

Scott Williams

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SPEAKERS

Zoe Varenne, Tom Pegram, Scott Williams

Tom Pegram 00:00

Hi, and welcome to 'Imperfect Utopias' based out of the UCL Global Governance Institute. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity, and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books other resources, listen to past shows, and join our community go to ucl.ac.uk/global-governance. We're really delighted to have Scott Williams with us here today on the podcast. Scott was the coordinating lead author for a really intriguing chapter in the 2019 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction issued by the UN. We'll link to that report in the show notes. I stumbled across chapter two which is titled 'Systemic Risks, the Sendai Framework and the 2030 agenda' in my research on COVID, and systemic risk and was really blown away by its clarity, its breadth, its depth of coverage, all in little over 30 pages. And I was very keen to bounce some ideas around with the author and thanks to Twitter. Here we are. So, Scott has a long track record working in the area of disaster risk for the UN and other agencies in both the public and private sector. This experience has led him to explore what it really means to be a systems innovator with current projects looking at how to accelerate climate innovation to a zero carbon economy within the EU, as well as applying the insights from the 2019 UNDRR report, report to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is available in a series of articles on [preventionweb](https://preventionweb.org), which we'll also link to. Outside the world of institutional politics and finance, Scott is also exploring new possibilities for engaging the world through poetry, writing, and other pursuits which, in his words, can nourish the vitality of life. Such a spirit of service some kind of ethical direction to orient action is a recurring motif at the more normative end of complexity scholarship as I found scholars such as the late great Paul Cilliers, who explicitly emphasise that there is no view from nowhere. There's no view from outside the system, that we all have genuine choices to make, that the future is not pre-determined, as we grapple with the complexity of our day to day lives, and our entanglements all the way up to grappling with global systems. So, thanks so much for joining us today Scott. Before we begin, I'll just hand over to my podcrew on the call today to introduce themselves.

Zoe Varenne 03:06

Hi my name is Zoe, I'm here representing the rest of the pod crew. I help mostly with the research and some of the writing bits.

Tom Pegram 03:14

So Scott, I think we're gonna dive straight into this intriguing chapter which you led on.

Scott Williams 03:20

Thanks for thanks for having me today.

Tom Pegram 03:22

Thanks for being here. So the chapter says in no uncertain terms, that systems thinking is now essential to the future. I guess to begin, it would be great to hear what is the core insight of systems thinking. And sitting here at the close of 2020 to what extent does the COVID-19 pandemic really vindicate that conclusion?

Scott Williams 03:48

Starting with a nice easy question, excellent. I personally don't really like the term 'systems thinking' but certain language finds its way into official, UN General Assembly mandated documents in curious ways. But you know, for me, it is about holding this sense, really a rigorous sense of humility and confusion. You know, I come from a very structured background as a chartered accountant of 15/20 years plying my trade within a big four accounting firm. So I know a lot about senses of certainty. And the limitations that, that imposes on your ability to actually make sense and create, that then creates really significant jarring, which money can soothe some of that sense of jarring certainly, in those sorts of professions of certainty, I would say. But ultimately, they are storytellers. Just as those who are holding on to the indigenous traditions of understanding natural systems are storytellers, every single number is a story. It's not a fact. Because it's constantly in relationship with everything else. And so I think the systems thinking perspective is being able to understand and just to exist within that confusion, that everything is in relationship to everything else. And everything is constantly relation to everything else differently, constantly, forever. And it always has been, and it always will be.

Tom Pegram 06:00

Yeah, so I mean, one insight, which I've taken from some of this, this scholarship and thinking about complexity is complexity really begins when causality breaks down. And some might take that statement to mean, well, there's not really very much we can do in that kind of situation, you know, it's it kind of, you know, sort of, I think a conventional response would be well, that just leads to a kind of paralysis, a lot of fear, a lot of resistance. And I think with, COVID is a curious case, because, you know, backscene, I think is an obvious example, where, yeah, to a degree there is causality, you can kind of dictate outcomes within the laboratory, given enough time given enough experimentation. But in terms of actually dealing with COVID as a social, human phenomena. That's not necessarily the that's not the right frame. And so you have the kind of complicated systems interfacing with very complex systems, and causality is very context bound. And I was wondering, how then do we navigate a situation like COVID-19?

Scott Williams 07:16

So I mean, it's certainly to probably premise, what I'm about to say is that, you know, this is not advocating an anti-reductionist non-scientific approach. But what it is trying to guide us towards trying to infuse into the discourse in the context of chapter two, and then the writings that we did in making that relevant for what was starting to emerge through the confusion of COVID-19 back in sort of March,

