

Recovering Systems Thinking from Systems Thinking¹

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THE QUESTION

In her kind invitation to this Workshop, Dr. Amanda Gregory wrote: “I think the notion of critical issues in systems thinking is very important at the moment as everyone seems to be asking ‘where do we go from here?’ and this was specially true at the recent UKSS strategy meeting.”

When one asks “where do we go from here” one is indicating explicitly that, after some journey, one has arrived at a point from where one does not know how to continue the trip. Since this sort of doubt is frequently uncomfortable, one tends to rush oneself to blindly indicate possible destinations, without noticing that the origin of our doubt is rooted in some sort of uneasiness about this “here and now” where we are. Such an uneasiness, if I may continue on board of my travelling metaphor, is usually related to either the fact that we really do not know where we are in relation to our travel itinerary or that we are in doubt about the meaning of the whole trip. The first possibility does not offer much problem for it is just a matter of finding oneself in a map. It is difficult that this possibility, arising from my travel metaphor, could be our actual case, for you would have come out with a clear answer in that strategy meeting of the UKSS. So, let us forget about this first possibility.

The second possibility, that we are in doubt about the meaning of the whole trip, might very likely emerge from two types of situations: either one has changed one’s mind during the trip concerning its original purpose and one is deciding between two (or more) different purposes or, along the course of the journey, one has slowly forgotten the purpose and meaning of the journey and one is, at the end, only following an inertia of which one suddenly catches sight. Of course, both of these two possibilities may intermingle.

In any case, the question “where do we go from here?” is requesting some reflection about the relationship between two further questions; namely, “why did we come here?” (what was the purpose of the journey?) and “where are we?” This pair of questions, when allowing the metaphor to grow in the specific field of systems thinking and practice, become into the pair: “what has been the meaning of this journey called systems thinking and practice?” and “where are we in relation to

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such a journey?” If, in turn, they are asked in terms of the systems community we are suppose to constitute, they can be rephrased as: “how did we come to be what we are?” and “what are we?”; for, as a community, we are what we have become. However, the inner relationship that binds these two questions is not a simple relationship. It is dialectical relationship (or self-referential, if you prefer). Witness why: The question “how did we come to be what we are” cannot be replied unless we know “what we are.” In turn, the question “what are we?” as a systems community can not find any reply unless we have a reply for the question “how did we come to be what we are?”, for we are not a rock or a machine, we are an ongoing project, we are the representatives of a quest or program. So, these two questions are really one twofold question which claims one twofold reply. The question is thus: “how we came to be what we are (knowing that what we are is what we have become)?”

If my possibility tree is roughly right, then I should be right in thinking that it is nonsense to begin to indicate destinations without asking that last question. And this is what I want to do today: just to ask the dialectical question {“how did we come to be what we are?” <---> “what are we?”}.

Now, in order to ask that question, I think one should take some distance from this everyday hustle and bustle that each one of us lives under the umbrella of this thing called systems thinking and practice. I would like to attempt this taking distance by two successive steps: First I will take the necessary distance to see the recent origin of the systems movement from the forties to the seventies. Second, I will take a further stand so as to see the systems movement within our current epoch. When I take these two successive stands, this is what I see concerning the meaning of our journey:³

FIRST STAND

If one pays careful attention to the original⁴ systems call from the sixties and seventies, I think one finds (among other things) a call for holistic understanding and acting which pretended to counter the multiple pressures of a fragmented and fragmenting world. It was a call for making holistic sense —finding the meaning of things, happenings, situations, within a totality— and acting for the global good in accordance to that sense —acting so that human action could harmonize with a fair and legitimate totality. It was, I must insist, a call to constitute a revolutionary force, a critical endeavour, against fragmentation; against the short-sightedness derived from specialization. It was a plead to see things from a non-specialized perspective and for the sake of the whole (call it as you like: humanity, justice, freedom, God). It was a call for people to regain their being as human beings above that of specialists,

³ What I am about to write is a very brief summary of some ideas I have developed in more length elsewhere (1993, 1994, 1995)

⁴ By “original” I do not only mean first in time, but, and this is more important, belonging to the essence of something whose very essence is its process of becoming.

or sellers, or clients. It was then a call for men and women, not a call for managers. If it happened that the called person was a biologist, or a manager, or a bus driver; the call was calling their human marrow to reveal against their disciplinary imprisonment that was fragmenting their lives and their surrounding world.

