CHAPTER 40

A Serendipitous Road Map to Educate Cosmopolitan and Sustainable Development-Oriented Managers

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter proposes a critical and creative approach to reframe business education, exploring radical (root-based) endeavors towards sustainability. The dilemmas that emerge as societies and economies face the frenzied rhythms and unknown consequences of the current Fourth Industrial Revolution, along with the dire threats that climate change brings, obliges corporations and the field of management education to reconsider their premises and epistemic assumptions. Reconceiving the intersections between business and society, mediated by the tantalizing promises introduced by exciting technologies enables educators and corporate leaders to better face current political upheavals, demographic trends, work-related stress, and the many economic shortcomings that pose a threat to humankind’s survival and flourishing.

Acknowledging the profusion of phenomena related to the current digital era, including quantum computation and biotechnological metamorphosis, sometimes excessively embellished and without critical scrutiny, we claim here that since many of the effects are unforeseen, and perhaps unforeseeable, managers and business educators must improve their decision-making capabilities, in terms of sustainability and ethical soundness.

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We argue that this purpose can be supported by questioning the premises that are jeopardizing human prosperity, and seeking a deeper comprehension of natural and social systems. In this last sense, it seems essential to enhance the understanding of and sensibility towards diverse mindsets, learning from the whole spectrum of the human experience, through time, in different contexts.

How can we advance in such a direction? In the era of Big Data, multiple algorithms can help us analyze millions of data, providing valuable information, and certainly enabling new knowledge for consideration. Nevertheless, what about wisdom? What about quality of life? What about life itself? Echoing T. S. Eliot, we ask: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

In the wake of potential economic crises, where natural resources are increasingly polluted and depleted, where drinkable water is scarcer than ever, where icebergs are melting, and ocean levels are rising, it is imperative to deflect the inertial forces that have led us to unsustainable patterns of production. Increasingly darker footprints and the earlier arrival of the overshoot day as reported by the Global Footprint Network (2019) are ethically unacceptable, and materially unbearable for the planet.

Why have the conventional postulates of economic organization led to economic growth for some (depending on how, when, and where it is measured), but not real prosperity for all? Why has the market never found its equilibrium? Does a growing GDP equal progress? Which economic indicators constitute proxies for growth in terms of well-being and value? Which indicators can forewarn us about development, evolution, or involution?

Realizing the disruptive challenges that innovative technologies pose to current societal settings, business conventions, and environmental agitations, this chapter invokes the need to recall, recognize, and reinterpret traditional human perceptions and intuitions about phenomena that relate to current development categories.

In general terms, we propose a research agenda that dives into the exploration of non-mainstream forms of societal organization, either ancient, forgotten or merely marginalized. We believe that rescuing and deconstructing the underlying beliefs of diverse societies can provide new hermeneutics to technological and economic predicaments. For example, how have material production and consumption patterns differed across cultures and time? How have ideas of economic value-generation varied? How has technology been defined by different social groups?

Evoking and analyzing how human groups have defined and enacted patterns of social and economic organization may illuminate how current dilemmas can be tackled in the present and future, taking hints from the past. Which set of criteria is used? Which criterion, if any, has prevailed? What kind of beliefs have emerged and lingered?

For example, examining how diverse causes of and answers to technological disruptions, have improved or endangered, people’s progressions can help us learn from previous mistakes and riveev clever solutions. Which environmental
crises led to innovative adjustments or to community extinctions? For example, how can we learn from the clues given by Mayas, Australian aborigines, Incas, Polynesians and inhabitants of eastern islands, among others, in order to prepare for eventual crises?

Thus, we propose to raise awareness about the importance of research into and learning from the intuitions, feelings and perceptions of diverse human groups. Combining and comparing their messages may inspire decision-makers to conceive creative and enduring solutions to contemporary challenges. If individuals, corporations and all kinds of business and social organizations were to learn and explore diverse sources of knowledge, for example by exploring ancient and marginal traditions, the chances of sustainability would be increased.

For instance, thought experiments can nourish reflection on the sense and purpose of economic activity that provokes unsustainable externalities and toxic flows of misleading data. Hopefully, we will discover more intelligent ways (not merely more efficient) to combine available resources, avoiding their depletion while stimulating their healthy regeneration.

The inertia of mainstream economic and political organization is so strong and frenetic, that it hardly allows reflexive interrogation about its nature. Humans are extremely surrounded by digital novelties, most of the time inhibiting instead of enhancing proper judgment. Paradoxically, the most innovative technological creations are increasingly, and often entirely, detached from nature.

In order to break those inertias, the chapter offers sections addressing and putting forward: arguments in favor of pursuing a cosmopolitan horizon and research agenda; a consequent call for an engaged and mindful methodology; arguments in favor of a reflexive education; a revision of definitions of technology, exploring how it can contribute to better living; and finally, social reflexivity through diverse cultural lenses is proposed.

Herein is important to state that the purpose of this chapter is not to answer all the questions which arise throughout the text, but to illustrate how reflexivity potentiates the emergence of multiple questions that have the potential to shake inertias and overcome entropic dynamics that threaten sustainability today; thus reinvigorating creative and transformative forces.

**CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

Since the UN Global Compact constitutes “The world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative” (UN Global Compact 2019), it is a convenient and pedagogically powerful heuristic to analyze sustainability actions and ideas, around the Ten Principles it promulgates, and around the whole set of Sustainable related Goals (SDGs) and targets, which embody the most ambitious development agenda of our time.

The Global Compact principles are articulated around four broad areas: human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption. These four areas and ten principles are more than mere analytical categories, they represent the
political consensus achieved among countries at the global scale, such as “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Labour Organization’s Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.” (UN Global Compact 2019).

Funneling efforts in these areas helps to potentiate business as a source of well-being, or as Ellis put it “as force for good” (2001). By tracking down how this axiomatic consensus has been manifested throughout history, we might rediscover more balanced ways to relate with nature, rescuing examples of integrity (against corruption), respect for humans and diverse forms of life, and reinvent wiser and more dignified working habits.

This quest for better practices through ancestral wisdoms does not imply nostalgia for the “good old times” – that perfection ever existed in other contexts. It just invites us to broaden the possibilities of learning from the mistakes and lessons that groups outside of the mainstream corporate world might have produced, and which could be relevant nowadays.

Perhaps by listening to the Inuit, observing indigenous communities from Polynesia or Amazonia, or by revisiting the heritage of the Celts, examining the beliefs of Shintoism, or reinterpreting the intuitions represented in diverse cultural myths, we might get some clues to guide us through the maze of unsustainable puzzles, as Theseus did following Ariadne’s thread (Castrillón 2005).

**Literature Review**

Human stupidity seem limitless (Moreau 1987). Reflect on the way corruption permeates governments and business causes waste of resource throughout the whole system, generating expensive entropies (Monteverde 2019), distorting the functioning of economic agents (Tran 2019), and perpetuating toxic cultural habits (Scholtens and Dam 2007). Even those who appear as short-term transactional winners, end-up with lots of enemies, hanging from uncertain relations, and “controlling” a non-sustainable environment. All material wealth, so easily perishable, exemplifies a delusional model.

Overcoming our senselessness obligates the recognition of the sometimes psychopathic behavior of corporations (as denounced by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott in their 2004 film, *The Corporation*) accompanied by the pathologies exhibited by so many power holders, as describe by Furnham 2000, Kets de Vries and Miller 1986, and Richardson et al. 1996.

When contemporary intellectuals signal today’s pressing issues (Harari 2018), it becomes impossible to deny the need for ethical sensibilities and capabilities. And given the digital agitations, it is imperative to discuss authors that have specified updated versions of Moral Intelligence, i.e., 2.0 (Kiel and Lennick 2011). The dreadful scenarios crafted by greed and selfishness call for the application of renewed intelligence to be solved.

As evidence mounts to demonstrate that the Earth cannot sustain increasingly voracious human populations, the call for action is non-deferrable.
Although exploring Mars and other planets to assure survival of the species seems like a laudable endeavor, the real challenge consists in facing and learning from all the mistakes humans have made through time. Thinking that we can live in other places, while evading the obligations to our planet, reflects psychological denial rather than genuine intelligence.

It would be more realistic to scrutinize the human experience, spotting the right and wrong moves our species has made in the past. A sincere assessment of our virtues and vices, recognizing and adopting virtues and learning from vices, can hopefully enlighten our decisional processes.

It is comforting to see the economic benefits of human rights recognition (Charles 2007), and the benefits of adopting environmentally friendly industrial processes (Albuquerque et al. 2019), or improving business models (Ünal et al. 2019); nevertheless discussions and actions seem confined to limited mental models. Although honest and positive, the current sustainable agenda seems mostly defined in utilitarian terms, where evidence is to be measured mostly by positivistic economic indicators that somehow encapsulate the perspectives for discussions.

Parting from the mainstream, we argue that current times, simultaneously enriched by information and industrial technologies, disrupted social logics and economic dynamics, require transcending utilitarian argumentation promoting holistic reflexivity, including more imagination, and of course, a rediscovery of the human nature and conditions.

Therefore, we should accept the invitation to enjoy and propel the power of imagination, a human singularity given by nature (Dortier 2004), in order to escape our uni-dimensionality (Marcuse 1968); dare to question the purposes of education (Ruano-Borbán 2001), especially in the field of business, where is usually reduced to training for profit making, as Friedman bluntly stated (Friedman 2000).

In order to overcome that dogmatic position, we must disrupt functionalist training for limited areas, challenging decision-makers for all fields of knowledge, to become exactly the opposite of what Friedman suggested, and what wisdom traditions have striven to discover and forge: wise decision-makers, capable of complex thinking.

We believe sustainability will be enhanced by individuals and communities willing and able to arbitrate among competing demands, guided by long-term perspectives, respect for natural cycles, and life’s dignity. We believe the capabilities to make wiser decisions, freed from power-pressures and fragmented interests, will increase when we humbly recognize past mistakes and accept phylogenetic imperfection.