I think we wrote that March, April, as things were starting. But it's the continued application of Newtonian scientific principles, linear causality. You know, Gregory Bateson, one of the great systems thinkers, understanders of life, many ways you could describe him, you know, said "a person is not a billiard ball." You know, if you've got a billiard table and you've got enough computational power, then you can work out, when you pull the cue back and you hit the white ball, you can determine the resting point and time of every single one of those balls. Because you can do the calculations. But you know, he said, if you then turn around, and you hit, the person sitting next to you with the billiard cue, you can't work out what happens. Because you're not just, it's not just the physics that is in play there. And it's the application of that clean, clinical linear causality to biological systems to objectify and eliminate the relationality that constantly exists within living systems within life. Billiard balls are not alive, maybe at one level of abstraction they are. But for the purposes of being able to calculate velocities and resting places, and the sequence over time of what will happen on a billiard table, you can apply those very simple principles of causality. The problem is when you look through a biological lens, and you take some of the twisted malinterpretations of Darwinian evolutionary theory, rooted in this bizarre notion that survival of the fittest meant competition, that life was in competition with other life that is just nonsense. But it was supporting a scientific worldview, which was emerging through the industrial, the early industrialization era, which has then just been supercharged and super accelerated by the application of more and more advanced technologies, whether it's extraction and mining technologies, whether it's the application of phosphates and fertilisers to supercharge food, to be able to vaccinate ourselves against the fact that we've come up with a way to exponentially grow ourselves within a finite system. And exponentially, super exponentially extract and exploit and decimate. And to do that through a mechanism called money, which is an objectification. It's an elimination of relationships. As soon as you dig something out of the ground, as soon as you harvest something, as soon as you take a part of someone's life from them, their time, their dignity, their context, their relationships, and you reduce that to something as simplistic as "Now I've got money and I can do something with that" is a linear causality. It all starts to, it starts to become more and more absurd. And this is how I originally started to come on this journey, looking at double entry bookkeeping, in accounting, like, there's some stuff missing there. None of the ledger balances my friend. Yep. What the ledger balances within a very, very defined set of context, which is an interpretation of a way that we understand what is actually happening with that business' activities across the world and all the human beings which are involved in that, that business. And we just get rid of all the messy stuff and say, Look, it fits on the ledger. And so I started playing around with the notion, well, what about the debits equalling the credits at a planetary system scale? Because that's a real that's a simple equation. We understand double entry bookkeeping, it's been around since Luca Pacioli, was doing the money laundering for the, you know, the human slave trade of the Venetians back in, you know, the mid 15th century. We understand that, Okay, what about at a global level? Because, as, as you noted, you know, we're not outside the system, where we're within the system, and therefore, anything that's not finding its way onto that balance sheet that debits and credits, and that profit and loss statement is still there. But that ability to dissonance ourselves from that has been somewhat muddled and murkied with COVID asserting itself on what appeared to be more permanent structures, what appeared to be more fixed. And rigidity, the rigidities within our system, have sort of, oh, they've gone a bit sort of murky, because they were never there. They were all artificial, they were here, within the more modern part of our beautiful piece of equipment in our skull. But the older bits within our skull, always knew that they were not there. And that sense of well, okay, this actually feels like we're getting to a place where we're all, you know, in

relationship constantly together with, in a way that the separation narrative has, has pushed us away from, has dragged us away from because careers and, and titles and pensions and salaries have become more important than the relationships which are eliminated through the mechanism of achieving those more linear, you know, life trajectories.

Tom Pegram 14:00

Yeah, wow, so many thoughts are sort of arising. I mean, certainly the power of narrative, right. I mean, Yuval Harari, really, I think nails, the idea of money being, in a way, the greatest invention of humankind in the sense that it's allowed for extraordinary cooperation. Essentially, it's a mechanism, which means that we don't have to build personal relationships of trust, to engage in exchange. But I think what you're pointing to is actually that there's, there's a sort of dark, there's a shadow side, shall we say to, to that invention in that narrative?

Scott Williams 14:35

And I think it's been a limited narrative that serves a certain purpose. And, you know, Yuval is a very, very, very big thinker, certainly and an interesting, an interesting person, but if our goal is to annihilate the conditions for us as a living organism to exist on this planet, then money is indeed, the one of the most fantastic ways to accelerate that process. Absolutely. I don't doubt that for a second. But is that is that our objective? It appears to be our objective at the moment. It's not my objective. It's not why I think I exist on this planet. Certainly when I'm sitting in a forest in autumn, amongst the falling leaves, watching the decomposition of the sunlight, which gave rise to those leaves being created only six or seven months ago, now falling to create the next layer of soil to actually then create the conditions for the sunlight to create those leaves again next year. I think we may have missed something because money doesn't... Money doesn't allow for that.

Tom Pegram 15:55

Yeah, yeah. I mean, and the other, you know, again, sort of, in terms of what's missing from these narratives, I think that's a great question. And you also raised the issue of the survival of the species as an extremely powerful narrative, and actually not one that Darwin necessarily endorsed. And you have alternative ones like Peter Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid in nature. But it seems that this side of the species is definitely sort of won the narrative race. But I guess there might be some revival, shall we say, of these alternative narratives right now that there's an opportunity to have those kinds of discussions in a context of change and turbulence?

Scott Williams 16:38

Yeah, I mean, our... And we tried to start to explore that, in that chapter that, you know, initially formed the connection that has led to this conversation today. Yeah, love or hate Twitter. It is an interesting mechanism for being able to connect disparate relationships together. You know, our brain has evolved over a very long period of time to be biased towards habits. And we've just got in the habit of a competition narrative, we've got in the habit of a scarcity narrative, we've gotten in the habit of money being something useful, and we've got in a very, very recent habit, that GDP is somehow anything other than a fantasy story for the perpetuation of the decimation of the possibility of the majority of life being able to exist on this planet. It's kind of the highest level of simplification of the mechanisms by which those who have stumbled into power by virtue of, you know, falling out of the right vagina at the

