

# “Global Sustainable Information Society” – Vision for the Future

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**Abstract:** Social systems are another variety of evolutionary systems. Their synergetic effects are the so-called commons. Social systems show a dialectic of individualisation and socialisation. If the individual element takes center stage, the commons are enclosed. Today, in the age of global challenges, the enclosure of the commons is not sustainable any more. A supra-system needs to be built up that takes care of a unity-through-diversity relation between all actors, be they individual or collective. That’s the rationale of the vision of a Global Sustainable Information Society.

**Keywords:** evolutionary systems; social systems; individualisation; individualism; socialisation; collectivism; global challenges

## 1 Social systems

According to Evolutionary Systems Theory promoted by the author, a system is defined as “a collection of

- (1) elements E that interact such that
- (2) relations R emerge that – because of providing synergistic effects – dominate their interaction in
- (3) a dynamics D” (Hofkirchner 2013a, 105 – italics removed, W. H.).

Dynamics D is known as self-organisation (Hofkirchner 2013b). It is a feed-forward and a feedback loop between two different system levels, known as the micro- and the macro-level. The micro-level is populated by the elements E that show a certain behaviour and interact with each other; on the macro-level the relations R are found that give the system stability in that they make the elements behave and interact in a way that makes them work as one single system. E bring forth R through their behaviour and interaction and R constrains and enables further behaviour and interaction of E.

In the course of evolution, evolutionary systems unfolded from simple material systems over living systems to social systems on our planet. Material, living, and social systems are all self-organising, but differ with regard to their mode of self-organisation. Social self-organisation is characterised by so-called “re-creation”. Social systems and processes change their form in a directed way and transcend themselves, re-invent themselves, create themselves – that is what the Austrian philosopher Jantsch meant by the term “re-creation” (Jantsch 1987). Social self-organisation goes beyond biotic self-organisation, which, in turn, goes beyond physico-chemical self-organisation.

Those agents that are elements of social systems are called actors. Actors can be individuals or collectives. Individual or collective actors inhabit the micro-level of social systems. The macro-level is the home of social relations. Social relations are the product of actors. Social relations build the structure of the social system. That structure can be said to exert downward causation on the actors’ actions and interaction (Hofkirchner 2013b).

## 2 Individualisation and socialisation

The rationale of every system is synergy. Because agents when producing a system produce synergetic effects, that is, effects they could not produce when in isolation, systems have a strong incentive to proliferate (Corning 2003). In social systems synergism takes on the form of some social good. Actors contribute together to the good and are common beneficiaries of that good – the good is a common good, it is a commons.

In evolutionary systems, any system shows a dialectic of integration and differentiation. Agents that differ from each other bring about the formation of a structure that integrates; this structure catches up with the differentiation at hand and, at the same time, conditions a new differentiation of the agents which brings about a new integration: ever more differentiated agents bring about the formation of an ever more integrated structure that conditions the formation of ever more differentiated agents. There is divergence and convergence in one. That is the line along which evolution can make progress. As long as the increase in divergence is for the sake of convergence and the increase in convergence for the sake of divergence, a system does not fall apart; evolution can lead to ever more complex systems (the higher the differentiation, the higher the integration).

This dialectic of differentiation and integration appears in social systems as dialectic of “individualisation” and “socialisation”.

At the highest resolution, social agents, actors, members of societal systems are different individuals. Through their action, interaction, and co-action they bring about the formation of societal relations that condition the generation and utilisation of commons in an integrated way, which allows the individuals to differentiate: the more individuals are “individualised”, the better they produce the common good; the better the common good is “socialised”, the more individuals can become individuated. That is, socialisation and individualisation precondition each other.

Being social is the result of socialisation, and being individual is the result of individualisation. The more the individuals contribute to the commons and the more diffused are the commons, the more social is society; the higher creativity and the more open the access to the commons, the more individual are the individuals.

## 3 Individualism and collectivism

However, individualisation and socialisation need not to be in balance. If individualisation is at the cost of socialisation, the result is individualism; if individualisation is outbalanced by socialisation, the result is collectivism.

There are historical examples of individualistic and collectivistic social systems.

Western societies fell victim to individualism and brought about the most extreme form of individualism in current neoliberalism. It is reasonable to call that whole strain of development “idiotism” (Curtis 2013). As etymology shows, “idios” meant in Greek Antiquity “the personal realm, that which is private, and one’s own” (12). In Neil Curtis’

view, “idios” bears also the stamp of “being enclosed”. He says that “the creation of the private through the enclosure of public or commonly held resources has historically been the primary means by which property has been secured for private use” (12). By the term “idiotes”, then, a person was denoted that is concerned with his personal realm only, with his own, and not with, say, the res publica and the fate of other human beings. Curtis convincingly demonstrates that neoliberalism, not only in ideology but also as a distinct social order, epitomises the principle of the “idiotes”. Hence “idiotism” as signifier of our current society. However, “idiotism” as a feature of society that functions via self-interested, self-concerned individuals goes, in fact, back to Antiquity and even earlier social formations in which domination entered the stage – the institutionalised instrumentalisation of humans for one’s own interests, which goes hand in hand with the enclosure of the commons and the denial of free access to the latter. Global financial capitalism is just carrying idiotism to extremes. But it originated, as demonstrated by the Odyssey, when selfish “I”s, after having disguised themselves as incarnations of the “We” as relict of the tribalist stage of social development overtly entered the stage of heteronomic societies (Hofkirchner 2013d):