Which messages were left by societies that collapsed? What teaching can grasp the cultures that lost balance with their environment? Which learnings left us insight into those leaders who abused people in undignified labor conditions? Or on the contrary, can we find inspirational ideas and practices that can create transformative initiatives in order to funnel the potential of state of the art science in favor of authentic human development?
What can we learn from Hindu epics, like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita? What does the experience of Gilgamesh teach us? What about Homer and Hesiod? How can the divergent thought of Confucius and Lao Tse help us face the world today? What about the Popul Voh? Can we find good examples of sustainability-oriented leaders? Do we remember the impacts of corrupted leaders?

Business has a lot to learn from the whole of the human experience. Fragmented models and assumptions (like perfect market equilibrium, economic-calculators of cost–benefit) need to be revised. The artificial, ceteris paribus, has reduced our awareness of complexity, while complicated externalities place on the water and terrestrial ecosystems that support life on Earth.

Since the simplistic GDP indicator overshadows other measurement (and perceptual possibilities), we seldom understand the irredeemable lost that botanic and animal extinction represent, nor the unquantifiable pain that abused children, or people in slums, suffer. The math seems wrongly used, or how can we explain hunger alongside morbid obesity? Why do we keep producing so much food waste that simultaneously intensifies climate change?

No doubt, economic models have to be deconstructed; but more importantly, the integrality of human nature has to be crudely decorticated. As recent studies show, human consumption patterns are unsustainable, only drastic changes will allow us to survive, let alone develop (Rowlatt 2019).

A HUMBLE METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

This chapter constitutes a humble quest. The methodology proposed for this quest clearly rejects positivistic standards. Being socially engaged and constructivist favors a critical perspective, one that seeks to promote “insights, critiques and transformative redefinitions” (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). And given the fact that any hermeneutic effort might hurt sensibilities, it explicitly demands to assume a mindful (Bentz and Shapiro 1998) and culturally responsible (Swartz 1997) approach.

The pursuit of this mindful, reflexive, and critical approach is supported by the operational orientations of arts-based research, particularly in terms of learning from histories to explore meanings and change minds (Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund 2008). Our proposal is compatible with Coser’s insightful approach to towards’ societies comprehension through literature (1972). The sampled texts could come from sacred books, classics, philosophical compendiums, or even traditional folk tales that reflect the spirit of a given human group.

Some careful selections can light the way, as Bailkey and Lim (2020) who propose a rich anthology of ancient texts, or Le Livre des Sagesses, which recovers an exhaustive selections of human expressions of spiritual wisdom (Lenoir and Tardan-Masqueller 2002). Since these samples of texts, ideas and archetypes throughout time and geographical spaces are purposefully inclusive, anthropological, and historical they offer a non-skewed sample upon which to
explore the presence of sustainable related concepts, lighting ways to challenge our current status quo.

For instance, religion constitutes an interesting prism to explore sustainability-compatible ideas and warnings. Although ideologically biased, religious beliefs provide inspiring venues to analyze values, and might serve as an “alternative perspective in the Organizational Sciences,” such as defined by (Evered and Louis 1981). For example, how did diverse groups solve dilemmas? How did they foreshadow consequences? Why was the consumption of some animals and products prohibited? Or fostered? What were the underlying criteria?

Religions’ natural focus on values and the mindset they shape makes them a rewarding path to approach values and serves to reinforce mindfulness and purpose in research. Also, avoiding ideological and non-judgmental examination of religious ideas for development could serve as “A guide to our Wisdom Traditions,” as Houston Smith refers to the whole set of world’s religions (H. Smith 2002).

Learning from diverse cultures can teach us about how sustainability constitutes a non-exclusive and necessarily expandable journey to explore mind-sets. Through it, we could contrast today’s SDGs, their relationship to Global Compact Principles, mining for commons concerns and values, and inspiring ideas, as well as becoming wary of potential risks of approaching SDGs in ways that might be perceived as arbitrary, absolutist, or even colonialist by involved parties.

Such a research agenda must be flexible. Forcing the cross-examination of every variable may result in anachronisms. Nevertheless, this reflexive effort to rethink development in the light of multicultural human experiences will hopefully broaden humankind’s capability to transform its unsustainable patterns of behavior, either because we manage to spot predatory approaches to nature, or we because we find bona fide examples of harmonious social, environmental, and economic societal settlements.

Exploring the presence or absence of business and sustainable-related concepts through human mentalities, constitutes more than a predetermined academic task. This urgent imperative also represents a quest to learn from the best ideas humanity has borne, while humbly acknowledging our previous mistakes, identifying the roots of our current problems.

How do the challenges of development and the principles of the Global Compact appear when examined through the lenses of diverse cultural and religious groups? How have business principles been forged through time? Which beliefs can foster or hinder more fair, inclusive and resilient social interactions? Which promote (or erode) mental health?