right time in history in the right part of this planet, to perpetuate that lineage of power. But it's not very useful when you are ending a, you know, a 12,000 odd year period of relatively stable, very unusual and relatively stable, climactic conditions, which have given rise to the possibility of being able to separate ourselves from the underlying reality, which is the stochastic vitality of living systems and life on a rock floating around a big ball of heat, somewhere in space time. So what we were trying to start to explore, and what you know, I'm hoping we can continue to explore is that habitually being able to challenge habits is something that COVID has actually helped us do in a way that, you know, the climate crisis and the ecological crisis, and, you know, the nitrogen phosphide crisis, the planetary boundaries, the stuff that will, Steffen, and, you know, Johan Rockström became sort of rock stars for back in 2009. Those are much more important and relevant indicators, they're still indicators, and they're still rooted in what I would argue is a flawed measurement paradigm, rather than an ability to actually exist within a relationing, a constantly relationing paradigm, but they help to articulate the limitations of a measurement paradigm. But trying to explore into that we need to be able to find a way to allow humans to meet humans again. And for humans to be back in relation with both themselves and in relation with the leaves and the trees and the soil which is outside my window which ultimately gives rise to the ability for us to sit here and have a conversation in the first place. And that, through that, exploration that we started, yes, complicated versus complex, let's just have, let's just have a conversation about that, because that's a relatively obvious one. You can fix a car, but you know, you can't fix a family, as Nora Bateson often uses to explain. We live in a world where we believe in interconnectedness rather than interdependency and therefore, we can fix things. But there isn't actually anything to fix apart from the relationship and the perspective that we are actually holding about our place within the living systems in which we exist. And so that then challenges the way we govern ourselves, that challenges the way we invest in ourselves, that challenges the way that we actually, ultimately spend time, which is all we really have, can we do it with a perception of the love and care for all of the relationships within which we exist? Or can we continue to do it in the absence of love and care to objectify and eliminate the context in which those relationships exist, to continue to achieve industrial output, and in financial wealth, for what is really a very small fraction of the human family of which we're all a part, you know, 3 billion people still not having access to clean cooking technologies, to two or two and a half billion not having access to basic sanitation and water. The, it this is not a matter of finance and technology, it's not a matter. It is a deliberate and an ongoing choice at an unconscious subconscious level, at a habitual level, to not care, to deliberately care for the smallest possible unit. And you're no doubt aware of, you know, Einstein's musings on the prison, the delusion of reality in which we exist, that our universe which is infinite, and constantly dynamically changing, we shrink down. And my 20 years as a chartered accountant taught me very well how to shrink that down to a conveniently measurable and then comparably, you know, manageable space. But all that does is it annihilates, the potential for compassion to anything outside of the smallest possible unit. And we're seeing that with, with the continued issues with race in the United States and elsewhere, which is an absurdity. We're one race, we have different colours, and we have different bone structures because of the environmental conditions in which our ancestors existed. That's it. Period. There is no other difference. If I tear your skin off, and you tear my skin off, we both bleed red. And we both die. And I don't care where you live and who you are and what tag is associated with you. Can we overcome those categorizations? Can we go beyond those silos? Can we go beyond those boundaries? It applies in academic disciplines, it applies in business divisions, it applies in government departments, it applies everywhere. Why? Because of the efficiency mechanism in our brain that wants us to categorise and

wants us to play as if that is the world because if you are released as you are, if you engage in a course of psychedelics, or in a non-chemical way through the warm data processes that I spend a lot of my time on with Nora Bateson and the hundreds of warmies around the world who are exploring without really understanding what happens. But if you open a space for people to be confused together, exploring into a complex question, something does happen. There is a healing there is a generation there is a new forming of patterns that didn't exist before. Just like the disruption that happens with the taking of psychedelics psilocybin and other forms.

Scott Williams 24:13

This is a sort of the areas that we were starting to explore and that I'm hoping we can continue to explore more and not just in separate literature, but in in the heart of the intergovernmental processes. The spaces where the highest level of decisions are made, where the trillions are being deployed towards COVID recovery programmes at the moment in the absence of any sense of love and care, using exactly the same sorts of habitual reasonings of this is why we have to do it this way. "Don't be silly, Scott, don't talk to me about the fact that we're all part of nature and we're part of living systems and COVID has helped us to understand that. I don't understand that. I don't care about it. I'm not incentivized to do that. My salary is based on the fact that I don't understand that and if I start to understand it, then I get confused and then I'm what the hell do I do then man? I can't be confused. I'm the man, you know, with the microphone. I'm the one who has to tell people stuff." Why don't you get out there and start telling people, you're a bit confused about stuff? Why don't you start doing that, because that's one of the flips that I've made in my life is to just allow myself to be. And that has been remarkably beautiful part of this short journey in this current iteration that I exist within of not trying to be a systems innovator, as you mentioned, at the start, not trying to be a change maker, but trying to exist within and see the patterns across and between different parts of life in which we exist. And that's very healing, like sitting in a forest, watching the leaves for watching the soil forming, if you sit there long enough, you will see the soil form. Unfortunately, the reality in which we exist, we have to move and move and move. But actually, sometimes there is some learning from not moving, and letting that direction be guided for you, rather than consciously, constantly relying on this, which is based on habits, which are locked in based on the systems in which you exist, and the cultural dynamics in which you grew up in, rather than on what is actually happening.

Tom Pegram 26:36

Great, thanks, Scott. I know Zoe wants to come in now. So I'll pass over to Zoe.

Zoe Varenne 26:44

Well, I'm really grateful actually, to be here. And to be part of this conversation. It's really like, making me think a lot. And I really appreciate so I want to try and formulate my question, Kind of taking into account what you said about needing to, I think reprioritize relationships and compassion and sort of the human aspect of things and like projecting into an imagined future where all this has been taken into account and complexity thinking is maybe more fully integrated into social and political institutions. What do you think those institutions would look like? And what would you hope that they would look like? I guess is my question.

