emergence

Can Emergence be our Saving Grace?

Anna Katharina Schaffner

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Why does the concept of emergence resonate with so many of us, at this particular historical moment, and in so many different spheres of activity? Emergence is not just a widely researched topic in biology right now, but attracts attention in many other domains, too. Most notably, it has captured the imagination of different tribes of world changers – political and environmental activists, system and complexity theorists, and many other pathfinders who wish to bring about social change at scale. It resides at the heart of the Emerge movement, and it informs numerous other networks, too.[1] In fact, a commitment to the belief in emergence as a theory and practice of social change seems to be the nexus that unites many initiatives in the wider ecosystem, including in the metamodernist, game-B, political, environmental and various spiritual communities. But what is so great about emergence? What is its core appeal? And are there any caveats?

There are other patterns that form a shared matrix in the wider system-changer landscape. Many in that space are broadly marked by a metamodern sensibility, which, as Jonathan Rowson writes, refocuses attention on interiority and 'tries to integrate indigenous, traditional, modern and postmodern ways of knowing'.[2]

Also understood as a neo-romantic structure of feeling, metamodernism seeks to move beyond critique towards vision, daring people to dream again in spite of an often painful knowledge of limited chances of succeeding with bringing about any change at scale.[3] There is also a shared sense that our most urgent crises (the crises of climate, social inequality, environmental degradation, psychological alienation, political polarisation and the ensuing threat to our democracies most notably) are interlinked, forming a meta-crisis. There is a general attentiveness to our own meaning- and sense-making strategies - flawed, limited and blind-spot strewn as they are - and an acknowledgement that we are hopelessly phenomenologically entangled in the problems we are trying to fix.[4]

Many thinkers, including Indra Adnan, Maja Goepel, Anthea Lawson, Bonnitta Roy, and Otto Sharmer hold that social and inner transformation must go hand in hand.[5] Tomas Björkman, Lene Rachel Andersen, and Zachary Stein consider Bildung the solution to our problems.[6] Many, finally, are inspired by systems, game and complexity theory, developmental psychology, integral and post-integral thinking, posthumanism, and the marriage of spiritual and philosophical thought. These interests all contribute to a shared base for our investigations and initiatives. However, the most potent unifier remains the belief in the transformative power of emergence. Moreover, this belief can, at least in part, be explained with recourse to the confluence of some of these other patterns.

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The concept of emergence is as evocative as it is open, simultaneously poetic and scientific, inspirational and aspirational. Emergence occurs when a higher-level entity displays properties its parts do not have on their own. A process of attractive forces, it gives rise to a new whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts - a clustering and merging into new formations with unpredictable qualities.[7] The theorist Daniel Schmachtenberger defines it as follows in what he describes as his 'rambling ode' to emergence from 2016: 'Emergence is the result of synergy, synergy is the result of relationship… relationship is the result of attractive forces'.[8]

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At a basic level, then, emergence evokes a stronger together through combined agency ethos. Think of a formation of migrating birds that knows the way across oceans and continents to its far-away destination, and the pathfinding capacity of which resides not in the individual birds but somewhere in the connection between them. Or imagine single-cell entities evolving into complex organisms with striking new capabilities. The main reason why emergence has captured the imagination of so many is of course its promise in the social realm. Many believe that social change happens when the ideas of isolated innovators begin to resonate with an ever-growing number of people. Shaping first networks, and then communities of practice, these pathfinders can eventually inspire mainstream ways of thinking, doing and being. That, in a nutshell, is the social change via emergence theory.[9]

Emergence evokes the question of what kinds of 'We' we can become. Into what could we evolve if we open ourselves up to new ways of working, living and acting together? What shape could this new 'We' take? Which emergent capacities could we develop that make us bigger than the sum of our parts? Faced with the possibility of the complete disintegration of our systems or the emergence of a more elegant and complex social order (the hard fork hypothesis), this is an urgent enquiry. It is the key question we ask at Emerge: How can we become more than isolated actors in isolated niches addressing isolated problems? How can we be more than mere purveyors of cognitive candy with a vaguely revolutionary flavour?

At the same time, how can we, when forming larger, more complex entities, avoid collectivism and its pitfalls, such as the subsumption of individual rights and identities in the name of a greater good? It is fair to say that at state level, no workable alternative between individualism and collective authoritarianism exists – yet. It is also true that the old left, broadly and historically speaking, has always been stubbornly fragmented, either unable or unwilling to unite even in times of great and urgent crises. However, in legions of smaller communities, other forms of social organisation have been and are being pioneered that seek out a new equilibrium between these poles.

If we understand evolution as a form of perpetual self-transcendence resulting in ever higher levels of organisational complexity, what could that mean for our social networks? These questions pose thorny practical as well as philosophical challenges.