Reflectively exploring development-related challenges also enables the deconstruction of positive and negative types; it leads to the exploration of the semantic possibilities between the extremes and other related concepts, notions, and categories which enrich the ways development can be conceived. Diverse philosophical and religious systems can help reveal the mindsets than can help us question and transform our definitions of human rights, labor, environment, and corruption. Societies in general, and businesses in particular, can learn a lot from realms usually excluded from cash-flow considerations.
SOME ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF REFLEXIVE EDUCATION

Enabling the inclusion and eventual comparison of multiple cultural expressions and the Global Compact’s Principles serve as means to make sense of eventual ethical considerations. The interdisciplinary openness triggered by using cultural prisms like philosophical, sacred, literary texts, offers a new perspective to re-interpret economic, environmental, social, and governance phenomena. Generating the competence to contemplate and reflect upon diverging human manifestations certainly stimulates dialogue, a key feature reclaimed by more pedagogues (Christensen and Garvin 1992) and by ancient masters like Confucius and Socrates.

Contemporary drivers of change stress the need to promote dialogue at all levels and among all stakeholders in order develop genuine empathy and deeper comprehensions. The United Nations, through the Global Compact initiative, and the correlated educational PRME program, strongly suggests reflecting on the principles and dialogic practices that contribute to educate more committed global leaders. As Tayar and Paisley (2015) demonstrate, pragmatic success is favored by reflexivity and mindfulness.

In times where fake news, false flags, and narcissistic caudillos are populating the world stage it becomes more urgent that ever to leverage business goodness, to defend the love of wisdom and the need for more reflexive decision makers (Ikujiro and Ryoko 2007; Subotnik 1988; Weick and Putnam 2006). Reflecting on the customs and social dynamics of others might help us understand and hopefully discern the ‘hidden connections’ that nature deploys (Capra 2002) and that business ignores, threatening life and eroding sustainable value.

We might also discover alternative social orders and features of individual character building, crafting renewed comprehensions about the replicability of mores, customs, and the legitimacy of imagined futures. What can ancient cultures teach us about leadership (Goleman et al. 2002), moral intelligence (Kiel and Lennick 2011), or the plausible foundations for purposeful education (Castrillon-Orrego 2019).

The recent Business Round Table’s “Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation” (August 2019), reinforces the call of the Global Compact to hold corporations accountable. The ten principles are potential prisms to evaluate how managers work towards sustainability, echoing Freeman’s call to consider all stakeholders (Freeman 1999) and finally transcending Friedman’s anachronism that businesses are only accountable to shareholders (Friedman 2000).

Reflexive education contains a lot of potential in order to gain awareness of, prevent, and help overcome diverse problematic issues that might surge within the accelerated digitalization of life. For instance, as Glass and Newig (2019) demonstrate, links between governance and sustainability can be more clearly understood if people participate, reflect, and question the coherence of policies and institutions.
In general terms, reflexivity favor the inclusion of theoretical plurality and diverse pedagogics, eventually fostering varied forms of responsible management education (Cicmil and Gaggiotti 2018). Reflexivity could as well generate capabilities to problematize conventional interpretations, such as history (Hunter 2019), thus strengthening the potential to criticize non sustainable business practices.

In terms of business education, promoting reflexivity can help students become more aware of who they could become (Feldman and Fataar 2019), also providing them with lifelong learning capabilities to be deployed through their professional careers.

A Call for Cosmopolitanism - Expanding Horizons

If all the actors of the business community acknowledge their inherent responsibilities within the global system, they might coherently nurture a cosmopolitan drive, effectively taking into consideration the vital concerns of their multiple constituents. This call for cosmopolitan (from Greek kosmopolitéς, from kosmos + politeς citizen) commitment, is both, a reminder of the dignity of all human and sentient beings, and a call for harmonious, natural flow within the universe where all forms of life interrelate.

Developing a cosmopolitan mentality constitutes a long-term survival and balanced growth strategy for all economic agents, which simultaneously assures their own legitimacy; for example, embracing diverse interpretations of what quality of life could represent for diverse cultures. Pertinence is also fostered through the potential bridging of diverse perceptions; stimulating comprehensive solutions to the current development challenges, such as embodied in the SDGs. If economic logics are reflexively questioned through multiple lenses, it might be possible to acquire and disseminate a more cosmopolitan spirit, propitiating the achievement of more sustainable life patterns.

Mimicking nature as it unfolds in diverse environments can also open minds and hearts to other cultural models, thus deconstructing the status quo, and expanding critical thinking and creative flows, enabling the rediscovery and reinvention of economic, social, and biological logics of interaction that the “hidden hand of the market” has institutionalized to a point that now seems natural.

Conventional capitalism generates multiple exclusive and painful outcomes which hamper the construction of a common identity in which peoples from different countries can spontaneously feel citizens of our planet, sharing the same destiny.

In order to promote a cosmopolitan citizenship, where all human recognize themselves as navigators or the same “Spaceship Earth” (evoking Kenneth Boulding’s powerful metaphor), economic logic must be radically subverted in order to eradicate the unbearable consequences that the current status quo and establishment generate for the large majority of the world’s inhabitants. Millions of people suffer poverty, mental disease, lack of access to drinkable...
water, deforestation, asymmetrical reception of externalities, toxic air and water, and are treated like waste and disposable parts of the system.