Scott Williams 27:22

What a wonderful question, institutions. Gosh, what a word that is. It's... Having worked in some of the biggest institutions on the planet, and then plying my trade, to then work with even bigger institutions on this planet. The ones that make, you know, \$200 billion a year. They're just people. They're human beings. And they have wrappers around them, that they are institutions, and that creates artificial notions of separation. But they are ultimately they are composed of human beings, who have been trained, who are incentivized, who are punished, in many cases, if they do not release themselves from that murky, messy, confused reality of being a human being. And if they do allow themselves to be released from that, and become more mechanised in the way that they are able to exist with each, with other human beings within those contexts, and across into the other context, the other parts of the marketplace or the other parts of the, the institutional system, then they're rewarded. And humans like being rewarded, now brain likes being rewarded. That's why Facebook's so successful. And you know, institutions have known that for a very long time, the sense of being excommunicated from the church is, it's an ancient fear of being left behind when the tribe moves on across the plains. "What the hell am I going to do now I'm outside the tribe, you know, the tribe's moved on, and I'm still a camp, and I can't, I know that I need the tribe, I know that I need that support," because when we cooperate with each other, then we can survive. Otherwise, we die. We're hopeless at dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity individually. And we're hopeless at defending ourselves against the vast forces of nature, individually, but we're really awesome at it when we're together. And institutions are nothing more than you know, a modern incantation of the tribal mentality. You know, I have friends who work for Barclays and you know, "Oh HSBC, they're horrible ooh." And when I used to work for PwC, you know, "Oh gosh, we're gonna you know we're gonna beat Deloitte, we've got to kill them, kill them all. Gotta win, oh gotta win!" But actually some of my mates, you know, who, who I have a loving relationship with, which was formed back before either of us joined these institutions. You're telling me that, that's less important than the relationship I have. Here. You know that's always felt weird, I think, you know, when you're able to actually help people into that conversation as a human talking to another human, and not really being sure which all of us are very vulnerable. And all of us are not very sure, we have all of our fears constantly bubbling around, and our vulnerabilities are just below the surface, and some are better at hiding them. I think what I would, what I would hope that we're going to get towards as the existential distress, as the realisation that, that stability, on which all of our narratives and our stories going back to the stories are built on. And the great edifices, the great sort of phallic edifices of our urban environments. Big, stiff, vertical, erect structures, which are a carryover obviously, from the steeples of churches of days gone by, and pyramids and other forms of erectness, which still serve deep narrative, you know, epistemological truths, which many of us hold, dear. But can we release ourselves from that? I think the pressures are there, and the opportunity is being presented to us through COVID to imagine different ways to be. I don't think the institutions per se, will change. But I think the humans within the institutions, if we can open up enough spaces for humans to meet other humans as humans, and to be able to get lost in the complexity, as again, as Gregory Bateson said, "Everything is everything, and I get lost in it." Awesome!

Scott Williams 32:22

The more people who can wake up each morning, and just think "I'm just gonna be the best. Be, us however you visualise yourself, that I can be today and whatever that means. But I'm not going to, I'm not going to push away my vulnerabilities, I'm not going to push away my fears, and my my hurts, and I am, I am going to allow myself to hold that as well as my professional expertise and my training and all

of the things that the book learning that I know, and the scientific understanding I have of how things work. So I don't, you know, jump out of a second floor window, instead of use the stairs and I go out the door," you know, it's not letting go of those things that we actually do understand about those linear causalities I was talking about before, but it's much more being able to hold both the linear causalities as well as that confusion, and to hold that both outside of but within institutions. And for those institutions to represent more of a mycelial structure. You know, those mycausal pathways that exist within forests that you don't see. But without them, you don't have the forest, you don't have the trees, you don't have the skyscrapers. It's the stuff within the institution, not the edifice of the institution, which if we can have, you know, more primacy of perspective, maybe. This is where language kind of doesn't really work, or at least the English language with all its focus on nouns. And, you know, we need more verbs, the de-edifying of, of these institutions, and the mycelialling of these institutions. And this notion that I've carried very dearly of caring and nourishing that these institutions will become spaces of, of collected, caring and nourishing. That is what I would hope and I think as things get more dire, you know, 14 degree warming anomaly in the Arctic, in the Arctic Ocean over the last month. Yeah, I mean, I call it a blue ocean, the first blue ocean event in September 2020. Back in 2012, when someone asked me about it at Rio plus 20. And they're like, "You're a lunatic. It's not going to happen until 2060/2070 man" It was like, "Actually, no, I think there's elements which are outside the models," even back then. I didn't know much about climate models back then. But it was obvious that there was a restriction of what could be included within in the same way, as what could be included within a balance sheet of an accounting, of a company's, you know, financial position and financial statements. So can we get to that position where we're able to not just look at what we're certain about within these institutions, but be much more comfortable about what we're very uncertain and confused about, and bring that into the daily reality of how people within those institutions and then how those institutions ultimately start to sort of fracture and fragment and break down a little bit because of the silliness of the separation becomes much more obvious, on a minute to minute, second to second, day to day reality. Or something like that.

Tom Pegram 35:48

I think that's a great sort of working premise, at least, you know, and we'll work on the language, we need more vocabulary. That's, yeah, yeah, that's a that's an exciting sort of task. Really. I know Dave Snowden also has said that one of the great values of complexity thinking is that it allows seemingly incompatible ontologies to in a way be kind of held alongside one another, not necessarily in conflict. But accepting that you know, it, ultimately, it's all about context. And I was struck also by what you said about, you know, Gregory Bateson saying, "I get lost in complexity, and that's okay." I think for a lot of people that might not feel okay, as you say, and I know that something which has occurred a bit in the scholarship is this idea, you know, don't drink the Kool Aid, that it's not all crisis, you know, it's very easy to mistake complexity for crisis. And it might be quite an important distinction. Because obviously, in a crisis that may induce certain physiological responses, shall we say, that could impair our ability to make sense and to act with awareness with presence in this current situation we find ourselves in. But I wanted to just see,

Scott Williams 37:15

It's a real fear that, you know, as we enter into different types of relating with the living systems of which we exist, and we start to appreciate that they are much less stable and permanent than we've

been led to believe that everything will fall apart and in absence of feeling cared for, and feeling loved, and being able to have a space to just really break down and cry, and just be very emotional about it. And I've worked through this myself, and I know others who have you, if you have to do that on your own, then, you know, suicide is a likely option, because it is terrifying. But we don't have to go through this alone, you know, we are here together, and we are able to hold and help each other. And there are more and more people who are holding, you know, lightly, you know, Dave's notion that we don't have to be in conflict, as we are exploring these different ways of being able to understand and perceive our world, we can actually hold all of them simultaneously. And it's the paradoxes that are actually very important for us to be able to hold together, your perspective, the way you observe, the way you describe your world is necessarily going to be different to mine. But it doesn't change the fact that we exist within the same world. But if that's a space of mutual learning, where I'm learning from you, and I'm learning from Zoe, and you're learning from me, and I don't come in as the expert, which I'm not coming into this conversation, as the expert. And you know, I'm very much sensing that neither of both of you that coming in with the perspective that the questions that we're asking are often just too simple. They're questions which are able to be served very directly by reductionist linear approaches. And they serve continuing narratives of growth and a GDP and a progress and all of that. But if we can explore different questions, and then put that science in service of those more, more complex questions that don't have answers, but we can get steers, we can get a bit of guidance, get a different range of scenarios and insights that maybe will help us to be able to shift our habits just a little bit, challenge them, then, then we're in a better position to be able to use all of the capabilities that we have built up through our evolutionary history, rather than just those, which gives us that nice sort of pat on the back that, oh, we know what's going on. We're all hunky dory, it's all fine. It's most obviously not really, most obviously, is not. But those spaces to be able to perceive differently, should not be and never had been through history of how humans have dealt with crises have been done in isolation.