SECOND STAND

If one now takes more distance, i.e. the second stand announced above, one can see that such a call was not a solitary call. It was part of a inharmonious chorus, to which so different discourses as those of Weber, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School (specially late Adorno and Horkheimer), Habermas, MacIntyre, Foucault have belonged. If one uses the necessary filters and takes the necessary distance, one can hear that such inharmonious chorus is announcing two proclamations:

The first —the one that was more easily heard, the one that sounds more akin to that original call of the systems movement— is a protest against the “iron cage” of the bureaucratic society, if you put it in Max Weber’s terms, or against the “instrumental rationality” if you put it in Adorno’s terms, or against the threat to the “life-world” posed by the “system,” if you put it in late Habermas’ terms, or against the “enframing,” if you put it in Heidegger’s terms, or against “emotivism” if you put it in MacIntyre’s terms, or, finally, *against the lost of holistic sense* if you put it in what I take to be authentic systems terms.

The second announcement, usually seen from a more thoughtful stand associated to philosophy, is saying something like this: *We are in the verge of modernity* and, maybe, in the verge of Occidental history. The only way to critically and sensefully understand-and-act practically (by which I mean the opposite than instrumentally) in and upon our present world is to ask, and attempt to reply, the question for the historical conditions of this present world. That is, to ask, *how did we come to be what we are?* Notice that I am paraphrasing the same question which ended the first part of this short essay concerning the systems community, but now the word “we” stands for a much embracing “we.”

To ask this dialectical question: {“how did we come to be what we are?” <--- > “what are we?”}, so that we can regain holistic sense for our social and individual life, is precisely what I take to be the original call of the systems movement. But...

OUR COURSE

But, I am sorry, very sorry, to say that such a call has gradually been loosing its strength from the seventies to our present end of century.⁵ Or, to put it in sharper terms, we had just failed to hear and follow that original call. We failed, precisely in the very point that meant the distinctive note of the original systems call: The manager and the seller that invaded our being took the call for themselves. We heard

⁵ Elsewhere (1994, 1995), I have argued that this end of century also marks the verge of modernity and, maybe, of Occidental history. In that sense, the decline of the original systems call is only a tiny part of a general historical tendency.

that we were called to think as a manager or as a consultant or as a university lecturer trying to make a successful career, and then, and only then, to think holistically. As a manager we took that of thinking holistically as another management tool. And that was precisely to think counter-holistically. We could thus not think what to think holistically was. We just urged to design management methodologies — marked with the empty name of “systems methodologies”— which could compete in two markets: the market of consultancy and that of postgraduate courses. The resulting methodologies had to be regulating methodologies for the growth and survival of organizations within their accepted fragmented environment. We thus accepted a given order, that of “advanced” capitalism, without even pausing to decide whether we were to accept it or not.

The pathetic limit was reached when, in a sort of last attempt to clutch at straws, we decided to add the title “critical” to our already empty “systems” thinking and practice. Pathetic it was because, instead of launching a critical research program on the power fields (on the “shape of the traps”) where our current institutions and organizations dwell, and on how those power fields threaten holistic sense (and life-world, if you wish to put in Habermasian terms); instead of such a critical endeavour, we added a new methodological tool to our management toolbox; namely, a tool to deal with “coercive situations” inside the organization under study.

In summary, what we have attempted, at best, is to make the inside of our organizations a bit nicer, “more human.” What about general justice, humanity, poverty, abandoned children, fragmented life, power unbalance, distorted communication, Zaire and Rwanda? We just retort, ‘we are sorry, we are consultants; we are trying to improve our organizations, which is the only thing that is in our hands’. Indeed, it is the only thing that is in our hands if we believe, with a fervour that silences thought, that we —and I mean “we”, not an isolated “I”— can only change what is at our little finger tips...

In the meanwhile we are beginning to drop the word “system” from the title of our books and of our courses. We secretly know that it is not fashionable any more (unless we take “systems” within the context of The Fifth Discipline).

I do not pretend the former words to be a proper reply to the question: {“how did we come to be what we are?” <---> “what are we?”} when applied to the systems community, let alone to that same question when applied to a more embracing “we.” They are only saying that we strayed, almost from the very beginning, from what I now consider was our due historical path: to understand the power field that would made us follow the historical path that we actually followed.

Where do we go from here? Either to where we are arriving at: to the total evanescence of the systems movement and our dissemination into different and always changing management fads; or, else, to re-taking the original systems call and persistently and courageously ask: {“how did we come to be what we are?” <---> “what are we?”}, with both a narrow “we” (the systems community) and a wide “we” (humanity) in mind.

Some of you are by now ready to show how wrong I am: you will probably indicate some cases of how useful systems practice has been; or just say that what I am calling the original call of systems thinking is nothing but a figment of my imagination. Maybe...

I know I gave a very hasty, unfairly harsh, and, maybe, inconsiderate response to my own question. I do not have great expectations to convince the mobs of my view. But I would like to listen to those of you who, by the end of day, after subtracting hastiness, harshness, etc. from my words, see that there is something in them worth discussing and maybe worth acting upon. In this sense, I think, concerning this issue, a conversation is more fruitful than a debate.

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