The exploration of foundational myths across cultures can help us remember the shared nature and fate of our species, so clearly proven by phylogenetic science but so hard to accept by xenophobic and ethnocentric groups, pervaded by ignorance and divisive interests.

Reflexivity also helps to question prevailing models, boosting the call for cosmopolitanism. For example, SDGs exemplify a cosmopolitan expression of global awareness; not only were they achieved through a consensual process built on and through the United Nations, the most visible scenario where countries’ governments interact and leave public records, but also, and additionally, they can claim a “global” perspective.

Comprehensive and multicultural inclusive initiatives advance the feasibility of shared sustainability-oriented efforts. Global Compact and SDGs represent such efforts to enact Kenneth Boulding’s revolutionary conception of “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,” which nevertheless might broaden when amplifying the prisms and proxies through which diverse human collectives manifest their survival learning and such as sacred texts, artistic expressions, literature, poetry, folklore….

Approaching cultures through these non-judgmental ways potentially enhances cosmopolitanism, refreshing perspective and inducing cognitive and emotional tolerance, which ultimately can contribute to perceive and solve the clamors and silent pains that reveal the current gaps in the path towards sustainability.

In order for the business community to contribute to growth and development in a sustainable way, it must ineluctably widen the scope and breadth of its horizons. In this transformative process, the substantial concerns that humankind has produced and enacted in other cultural and chronological contexts, must be included for full consideration.

As a potential venue for research, we emphasize the need to educate managers to strive for sustainable development. Although this venture could evoke an endless effort, and some degrees of utopia, in the edge of potentially irreversible crises it becomes imperative.

Digitalization implies more connections but also more noisy and possible fragmentations. As McEvoy indicates, this “Shrinking World” also brings cosmopolitanism and opportunities – and, we add, obligations- (McEvoy 1968). As several authors claim, cosmopolitanism makes it essential to highlight the importance of moral education (Merry and de Ruyter 2011), and to rethink ethics (Rivera 2016).

Fires in Australia sending smoke and ash to South America, coronaviruses spreading at the speed of business, make it evident that we share a common destiny, and makes it imperative to review nationalism through the prism of sustainability. The concept of cosmopolitanism can facilitate transcultural dialogues, or as some authors claim, set the “conditions for educational conversations” in times of globalization (Wahlström 2016). Nevertheless, cosmopolitanism is not
panacea; as Peterson warns, there exist “educational limits” (Peterson 2012), which nevertheless end up giving more importance to ethical considerations and education (Osler and Starkey 2018; Starkey 2012), specially within the context of the fourth industrial revolution (Merry and de Ruyter 2011; Waghid et al. 2019)

**Reflexivity as a Flexible Quest for Interrogation and Divergence**

Exploring human groups that diverge from the mainstream might seem useless for those who want to perpetuate the status quo. However, that is precisely where exploration’s emancipative power lies. Creativity is unleashed idleness and leisure; as Ordine demonstrates “the usefulness” provides a lot of utility (Ordine 2017), and as Judkins shows, innovation and inspiration when we try to “see things differently” (2016).

How diverse cultures and belief systems can enrich creative administration? Can knowledge for more consistent governance be extracted from the others’ principles? How can we expand lexical capabilities to reach more stakeholders? Changes to management practices and ideas can flourish by appreciating other cultural patterns and value criteria, enriching the language and dynamics for sustainable development oriented dialogue.

Exploring the perspectives that other human groups from different cultural and historic contexts provide can also alter our identities for the better, helping us reframe resource allocation and distribution decisions, and reshaping relationships with water and terrestrial ecosystems. For instance, communities indigenous to diverse environmental settings indicate ways through which people can harmonize with nature’s assets, avoiding pollution and over-exploitation. As Wade Davis demonstrates, ancestral knowledge can illuminate modern communities, teaching us how to mimic a life in equilibrium with nature (2015). For example, reading Bruchac’s recompilation of work on North American natives (Bruchac 2003), it is possible to enhance our hermeneutic power, and discover the potential of native-nation values, culture, and history, so we can see afresh and reframe our relations with nature and with other human groups.

**Technology as Meaningful, Applied Knowledge**

As an apocryphal Chinese proverb has it “May you live interesting times.” Confucius put it less snappily but more wisely: when asked about how to contribute in the agitated times that he was enduring, he suggested to start by naming phenomena using most appropriate terms (Analects 13.3)¹ (Confucio 1998) which seem to be very pertinent recommendations nowadays, where

¹“If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success”
propaganda darkens publicity, and fake news is manipulated by obscure interests.