Tom Pegram 40:18

Chapter Two of the report says, you know, very clearly that nonlinear change is absolutely certain and imminent. And I guess the question, obviously, which sprung up for me, and I'm sure for practitioners in the UN who read this as well, how well prepared are we in terms of governance systems for this near term certainty? And what's struck me also was that the response to COVID has been kind of within an emergency paradigm. We kind of understand maybe how to deal with acute emergencies like the firefighters running into the fire. But with COVID and certainly with climate change and ecological destruction, we aren't really dealing with an acute emergency that is going to be resolved when the flames are snuffed out. These are problems which are going to roll on for time, you know, decades, maybe just, it's just going to be with us. And so I wonder how you would respond, you know, how well prepared are our systems in dealing with these kinds of chronic problems. And I came across a phrase by Reinhold Niebuhr which has stayed with me. And he said, you know, democracies are proximate solutions to insoluble problems. And maybe that's, that's the task that we have we have before us.

Scott Williams 41:45

Yeah. That phrase, yes, which is on page 36. And we put it in bold, because I think partly because we were so amazed that it actually managed to stay in the report, it says with the certainty of near term

nonlinear changes, the critical assumption of the relationship between past and future risk must now be revisited. And then we go on to say that human society is increasingly unable to understand or manage the risks they create. We are very much in a response space, because of much of what I've just talked about. We are still working very much on, you know, ex post situational changes, as opposed to getting further and further ex ante. And one of the things we call for in that report, which was actually meeting the challenge, which the governments of the world had signed up to, in, in my very favourite paragraph of all the paragraphs in all the intergovernmental agendas. And yeah, I'm a bit of an intergovernmental agenda geek, sure, but paragraph 15 within the Sendai framework, which hopefully if you know it, then you love it as much as I do. If you don't, then you should read it and start to love it too. And it was a very clever piece of wording, which basically took the framing of what we're trying to understand and manage from natural hazards and looking at them as individual natural hazards, which is what the Hyogo framework, the preceding framework did. It said if we can just understand earthquakes in geological risks better if we can just understand hydrometeorological risks a little bit better. And then we can be better at understanding hurricanes and cyclonic activity. And we can be, you know, better at understanding riverine flooding, and great, that's lovely, but that doesn't actually help us to understand what's happening in the system. And that was kind of what was the prevailing epistemology, prevailing way of thinking, we add these things together. And that gives us an understanding of the risk that New York City is exposed to. And more in particular, the human beings existing within New York City, which was interesting from an intellectual perspective, but not actually very useful. So paragraph 15, said, you know, it's all hazards from both manmade and natural origin, that there is no such thing as a natural disaster, the disaster is a result of the choices that we have made as to where we are going to exist, how we're going to exist, and even why we're existing there. And that we're not just looking at sudden, acute, we're looking at chronic to your point about chronic, slow onset, like desertification, like Arctic ice melt, like the slowdown of the ocean circulation system, and we talked about a synchronicity and poly synchronicity, and that, that we are very bad as human beings and dealing with multiple time horizons simultaneously. But we're very good when things go bad, we're really good. All of these artificial separations disappear very quickly. And that's why that becomes our default. One of my original giant Wake Up Calls was, was being in the Great East Japan earthquake, being in Tokyo, at 2:46pm, on March 11, and experiencing six minutes and 19 seconds, or whatever it was, of being very sure that this was my last couple of seconds on this planet, in, you know, as a living, breathing human being and that my family were likewise about to be crushed and killed. And that was my responsibility. And you know, that lives with me, those moments live with me forever. But what was very interesting immediately after that, you know, you have this 48 hour to 72 hour to 96 hour window, where human beings are just beautiful. We just, we care, it doesn't matter. You know, the investment bankers, some of my friends who were, who were taking, you know, positions on people's lives, which were compromising those people's ability to live, lives of a high quality and dignity, just the day before all of a sudden were spending their own money to fill trucks with food and blankets to drive up into a radiation zone to help people they'd never met before. It was like it was unbelievable.

Scott Williams 46:15

And most people do actually experience a sort of a form of those who survive a form of euphoria, post traumatic growth, not post-traumatic stress disorder, which we're familiar with, more people actually