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How and why does emergence occur? What drives it? Attraction or agreement, persistence or plasticity, synergy or serendipity, collective will or group intelligence, the Zeitgeist or an invisibly curating hand?[10] Is it set in motion by infectious sparks of random insight, or problem-solving strategising? And, as Nora Bateson asks, what of the soil from which emergence springs, and that which is submerged in the process?[11] We can't know for sure. These questions are a crucial part of the most urgent collective inquiries in the change-maker world. For if we seek to support and usher in a benign kind of social emergence, we must, first of all, understand its origins.

Attractive as it is, there are also some caveats to the emergence metaphor: not all bigger entities end up being more complex. Nor will they automatically be benign. Some just grow in size rather than in sophistication. Emergence is unpredictable – this is both its beauty and its danger. Emergence, moreover, is also probabilistic. Given our current predicament, it is not clear whether all the things that can emerge are more likely to be good ones. Trumpism and QAnon are also emergent phenomena.

As a cultural historian interested in the history of the present, I am deeply curious about why this concept resonates right now with so many of us. Why are we putting our faith into a biological metaphor, and in an unpredictable, probabilistic, highly complex, possibly also fairly un-shapeable process?

First, I think that the belief that our problems are highly complex and interconnected (merging into a meta-crisis) not only explains the current renaissance of system-thinking but must necessarily lead to the admission that nobody is in possession of workable answers. This pill is hard to swallow. It requires epistemological humility. And it is precisely this mode of humility that generates a privileging of collective over individual intelligence, of process over outcome.

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But this humility is even more far-reaching. For it is not only our innovators, leaders and experts who have failed to find viable solutions to our crises – it is we, collectively, as a species. Our most cherished gift – reason – has proven to be not just a profoundly limited but, indeed, an insufficient tool, and one that has the capacity to wreak much damage in its own right. It is at least partly for that reason that there is a resurgent interest in spirituality as well as in phenomenological, pre- and post-logical modes of knowing. The black feminist Minna Salami, for example, advocates a return to 'sensuous knowledge'. 'The idea that calculable reasoning is the only worthy way to explain reality', she writes, 'is one of the most dangerous ideas ever proposed'.[12] Alternatively, at a time when 'modern civilisation, our cherished binaries, our institutions, and our cultural lexicons are unfurling at their seams, grappling with resolute impasses and spinning black holes', we may wish to accept the poet and philosopher Bayo Akomolafe's invitation simply to dance 'with the preposterous'.[13]

We can observe a broader turn away from traditional cultural solution-seeking towards learning from nature. Ever more of us wonder whether her self-regulating processes hold potential answers to our crises.[14] This tendency can be interpreted in three ways: as a profound disenchantment with our own species, an admission that we are far from being the pinnacle of the evolutionary chain, as we like to think. Or maybe we once were but have become bored, even death-seeking, or at least deeply careless, for we have now pulled that very chain so tightly around ourselves that we are cutting our own air off. Secondly, we can also look at the turn to nature in search of answers as a re-turn, an act of rediscovery, a long overdue reappraisal of her wisdom. Thirdly, we can see it as an act of surrender - an act of letting go, Daoist in spirit. A yielding to the powers that are, giving up resistance, allowing ourselves to go with the cosmic flow, whatever that may be and wherever it may take us. Our readiness to let emergence take the wheel, then, can be understood as the result of a loss of faith in reason and a revalorisation of the power of serendipity, natural evolutionary processes, or wider cosmic forces. It is in chance we trust, or else in a greater design, mystical or divine.

And yet these arguments only hold to a limited extent. The great paradoxical elephant in the room is of course that many of the

emergence-based movements - our own very much included - wish to facilitate and catalyse a specific kind of benign emergence. Perhaps this doesn't have to be a contradiction, though. We may instead see our endeavour as an attempt to create a better future together, hand in hand with nature and chance, having humbly toned down expectations based on the efficacy of our agency. So we throw our faith, effort and energy into the witch's cauldron of emergence, accompanied by a little prayer, and in the hope that these humble offerings shall shape the potion somewhat. We place our trust in process, and in both chance and our agency - in the full knowledge that the impact of the latter may be very limited indeed.

It is within, between and – this being the greatest hope – beyond networks that emergent dynamics can grow and develop into new social values and political imaginaries.

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The second main reason why we put our faith in emergence is also, I would argue, the result of a profound disenchantment with top-down, hierarchically organised change, a disavowal of the idea that it has the capacity to fix any of our problems. This disenchantment is being fed by a fast-growing distrust in leaders, in governments, in old narratives, models, and ceremonies – in fact, perhaps in any kind of authority-led intervention. This encompasses a disillusionment with some of the traditional forms of social activism, too. Instead, emergence puts the locus of hope on the power of individual or collective innovators, networks and communities of practice.