Therefore, the search for truth(s) emerges as an imperative task, which requires humility and respect for others’ perspectives, which is part of what this research agenda proposes. A serene, cosmopolitan quest for essential values across cultures prevents ethnocentric fundamentalisms, and welcomes diversity and pluralistic manifestations of virtue. Equally, it opens eyes to recognize vices, wicked conducts and negative motivations, which had created unsustainable patterns of social, economic and environmental behavior. For example, how have disrespect for human rights, asymmetric labor conditions, wasteful management resources, and corrupted governments and commerce led to the destruction of human settlements? To what extent have internal causes extinguished some human populations?

More than 50 years ago, Erich Fromm questioned:

> Are we confronted with a tragic, insolvable dilemma? Must we produce sick people in order to have a healthy economy, or can we use our material resources, our inventions, our computers to serve the ends of man? Must individuals be passive and dependent in order to have strong and well-functioning organizations? (1968, p. 2)

That interpellation regarding how we relate to technology is as relevant today as it was decades ago. Actually, sometimes it seems that technological revolutions exacerbate our brainless behavior. We pollute more and deplete natural resources ever more quickly. Some political leaders seem bitter and convulsive, as if permeated by an inherent unrest. In addition, the media records ubiquitous violent social protest and conflicts.

If technological progress has not guaranteed human improvement, it is worthwhile to evoke the metaphor of Pandora’s Box and reflect on all the promised gifts predicted by enthusiasts for technological revolution; simultaneously we should recall our incapacity to harness them for good.

For example, a current definition of technology (Merriam-Webster 2003), as “the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area”; or as “a capability given by the practical application of knowledge” or as “a manner of accomplishing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge.” Examining these meanings, we realize that is not only about gadgets and novelties. Technological innovation also requires the insight to discern what to do with the new capabilities, and the means to apply them.

Consequently, we suggest interrogating the kinds of knowledge applied, the capabilities generated, and most importantly, the purpose of those novel knowledge applications. Do they serve a noble purpose? Do they respect human dignity? Are they compatible with all forms of life and natural ecosystems?

For example, engineering fields create technology by applying math and science, based on energy and characteristics laws of physics to create useful items. But have we applied the learning derived from anthropological experiences?
In the face of indisputable climate change, and being at the crossroads of extinction, it seems humankind has not reflected enough on how to use innovations in sustainable and life-compatible ways. For instance, what do old legends teach us about survival and technological disruptions? What did Gilgamesh learn in his quest of immortality? Did he become a moral, rational ruler after learning of the impossibility of eternal youth? What messages were transmitted through the figures of gods and demons, like Baal? How did Babylonians solve conflict? What roles did the Hittite’s “Master Good and Master Bad” represent? How were crises managed? What kind of collective action and individual leadership erupted when the crops were insufficient? When flooding and droughts threaten survival? Perhaps, some of the “Oldest Stories in the World” (Gaster 1968) can teach us a lot about governance, or respect for, and proper connections with, nature.

Conceivably, a clue to the resolution of many dilemmas that emerge at the intersection of technology, societal changes, and volatile economic cycles could eventually be found through reflection on human traces.

Reflecting on Experience, Deflecting Current Inertias

The proposal to reflect upon the diverse manifestations of humankind’s experience through its existence also infuses all stakeholders (including managers and owners) with the ethical perspectives necessary to heighten sustainability.

Reflecting upon the human condition does not exclude deflecting. Actually deviating from that which has been previously established might open venues for serendipitous discoveries. Like collective introspections, reminiscences of our best intuitions might emerge and combine with the emerging technologies and potentiating valuable clues to solve imminent threats to the survival of humanity.

Human stupidity has never been as conspicuous as now, when scientific evidence denounces all our mistakes and regrettable effects on the environment and social balances. Like a fish within a bowl, our pride and narrow focus on monetary maximization prevent us from seeing alternative forms of socio-economic organization.

As UNESCO has signaled, our ignorance is tremendous, but worst of all, is hardly ever held up for questioning (Sureau 1995). Ignorance is ignored. Deliberately. As in Socrates’ time, leaving the cave can be painful. Humanity seems to prefer gloom, shadows of a harsh reality, especially those capital holders who obscure externalities, and the people who renounce complex learning, happily adapting to their world of diffuse shadows.

Our call for reflexivity echoes not only recent epistemology, but also ancient traditions, which might acknowledge circular causality, showing how effects and causes influence each other. By proposing to learn from diverse human experiences, it might be possible to discern the beliefs that had led to unsustainable governance, social interactions, and patterns of production–consumption.
As sociology teaches us, high reflexivity enables the active shaping of interactions, while a low reflexivity leaves people reactive, passively shaped by structural forces. Humans have gained the knowledge to manipulate some raw material and innovate productive processes, which have improved our material standards, but unfortunately, we have not been able to overcome destructive inertias. As Bohler points out (Bohler 2019), we blindly follow individual brain instincts for short term satisfaction that on an aggregate basis will cause the insane destruction of the planet.

Instead of pursuing autonomy, most people prefer the easiness of automation. As Erich Fromm denounced, we seem afraid of freedom (Fromm 1984), and seek to escape our responsibilities. How can we escape our escapism? Mirroring our fears and hopes in others’ stories and histories, could provide hints on how to leave the maze.