experience the growth. And then, okay, we've got to do new things, but it lasts for a very short period of time. And then we go back to the same, the habit generator comes back in. So how can we, and that's very much what we're trying to explore here. That's what the Sendai framework said and it's what all the governments of the world have agreed they're going to do by 2030 is that they are going to take a preventative approach, they are going to finally implement the precautionary principle, which we broadly agreed back in 1992, in Rio, and that actually 10s of 1000s of years ago, humans agreed that the precautionary principle is a good idea, don't go alone, to go and fight the tiger. Because you're going to lose, take 10 people and spears and nets, hey, presto you've taken an ex ante preventative approach. Because, you know, all the dudes who went tried to take the tiger down because it was, you know, it was gonna be males, for a lot of people, they aren't here anymore. So we are very slow to learn, unfortunately, that the choices that we are making to continue to pursue linear trajectories are the exact choices which are resulting in our inability to be able to manage ex post the results of those choices. So we came up with this notion of a four dimensional topological map of risks through time. How can we create a pluralistic data, knowledge, understanding wisdom space, with everything that we have developed through scientific ways of understanding as well as indigenous ways of understanding? And how can we layer a bit of AI onto that to do some pattern recognition? How can we layer in some warm data type approaches to do different types of pattern recognition, to then be able to come up with this sort of visualisation, this representation, so that we can start to actually see what is happening, and to be able to start to get insights about the anomalies within systems performances, which give rise to the potential discontinuity of those systems on which we exist, which we're, you know, relying on to be able to exist, and then can we downscale and upscale all of those insights from the planetary and extra planetary down to individual buildings and individual communities to provide us a bunch of scenarios and insights for different decision compass from anyone who's trying to make a decision based on the stochastic nature of the reality that we exist within, but with a more trusted sense of this is everything that we actually know at this point in time and understand and this notion that I have a core elements approach, clearly data ecosystem, proper representation, the best representation, we can have the dynamic nature of the living systems in which we exist, dynamic nature of risk. To be able to allow people to actually make those trade-offs have a different decision compass. And, you know, Kate Raworth's donut economics is advocating a different decision compass, we need to have a donut, deal with the social foundations as well as the planetary boundaries simultaneously. To do that, you need to have a much better understanding of what happens when you do those complex trade-offs that we have through economic indicators and other measures. But beyond that, you need space to play. That's the fourth bit you need a place to play and to laugh, and to be a clown and to bring humour in. And importantly, to generate those stories which are rich in metaphors. The stories which help people make sense through the language of the gods, of the natural phenomena to which they are exposed in the absence of having the scientific information and understanding that we now have. But so much richness and complexity can be held within poetry, within art, within dance, within music, that it can then, regardless of expertise, or formal education, can be passed on. Don't do that, you know, don't take the first four days of salmon as they're running up the river. as Robin Kimura-Wao spoke about so beautifully in braiding sweetgrass, let the first four days go by, celebrate, have a four day party, the salmon is back, this is cool, let's party our arses off. Let's dance by the river and celebrate. And then we'll start to take some fish. And if we do that, then the salmon will run up, they will breed they will come back down again. And next year, hey, presto, we get another four Day party. Perfect. Sounds like a pretty good life to me. To counter that narrative of the horrors of the future, we

can actually go back to different ways, we can rush into our future by some dancing and playing, back into some of the stuff that we've forgotten of the way that we used to relate to the natural phenomena to which we're still in relationship with.

Tom Pegram 51:14

Yeah, having the power of form and story and symbolism. Reminds me also of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's idea of the Black Swan and he's very keen to direct our gaze to the, what he calls the fat tail risks. And he's a big fan of the precautionary principle, which does seem to be the hardest thing, for some reason, within our covenant, and within our sort of current orthodox governance modes.

Scott Williams 51:44

I mean, money doesn't like fat tail risks. It just doesn't. I remember speaking to some guys from TEPCO, and I was consulting with them back in, in early 2011, late 2010. Why did you choose to build the seawall, six metres high around Fukushima Daiichi and Fukushima, the two big nuclear power complexes, one of which obviously, is very famous, and the other one has fallen into obscurity. But well, that was based on the 1960 Chilean earthquake, you know, the biggest earthquake that ever happened, the 9.5 magnitude off the coast of Chile, and then it was based on, you know, the size and speed and velocity of the tsunami. You know, the wall is there. If for the fault at all for going no, not the Chilean fault? That's, isn't it? Wait, what? Well, if we did, we'd have to build a wall, you know, 25/30 metres high and have, you know, five layers of walls and just ain't enough concrete and steel for that dude. So it wouldn't be economically viable. Is there modelling that shows that? It might have been, it might have been in sort of 1960/61/62 that modelling was done. It was shelved. It was a deliberate intentional decision to not use the modelling of what would happen, if the fault went the way that it did. And that wasn't even the biggest model scenario. I mean, it was a big one was 9.1, or 9.0. But there's the possibility of an even larger earthquake event happening, and even larger tsunamis happening. But the decision is to not build the walls as big as they could be. And then also to level the headland, down to a lower level, closer to the ocean, for logistics purposes. For getting in and out of the of the Fukushima Daiichi, these were to my point before, these were conscious choices, these were deliberate choices, because Tokyo needed to be able to demonstrate Japanese Government needed to demonstrate that they were an economic and energy superpower. And with the 1964 Olympics coming around the corner, they needed to be able to show not just a Shinkansen, which was the pride and joy, they needed to be able to show that they were going to be able to continue this acceleration, the only way they can do that is through vast nuclear power stations. Across the country, and Kashiwazaki Shiokaze on the northwest coast and in the Fukushima complexes were two of the largest complexes in the world. But they were based on deliberate choices to ignore Taleb's Black Swans not include. Just cut that bit of the tail off, and then the model works nicely the economic model and the viability makes sense. What we're advocating is not is not a fat tail risk approach, were advocating a full dynamic representation of all of the scales of risk. And importantly, what's underneath that, the context, and then the drivers of those contexts, of being able to actually help decision makers to navigate down into to that point about humility and confusion, again, down into that messy space of the drivers, which is where the choices actually, the manifestation of risks, it's too late. And that's when your notion of the response comes in. So we think we've got the choice architecture only at the point where the risk manifests itself, when the food crisis starts, when the when there's a you know, as the tropic pandemic starts to manifest itself when, when other things start to fail. No, the choices are well before that. But

the insights are very, very, they're hard to see, you know, amongst the noise, and if you've been conditioned to definitely not see them. And again, is as Nora talks about, you know, if you weren't born in Sweden, you didn't grow up in the forests of Sweden, you don't see the moose behind the tree. You just you can't, it's there, but you can't see it. And your mind's capability to shut off things that it doesn't want you to see because it doesn't want to process them because that takes energy. And dammit, I prefer to have my energy. You know, use as efficiently as possible, as opposed to being able to actually sense what is really going on. So how to actually create the mechanism, a way for people to start to exploring into that, the drivers level, not the manifestation of risk level. To get us back towards where the Sendai framework said we were going to go, we were going to go from managing disasters to managing risk because that was the top line tag at the conference, it was the top line tag going into the Addis Ababa action agenda in July into the SDGs and September of 2015, and then into the Paris agreement of December 2015. You know, we've got to get better at getting ahead of the curve. Otherwise, the curve will overwhelm us. But we haven't done very well on that. And our response to COVID is demonstrating we're still not habitually challenging those habits in a way which is helping us to take a preventative mindset.