In that sense, embracing emergence means subscribing to an organic bottom-up process that works with what the sociologist Nicholas Christakis has described as 'social contagion', the spreading of behaviours and values across rhizomatic structures.[15] Jonathan Rowson explores the virus imagery further: 'social network interventions can attempt to create benign social viruses, through which small interventions seek to create major impacts through contagion effects'.[16] The assumption at work here is that the kind of pro-social, cooperative behaviours many of us wish to facilitate are learned and can be spread between people. It is within, between and – this being the greatest hope – beyond networks that emergent dynamics can grow and develop into new social values and political imaginaries.

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Thirdly, given that emergence is originally a biological phenomenon associated with major transitions in evolution, it is worth reflecting on the deployment of evolutionary metaphors more generally. In the nineteenth century, such metaphors were predominantly used by social theorists who wished to justify models based on the essential selfishness of humans. Think social Darwinists such as Herbert Spencer, and his twentieth-century acolytes Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand, who embrace survival of the fittest doctrines upon which they erect laissez-faire economic models. They justify their conception of a lone warrior, personal advantage-seeking, and constitutionally competitive homo economicus that way.

In the twenty-first century, by contrast, it is noticeable that many of those who seek to apply biological models to social thinking make exactly the opposite argument.[17] Thinkers such as Michel Foucault were still highly suspicious of the dark side of 'bio-politics' – which he understood as ever more subtle and increasingly internalised disciplinary and authoritarian regimes, soulless efficiency enhancement, a pursuit of progress at all costs, and an ensuing devaluation of the lives of socially not so well-functioning subjects.[18] This has changed dramatically. Researchers such as David Sloan Wilson now use biological theories and models in order to point out the evolutionary advantages of bigger and more complex pro-social, cooperative, and altruistic groups.[19] They see the overcoming of personal interest- and nation-state-driven politics, of the kind that are exemplified in Hardin's classic parable of the 'tragedy of the commons', and the formation of complex transnational alliances as the next major transition in evolution. W. Ford Doolittle, for example, believes that, fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, another major transition is imminent. We must learn to function at a higher collective level to ensure the survival of our species – whether that higher level will take the shape of state socialism, state capitalism, or a species-wide mutual aid alliance.[20] For the alternative is barbarism – a return to confrontational scavenging. Doolittle writes:

*We must 're-biologize' our thinking. We need to recognize
that we are all part of one species and that this species
is just one among many, singular only in being uniquely
capable of understanding and changing the future of all
life on the planet. If we can accomplish that, we will have
witnessed the last (for now) and most inclusive (for now)
of the major transitions in evolution.[21]*

Posthumanist thinkers go even further, arguing that, in the perilous
age of the Anthropocene, we need to overcome specie-ist thinking
altogether and become truly planetary beings, finding new ways of
living on equal terms with all other life forms.

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Emergence, then, is associated with evolution and transitioning to
higher states of social organisation. Our fascination with it is partly
driven by epistemological humility, partly by a re-valuation of nature
as a wise force with its own kind of agency, and partly by a profound
loss of faith in our old ceremonies of thinking, doing, and seeking
to bring about change at scale. These ceremonies are of course the
subject of perpetual change in their own right. In my darker hours,
I wonder if our revolutionary metaphors have simply morphed into
evolutionary metaphors, as an inevitable part of this cycle of incessant
renewal of our models and vocabulary. What would historians of the
future make of our current social change theories? How will we fare
in comparison to our world-changing ancestors - the suffragettes,
anarchists, Marxists, civil rights activists and eco-warriors of the past?
Has the recent systems-theory-turn resulted in an overemphasis on
abstraction, to the detriment of actually doing something? Has the
new focus on the noosphere lead to a neglect of the socio-economic
material base? Perhaps. And yet both shifts were necessary. Every
such paradigm shift seeks to redress an earlier imbalance, and is an
answer to the blindspots of preceding models.

All things considered, then, are we right to think of emergence as
our new saving grace? We may underestimate the wild unruliness
of what it unleashes, for, at heart, emergence is an anarchic beast.
Or else, and this is the much more likely scenario, the beautiful

emergent dynamics we envisage rippling through and transforming the world will simply never grow viral potential in the first place. We may also overestimate the potency of our catalytic powers and our attempts to spark emergence into being. And yet we have no viable alternatives. And there is always hope. And potentiality – perhaps emergence's greatest asset.

It is precisely this hope-imbued potentiality which remains the true driving force of what we do in the Emerge project at Perspectiva. It is also what links emergence most firmly with metamodernism, for the disciples of both camps have left the house of sterile academic critique. It is where I have lived for many years. It is not pretty in there, and many of its inhabitants have grown bitter. While I am glad I have left that sphere, I also still feel very disoriented out here in the epistemological wilds, amidst the many different kinds of transformative tribes. Ever since I have taken over as Director of Emerge in January this year, I have vacillated between exhilaration, excitement, confusion, pessimism, and impatience. What to do with a movement of such enormous potential? How to help it truly thrive, right now?