That requires mindful efforts to develop personal mastery (which most wisdom traditions suggest has to be done); and develop our multiple potential intelligences, trying to conquer autonomy and build the capacities for positive freedom. But, this requires awareness, for, as Bourdieu adverted, biases are inherent to social research (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu and Nice 1980). We have to careful with ideas, because they can become “self-fulfilling prophecies,” and as Ghoshal alerted, business is not immune (2005). Actually, self-fulfilling prophecies are most likely in the field of business, which is never interest-neutral.

About three decades ago, Anthony Giddens optimistically suggested that societies (at least Western ones) were gaining in awareness and reflexivity (Giddens 1983). Fakeness, bots, struggling democracies, painful migration crises, prove him wrong. None the less, herein we highlight the reflexive potential of his structuration; as a potential tool to hermeneutically make sense of the structures and roles of agents in diverse cultures. Today’s agents of society can learn from past phenomena and discover means through which active agents can break unsustainable inertias and initiate the constitution of sustainable structures.

As experts demonstrate, deflecting the suicidal rhythms of humanity requires the shifting of economic trends, dramatically changing our lifestyles (Rowlatt 2019). We believe that these breakthroughs towards survival might be possible if humans awake from cybertnation and respond to the call of autonomy and the need to emancipate from institutionalized indolence. Evoking Scott’s pillars (Dacin and Scott 1997; R. Scott 1994), which normative, regulative and cultural-cognitive pillars have determined the institutions that have propitiated unsustainability? What alternative can be discovered in other collective institutions, something that can serve as luminary and lever for sustainability?

Can humans be capable of intelligent behavior? Yes, … at least theoretically; but our obtuseness keeps denouncing us. No wonder folly has been so eloquently praised. Erasmus (Packard 2016), Rabelais, and Shakespeare (Greenfield and Kaiser 1968) seem talking directly to us. But folly has also been criticized, by figures such as Confucius, Socrates, and even the Ancient Egyptians through
the Book of the Dead, whose spells precognized the admonitions (and judgmental criteria) to guide social life. Like the Ten Commandments, the Spells were not intended for the afterlife but addressed directly social organization, just as ancient poets like Homer and Hesiod do – praising the noble and laudable ethos, and denouncing the despicable and non-sustainable mores.

Although the 21st century is significantly different from previous eras, some substantial challenges are quite similar. For example, why do we behave in senseless ways? Why does our powerful brain, capable of the nicest discernment, find it so hard to carry out wise, ethical decision-making? Humankind seems to be the only species that destroys its own habitat (knowingly). Perhaps, a radical review (i.e., by revisiting our roots) can help us escape insanity. How did traditional knowledge denounce madness, corruption, abusive behavior, environmental degradation, and social unbalance?

Many ancient wisdom tracts advocated shrewd diagnosis and severe sanctions toward enemies of lucidity. Today’s social and neural scientists suggest one should seek “to empower consciousness in order to regain control of our destiny” (Bohler 2019: 187–217), evoking historic commands to form savvy leaders (Clemens n.d.), or integral governors, like king-philosophers (Bauman 2018; Plato and Jowett 1937) motivated by ethical principles.

Corporate-compatible concepts such as ‘reflective practitioners’ (Khin Sek and Fatt Kwai 2010), emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995), and primal leadership (Goleman et al. 2002), reflect old human eagerness to cultivate virtuous cycles, igniting the quest for educational technologies that might lead to enduring governance, social dynamics, productive arrangements, and balanced interaction with the environment.

Another way of rethinking the dominant arrangements of today is by fostering imagination. As Dortier neatly demonstrated after decorticating the origins of human language, culture, and cognition, a unique human trait is the capacity to imagine (Dortier 2004). Unfortunately, this power of imagination has been painfully curtailed (or perhaps painlessly, since we love the effortless life) by simplifying economic models and assumptions, such as the “ceteris paribus” that ends up reducing our conceptions of reality.

Through an induced process of self-fulfilled prophetization, complex variables are conveniently ignored and imagination (for many) is obscured to the point of extinction. Intercultural sensibility should awaken inter-contextual imagination, shaking heads-up the linear and oversimplified perceptions of businesses and their effects.

What if, in the wake of unsustainable foolishness, business explores other philosophical paradigms, and through the anthropological traces of religion and art (among other manifestations of human praxis) upgrades its senses in order to redesign itself? Building on Slobodkin who exposes how peculiar stories are to humans (Slobodkin 1992), we argue that there are many stories dispersed through religious beliefs that might guide us towards sustainable arrangements.
Intercultural sensitivity lead us to recognize the phylogenetic truth that humankind is a single species, and that ethnic features are just superficial, thus enhancing solidarity and reducing xenophobia. Additionally, it promotes imagination and openness to interdisciplinary knowledge, enabling the transcendence of the short-sighted corporate conception where “the manager is the agent of the individuals who own the corporation” (Friedman 2000, p. 234), which bluntly ignores the needs of a sustainable ethos.