Tom Pegram 56:55

I mean, this idea of, of trying to gauge what is actually salient in the landscape. And as we move into kind of unprecedented territory, so, what does a post-industrial transition, whatever that may, what form that may take? What does that actually look like? How would we understand the choice architecture, the leavers, the drivers, and I would like to just ask one question, which has been on my mind, which is, what is taking thinking about it in those terms? What does a systems approach help? How does it help us understand questions of how power is exercised, or justice is achieved? And I'm thinking very concretely about what happened in Copenhagen in 2009. And the position of particularly the African delegations, African country delegations, on the two degree target, which as far as they're concerned was unacceptable. How do we understand how power is being exercised? And I suppose, Justice in terms of the goals that are being pursued, perhaps, I'd be curious to know how you respond to those musings.

Scott Williams 58:23

Yeah, it's pretty, it's pretty overwhelming. And it makes me pretty emotional. Thinking not just about Copenhagen, but what is constantly happening all the time. A lot of it just doesn't make it into the press. But it's constantly there. I mean, the African delegation position in the small, the island states position was two degrees as a death sentence. And they were right, you know, even 1.5 degrees is a long way down death row. And we've got no chance of achieving either of them without that really profound shift away from the perception of the current power structures as being all there is. And I, I try, in what I am doing, with other people who I know are trying as well, to bring in, to these conversations, a notion of caring, nourishing and loving each other. In spaces where people are conditioned to not speaking that way, which is a, you know, it's a it's just a very human and beautiful way of helping people to recognise the scripts and the roles which they have assumed, which are actually layered on, as part of their ego construct on top of the reality that they are a human being. And, you know, I don't I don't care how sociopathically and psychopathically you may be acting and, you know, there's one obvious person who's about to need to go back to his golf course pretty soon, that comes to mind. Many people wish ill on him, and I would just wish care and kindness and love. And I, I know through my journeys through

life, that life no matter how terrifying it can be, when you exist with the sort of information that I sense that both you Tom and Zoe immerse yourself in, and how, how upsetting it is. That if you feel that you are cared for, and you are loved, and that you are being nourished as a human, then it's a lot easier to be caring and loving and nourishing towards others. And then very quickly, because all those power structures are not real, they're not real. Member states, governments of the United Nations and I do obviously work a lot for the United Nations. And I often get told, You can't say that nation states are irrelevant. But whoops, there I am saying it again. Because they are and the power that is at the heart of the system, which has been enshrined within unfortunately, you know, our best attempts at saying, We need a new direction, which I would argue at a global level is the SDGs. Paris, but at the heart of both of them is the primacy of sovereign governments to do whatever the hell they want. And the primacy of money as a mechanism for the transactions and the exchanges of human beings. And neither of them are real. Both of them are fantasies within our brain, the way both of them are being constructed. The forests and the mycelium that exists within a forest which spans a nation state border. It doesn't respect that. COVID, Coronavirus doesn't respect the changing destabilisation of the natural forces, which we describe as climate, the movement of water and particles in the air. They don't respect that. These are absurdities and allowing more and more people to be able to engage with that notion that that doesn't mean the breakdown of everything and everything becomes anarchic. If it's through the paradigm, the perception of if we exist to nourish each other, we will be nourished. reciprocity. You know, indigenous wisdom continues to teach us that whether it's from Buddhist traditions, or whether it's from, you know, Native American traditions or Aboriginal traditions in Australia, or African traditions, it doesn't matter. reciprocity, gifting yourself into every situation to be as kind and as loving and beautiful to other living creatures, living systems as you possibly can be. That's real power. That is real power. And there is beauty and song and dance and enough food and enough water and enough space for us to exist together. But if we continue this absurdity of the concentration of ourselves within dense urban environments to perpetually go after and chase power structures, built on cities and nations, and money, then, you know, 2009 just keeps repeating itself over and over and over again, until we are no more. And we are no more very soon the way we're going. It's, it's this century, that we are functionally extinct, because of the forces which we've unleashed upon ourselves, and that we will unleash upon ourselves. How to work on this at a level of culture? We are trapped, those of us who are trying to do good stuff and try to combat these narratives of division and separation, which are rooted in cultural means they're rooted in stories. You're probably familiar with the notion of stochastic terrorism. The notion that if you have a big enough, you know, platform, and you use divisive and hateful rhetoric, about violent violence basically being tolerated, you don't know that there'll be violence in 12 cities across the United States within seven days. But you do know there will be violence somewhere, somewhere in the system. And something that I'm exploring with Nora and with others in the war data spaces, stochastic vitality or stochastic generosity, you know, how can we not pursue measurement targets, not pursue, you know, the SDGs as a goal that use them more as a heuristic, as a guide. And, and actually approach this from the perspective we need to change the culture to be a culture of caring and love and nourishing, not a culture of violence and separation and extraction and exploitation. And then the ripples can go out through the system and that's been my lived experience since I guess I made it a choice to give myself to the universe and not to go after. And try to hold myself accountable to constantly be challenging my habits, constantly shifting, and therefore being confusing to others, and being very confusing to myself every day. And, you know, everything that I'm saying is both obvious and, but it's also, you know, ludicrous, depending on whose ears it's landing in.

Zoe Varenne 1:06:52 I had one more sort of question, if that's all right, um, as I guess, someone who's not really started their professional career, and who's in a bit of an in between space, all of this has given me a lot to think about. And I think there's definitely a cognitive challenge, and I think also probably a cognitive resistance to comprehending and sort of engaging with the true nature and behaviour of systems. But also, it's so obvious that it's so important and imperative. I guess, what advice do you have for students of global politics who want to pursue systems analysis? And maybe, I guess, should Systems Analysis be incorporated into more than just global politics? Should it be incorporated into every profession in every field of study, because it is just so crucial?