- the actors became self-regarding persons of their own rather than other-regarding and thinking is short-sighted and does not take into consideration harmful effects on other parts of the system; the structures of the social systems have been prioritising competition on the higher levels of society over co-operation, which is reserved for the lower levels;
- in ideology the private is believed to be the supreme good;
- means and ends have been decoupled insofar as means are intelligently flexibilised whereas the final end stays given as short-sighted interest.

The earliest historical example of collectivism is called “tribalism” (see Donati’s typology in 2010). It appeared at the dawn of humankind in face-to-face communities:

- the overall system is mystified as an all-embracing “We”; any actor is kind of personification of that “We”;
- myths convey tradition;
- means and ends of social life are not questioned.

#### 4 Global challenges

While the latter historical formation could not unleash individual ingenuity for a thriving civilisation with ever new forms of the commons, the former led to an ever greater enclosure of the wealth of commons. By globalisation, this enclosure is the cause of global challenges.

Since the second half of the last century the dominant way of using technological, environmental and human resources has been turning out increasingly incompatible with a peaceful and harmonious future of societies. There are forceful impediments on our way to establish sustainable international as well as intranational relations (which exclude the use of military violence and other technological means that are detrimental to good life); to establish ecologically sustainable relations to nature (which excludes overuse of resources and their abuse as sinks for harmful waste); and to establish sustainable relations amongst humans in the cultural, political and socio-economic context (which includes all of the producers and users in a fair production and usage of whatever is commonly produced). If we fail to establish these relations, the humane

development of civilisation and even the survival of humankind is at stake. A multitude of particular societies, having spread over the globe and having populated the entire habitable biosphere, have been developing interdependencies and are on the point of recognising the fact that they have to take into account each other since effects external to one society turn out to become internal for other societies, if not internal to the own society. The environment of every society is made up of all the other societies. This situation calls for a change. The principles of societal development that have been effective so far, cannot any longer be effective without serious disadvantages to the maintenance of any society. Rules for governance need to be established on a higher level. And such a change cannot be the unilateral action of a sole system but necessitates the joint operation of all affected systems. It's a task that exceeds the problem solving capacity of any currently existing system.

## 5 A Global Sustainable Information Society

A good society, given the global challenges, needs to exist on a planetary scale, that is, it needs to be global; it needs to be capable, by establishing its organisational relations, of acting upon the dangers of anthropogenic breakdown, that is, it needs to be sustainable; and it needs to be capacitated, by means of ICTs, to create requisite wisdom, knowledge, data, that is, it needs to be informational. Such a society is called a Global Sustainable Information Society (GSIS) (Hofkirchner 2013c, see also Hofkirchner 2011 and Hofkirchner 2013b).

The GSIS is rather a framework of necessary conditions to be met in order to avoid the breakdown of the worldwide web of social systems today than a detailed blueprint.

What is needed for its implementation, is that the actors – individual or collective – extend their so far restricted reflexivity from their private own, from their we-group, from their immediate society, to the emerging world society. In the global age, the content of co-operative goal-setting and –seeking, communicative deliberation and cognitive elaboration, needs to be unique. It is constituted by the requirements of yet another – though unprecedented – leap in complexity in the history of humanity. The actors have to catch up with the complexity they have generated.

- They can do so, in the co-operative respect, by anticipating the outline of the new rules that are to structure world society and necessitate modification of the rules currently governing the structure of the component societies.
- They can do so, in the communicative respect, by distancing themselves from their immediate immersion in their proximate social systems, by relativising their being member of those, by adopting the perspective of world society.
- They can do so, in the cognitive respect, by reflecting upon the whole they are becoming part of.

A change needs to take place here and now in the direction of a GSIS:

- it must consist in a dialectical integration of the individuals but does not require their subsumption (as in tribalism); it must be based upon the diversity of individuals (as in idiotism) but serves their true and best interests by acknowledging that they can do so exclusively when in harmony with the overarching system and thus without doing harm to other system components; actors need to build up a unity-through-diversity relationship to the social

system; actors need to be capacitated to reflect their own position and the position of others from the perspective of the overall social system; through collective reflection of the actors the system itself can be said to be reflexive about its actors when assuring the improvement of conditions for the social synergy to come and for the decrease of social frictions in the generation and utilisation of the commons;

- it must not be guided by ideology or myths but by reason as much as possible, by a realistic, science-based and practical assessment of different paths of societal development;
- means as well as ends must be questionable; no means, no ends must be given unless agreed upon in common; the ends must not be constants any more.

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