In the wake of environmental collapse, Global Compact’s principles command the implementation of ethical market standards, which can lead to truly sustainable social and economic practices; and of course interrogating business education throughout the human experience, discovering the best possible benchmarks. For example, exploring how contemplative aesthetics can complement ethics (Don 2008), or how systems of thinking like Taoism provide intuitive comprehensions to physics (Hasegawa 1994) or politics.

Conclusions

The twenty-first century has proven to be convulsive, in economic, sociocultural, political, and technological dimensions. Multiple forms of terrorism, clashes of cultural identities, revival of religious fundamentalisms, xenophobia, erosion of institutional arrangements (such as the European Union, NATO, COP 21, WHO); seem to increase simultaneously with the most amazing scientific discoveries and technological inventions.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (a term coined by Klaus Schwab; WEF 2016) has not liberated humankind from all the unrest and despair. On the contrary, individuals with mental distress, and stressed societies, are on the rise (WHO). The promises of progress, of modernity, that reappear with every industrial revolution, are stuck somewhere on the way; and the positive impacts do not seem to reach human groups as smoothly and evenly as promoted.

Embodying a post-modern Pandora’s Box, most dreamed gifts contained feared nightmares that we, humans, do not seem able to discern. Artificial intelligence is not making us any smarter, robotics might be reducing our most basic dexterity skills, block-chains and crypto currencies are consuming more energy and introducing more volatility than conventional monetary arrangements. Even the definition of living entities is being challenged in unprecedented manners, threatening the dignity of humans and other forms of life.

The implications of the digital era go well beyond drastic shifts in production and consumption patterns; quantic computation and autonomous machines have the potential to shake society and business, in unforeseen (and perhaps unforeseeable) ways. How can humans prepare to make sense of disrupting changes? Of emerging realities? How shall businesses prepare to make wiser decisions that protect life and generate sustainable value for all stakeholders?

Contemporary managerial and business challenges need to be continuously revisited, auscultating developmental needs that must adjust to some trends
(e.g., sociocultural and demographic), and even help shape prospective phenomena, like technological priorities, and scientific research connected to genuine human concerns.

Instead of being frozen by the daunting challenges, intelligent initiatives and reactions are urgently needed. For instance, reflexivity might provide the key to liberate the hope hidden within the Pandora’s box, and cosmopolitanism might potentiate empathy, awareness about share destiny, and a decisive call for sustainable oriented actions.

Ultimately, we need wiser decision-makers, like the platonic King Philosopher, capable of seeking virtue even if it is not easily recognizable. Cultivating truth, beauty, and goodness, as Socrates suggested, nourishes and enhances ethical reasoning, and moral development, both in terms of justice (Kohlberg) and compassion (Gilligan).

The unstoppable and frenetic changes of communication and business rhythms leave individuals struggling and vulnerable to severe emotional and transactional exchanges. In the case of the elderly, or those peripheral populations marginalized by poverty, with no or limited access to safe information and communications technologies (ICTs), the reactions are predictably flailing and ineffectual.

All efforts to reduce the digital divide, and alphabetize people to manage the most recent technologies are certainly worth the labor. Nonetheless, a lack of orienting, ethically sound criteria, will condemn all efforts to wild swings, frenetically moving without clear targets.

Current turbulent times clearly demand deep transformations from people, both at the personal and collective levels. Individuals and organizations must develop the capabilities to adjust to increasingly sudden and unexpected changes. Nevertheless, fast reactions are not enough, regardless of how clever or how fast. Responsible action requires intelligent reflexivity in order to contribute in the shaping of a plausible future; foreshadowing ideals, instead of passively shadowing inertial replies.

By evoking the powerful meanings, symbols, metaphors, experiences, reflections, and heritages of ancient civilizations and diverse cultural mentalities, we hope to contribute to help people make sense (both hermeneutically and action-oriented) of the profound transformations of the epoch, which carry unheard-of and usually inconspicuous consequences.

Reinforcing the contact with diverse human mentalities can help us unearth the core of humanity’s identity and full potential, empowering the discovery and creation of the most laudable futures, perhaps in serendipitous ways, but
always gaining awareness of our common destiny and need for sustainability, as we navigate through the same cosmopolitan venture.

The Digital Era ushers in unforeseen uncertainties, and perhaps unexpected threats to the survival of corporations and overall sustainability of natural ecosystems. Throughout this chapter multiple questions have been suggested as potential enquiry concerns, trying to nurture critical thinking and reflexivity, so emerging trends can be scrutinized in ways that are mindful of the well-being of all forms of life, social balances, and long-term economic prosperity.

Reflexivity requires flexibility, even more in the context of exponential changes that characterize the digital turbulences of current times. That is why continuous interrogation is promulgated throughout the text; not necessarily seeking definitive answers, but wishing to impregnate the quest for meaningful action.

Reflexivity cannot guaranteed predetermined results, but obliges us to explore life-saving epiphanies, seeking open-mindedness and warm-heartiness through serendipitous journeys, welcoming amazement; so humankind does not get lost, and, like T.S. Eliot, keeps searching and guarding the wisdom that might get lost in information.

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