Scott Williams 1:07:40

The liminal space, a beautiful space. I am an ultra-marathon runner and I trail run around the mountains and I often get up at three and four in the morning, even in winter and snow storms here in Switzerland and like you really are a lunatic. And, okay, by one definition, I'm a lunatic. But existing in that liminal space, as the edges blur between myself and the forest between myself and the mountain, myself and the rocks and the other creatures around me, opens up the possibility of other possibilities. And, I mean, this notion of professions and disciplines and, and career paths, they're imposed. They're imposed sort of possibility spaces. And, again, as I think I said earlier, you know, I'm not advocating an elimination of reductionist approaches to knowing things I think I couldn't possibly have got to where I've got to without going through, you know, I guess the meat grinder exercise of being a chartered accountant for an extended period of time, and learning how the system actually did function. So I think there's a huge value in pursuing courses of learning about what we actually, what our space of knowing is, to then be able to realise how tiny and insignificant that is. And then these liminal spaces Don't, don't close them off, you're always in a liminal space, if you choose to continue to live in a liminal space. You know, my daughter's 15, she's starting to make decisions about Okay, I need to make choices about which things that I'm going to study over the next couple of years to open up different pathways and possibilities to university and I'm probably not the best dad in the world to be able to help with that, because I don't really care about any of it because all of its artificial. All I would say is, you know, find things that you love that you can nourish yourself with, and that you can find a way to care and love and nourish others, as you're doing that you're not acquiring knowledge as a weapon. You're not acquiring it as a way to create a you know, a salary pathway, which the academic space is, you know, is as bad as the private sector space or like, just doesn't pay as well. And as bad as the government space about, you know, getting towards trajectory just to keep on going. Hell no. That makes it very hard to keep caring and nourishing. And as Einstein said, to have that widest possible circle of compassion. And I guess answer the last part of your question, yeah, this should be in everything this is, this is life. We, this, trying to, as we phrased it in chapter two, you know, trying to get a better understanding of the systemic nature of risk is what we talked about, but it's actually a better understanding of the systemic nature of life. But it's not actually a better understanding. It's just a remembering. Because, you know, when you're three or four before you go into formal education, you don't perceive any of these separations. You don't perceive politics and sociology and whatever is being separate. You don't have the language and you don't have the, the conforming and the training and the lathing, as I've often said, People you haven't been put on the lave around but someone sort of slowly chiselling all the really amazing, incredible bits of Zoe off, so that you fit on that laid and you're nice and smooth. And then you can be inserted into the system. God no, keep all the messy bits fight

being on the line for as long as you can. I think caring and compassion and love backed up with a knowledge of what is actually happening to the greatest extent that we can, and then having the courage to stay in those liminal spaces and continue to express that. I am Zoe. But I and I know all this stuff. And I've got a master's in a PhD and postdoc, and whatever. And I've done 20 years of experience in this then the other thing, but really, I simply don't, I don't know. And what I do know is this, but I'd love to explore your perceptions. And see if we can come up with a different way of knowing between us trying to find new Meadows for us to roll around in the grass with the wildflowers and see if we can maybe live a little differently and help a few more people along the way. And it's a long rambling answer. But I am very confused when people ask me, ask me these sorts of questions.

Zoe Varenne 1:12:36

It was a really wonderful answer. And I guess what really resonates and what comes through is, is doing everything you do with compassion and courage. And I really love that word courage, because I think I heard somewhere I don't know if it's true or not, that it sort of it comes from the French word coeur, which means so then courage kind of means doing things with your whole heart. And I guess that's, that's how we move forward. That's how that will, that's what I've definitely take away from this conversation is that to do things and to keep learning and keep being educated, but never to forget to do it with love and care, as you so eloquently put it, also, yeah, thank you.

Scott Williams 1:13:15

And there's a sense of deep integrity in that. That, you know, you know, to the extent you can know, why you're doing what you're doing. And you're listening to all of the different bits of the relationing in which you exist within not just what you know, UCL is, is saying that you should be thinking or that, you know, the British government is saying you should be thinking or your family is saying you should be thinking or any of those other sort of conditionalities that are imposed upon you. They're all useful, but actually having the integrity to say, No. Can we talk about that? I'm not sure. And that's just ridiculous. It regardless of what that means for you potentially being excommunicated from a tribe and then from another tribe. And then from another tribe. I've been excommunicated from a few over the years, not surprisingly, some people feel threatened. And this is in no means intended to be in any way threatening. But people can be threatened if they don't feel they can challenge their habits. But there's always another tribe. We're a big tribe, we're a big family. And there's a lot of people who will have their arms open for you as you get excommunicated from a tribe. If you're doing it with integrity. And the love and the care is a demonstration of that integrity, I think is really important.

Tom Pegram 1:14:40

Challenging habits that's the work. Yeah. Thank you so much Scott for such a thoughtful conversation for helping us sort of nourish this this space for exploration, for curiosity that we're really trying to cultivate here on the podcast is greatly appreciated. And it's reassuring that, you know, these ideas are circulating within the corridors of UN and, and elsewhere. We look forward to seeing next year's edition of the report. That's going to be exciting. And I hope we'll stay in touch.

Scott Williams 1:15:17

Absolutely. And just thank you both for holding this, this space to have these sorts of conversations and exchanges. We need we need more of these spaces and it's wonderful. Thank you very much.

Tom Pegram 1:15:30

Thank you.

Zoe Varenne 1:15:31

Thank you so much.

Tom Pegram 1:15:33

Thanks for tuning into 'Imperfect Utopias' to get access to all of our content, and to stay up to date with future zoom calls, workshops and events and more. Check us out at ucl.ac.uk/global-governments. If you liked this content, please do leave us a comment and subscribe. Until next time!