It is one thing to theorise about emergence, but quite another to try and harness its powers in the real world. I find letting go of organising, strategising, future-planning and trying to fix things, as well as grappling with the idea that rational solutions to our problems may not exist, almost painfully unbearable. It goes against my nature, or at least against all my socio-cultural conditioning. At the same time, I have an acute and ever more urgent sense of the limitations of these approaches. They are the primary meaning- and sense-making and future-shaping tools we have, and yet they are not working. Moreover, they are, if not the problem, at least a significant part of it. To an extent, then, my personal dilemma echoes our wider cultural predicament. I was and remain attracted to emergence precisely because it is so radically other - what calls me is its unknowable, dormant, and unrealised charge, its capacity to alter what cannot be changed by will and reason.

Endnotes

1 There is the Emerge network, and also The Emergence Network, The Alternative UK, Enlivening Edge, The Presencing Institute, The Berkana Institute, The Emergence Foundation, The Wellbeing Project, Rebel Wisdom, Emerge Bewusstseinskultur, Evolve Magazine, Enspiral, Prosocial World, and The Bateson Institute, to name just a few.

2 Rowson, Jonathan, 'Awakening the Twelve Tribes of Transformation', *Emerge* (March 2019)

3 For a great overview see: Dember, Greg, 'What is Metamodernism and Why does it Matter? Metamodernism and the Structure of Feeling', *The Side View* (May 2020)

4 Many of the regular guests on the Rebel Wisdom platform make that point, including Jamie Wheal, Jordan Hall, Daniel Schmachtenberger, John Vervaeke and others.

5 See for example: Kaufer, Katrin, & Scharmer, Otto, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-Sytsem to Eco-System Economies*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers (2013), Roy, Bonnitta, 'A Tale of Two Systems', *Emerge* (April 2020); Goepel, Maja, *Unsere Welt Neu Denken: Eine Einladung,* Verlag Ullstein (2020); Adnan, Indra, 'The Politics of Waking Up' series, *Emerge* (2020); and Lawson, Anthea, forthcoming book *The Entangled Activist*, Perspectiva Press (2021)

6 See Björkman, Tomas, *The World We Create: From God to Market*, Perspectiva Press (2019); Rachel Anderson, Lene, & Björkman, Tomas, *The Nordic Secret: A European Story of Beauty and Freedom*, Fri Tanke (2017); & Stein, Zachary, *Education in a Time Between Worlds: Essays on the Future of Schools, Technology and Society,* Bright Alliance (2017)

7 Brent Cooper has written a very insightful article about the emergence subculture entitled 'The Rise of the Emergentsia: Meaning Making in a Time Between Worlds', *Emerge* (July 2017)

8 See: John B, 'Daniel Schmachtenberger's talk at Emergence', *YouTube* (August 2016)

9 For a particularly lucid articulation of that theory, see Frieze, Deborah, & Wheatley, Margaret, 'Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale', *Berkana Institute* (2006)

10 Warmest thanks to Sophia Prinz, Chenxi Tang, Dietmar von der Pfordten, and Frank Fehrenbach, for inspiring and often heated discussions on the topic of major transitions in evolution at the Hamburg Institute of Advanced Studies (HIAS). Above all thanks are due to Katrin Hammerschmidt, who works on this topic and who has generously shared thoughts and ideas from her research on the biological features of emergence with me.

11 Bateson, Nora, 'What is Submerging?', *Medium* (February 2021)

12 Salami, Minna, *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone* (2020) p. 13.

13 Akomolafe, Bayo, online at: bayoakomolafe.net (accessed 16 February 2021)

14 Hutchins, Giles, & Storm, Laura, *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of Life-Affirming 21st Century Organizations*, Wordzworth (July 2019)

15 See: Broome, Steve, Jones, Alasdair, & Rowson, Jonathan, 'Connected Communities: How social networks power and sustain the Big Society', *RSA* Project Report (September 2010) p. 2.

16 See ibid., p. 4.

17 See for example, the Prosocial World website: www.prosocial.world

18 Thank you to the HIAS Foucault specialist Sophia Prinz for pointing out this connection.

19 W. B. Atkins, Paul, C. Hayes, Steven, & Sloan Wilson, David, *Prosocial: Using Evolutionary Science to Build Productive, Equitable, and Collaborative Groups,* Context Press (2019)

20 Doolittle, W. Ford, 'Could this pandemic usher in evolution's next major transition?', *Current Biology* 30, R841–R870 (August 2020) p. 846–848.

21 Ibid., 848.