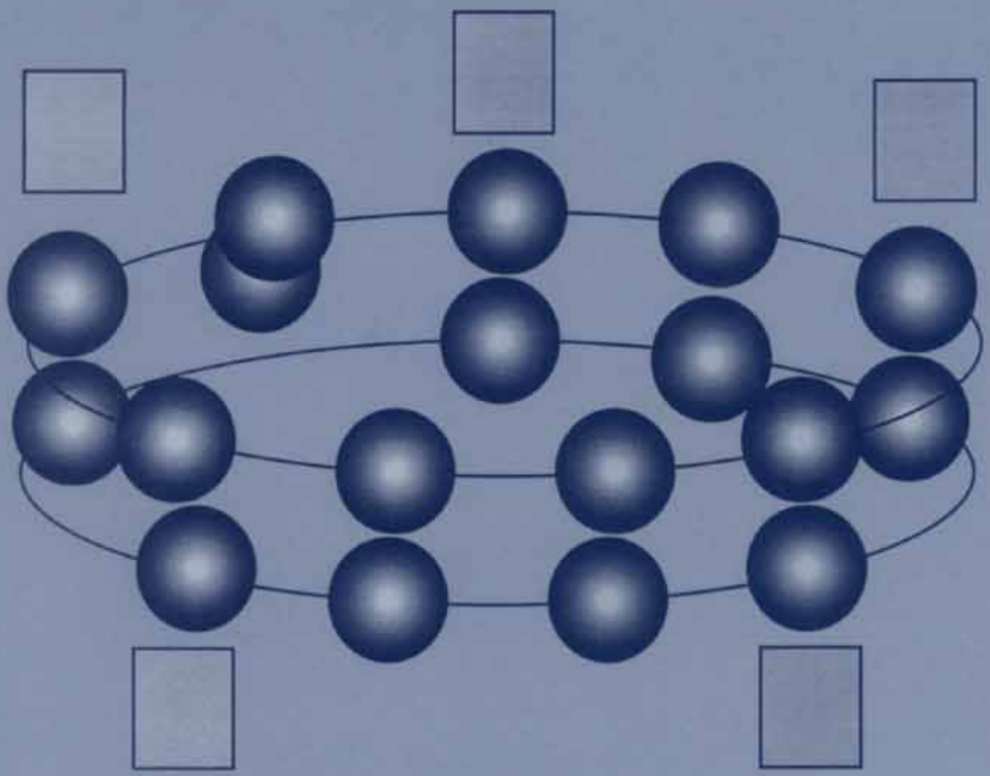
CRITICAL SYSTEMS THINKING

Current Research and Practice



Edited by
Robert L. Flood and
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Overview

A Taste for Research and Practice

This book comprises articles written by colleagues employed within or affiliated to the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull.[1] The Centre for Systems Studies was set up in 1992 as a research center to develop an action-oriented field of research organized under the broad banner of Critical Systems Thinking (CST). CST (a notion popularized in the 1990s partly through Flood and Jackson's book *Creative Problem Solving*)[2] was an effort, in Flood's terms, to "liberate" systems thinking from confines of thought with which it had traditionally been identified. Previously, action-oriented systems studies had two main themes: first, *design*: finding out how systems are best coordinated and controlled, with feedback mechanisms patterned to organize information-carrying in the system (cybernetic-style thinking); and second, *debate*: finding out how sets of purposeful activity and people's differing viewpoints can be systemically reconciled or accommodated for (as in soft systems thinking).

CST, however, reckons that systems thinking can (and should) develop as a tolerant and reflexive enterprise, able to reflect critically on the way in which these (and other) knowledge constructions become generated. It can (and should) be able to recognize likely consequences of employing different systemic approaches to different sorts of issues encountered in organizational and societal affairs. This includes some attempt to make visible assumptions supporting people's outlooks. It also recognizes a connection between knowledge and power and makes this an issue to be addressed when studying and tackling organizational and societal affairs. CST is concerned with the dominance of dominant voices reflected in dominant ways of appreciating and tackling issues in organizational and social reality. Evidence of dominant theoretical visions in systems thinking, which portray themselves as the only worthy rational systemic approach, and attendant dominant methodological options present in principles for action springing from these theoretical visions, is cause for concern for CST.

CST, thus, does not advocate a monolithic mode of thought. Critical systems thinkers do not even agree with what this "thing" called CST is. Gerald Midgley's chapter entitled "What Is This Thing Called CST?" (the first chapter in this volume) is a foretaste

[1]The Centre is in fact equivalent to a department according to criteria of the University of Hull. The fact that it is called a Centre is a historical detail since that is what it has become known as internationally. The Centre employs around eight full-time staff members at any one time, has six affiliates from the Department of Management Systems and Sciences at the University of Hull, around 20 Ph.D. students, edits the international journal *Systems Practice*, runs its own masters course, and is housed in dedicated accommodation adjacent to the university campus.

[2]Other books written by Centre staff on or around CST are listed in the bibliography at the end of this overview.

of the diversity of research carried out under the reflexive banner of CST. Our book indeed offers a sense of a continuing conference around the notion of CST that is taking place at the Centre for Systems Studies between its staff and visiting scholars. It offers a taste of our research work. Tastes come in three main types of dishes that correspond to the three main parts of this book: a Theory dish, a Methodology dish, and a Practice dish.[3]Centre colleagues provide many tantalizing tastes and substantial food for thought in each main dish.

Readers may wonder if we speak of arguments presented in each dish (part of the book) as simply a postmodern TV cooking program about tasting many different ways of seeing issues. Is there no way of choosing between the arguments presented by the different authors other than resorting to simple appeal? Actually, we are struggling precisely with the question of how choices may be made, in a way that does not imply that it is *simply* a matter of taste. Hence, Gerald Midgley in his "What Is This Thing Called CST?" argues in one of his closing paragraphs that "there may be many different visions of methodological pluralism [pluralism being one of the tenets of CST] . . . and our task is then to justify why any one is preferable." Here Midgley refers to the importance of justifying a way of understanding, in his case a way of understanding the meaning of CST's view of pluralism, by developing arguments that define why any view can be taken as preferable. Preferability then becomes *argued for* with reference to criteria that can be invoked in the justification process. Yet, of course, in making visible the criteria used to justify preferences, it is always possible that other people will prefer to invoke challenging criteria. The process of argument about criteria can never reach finality.

So, although all of our authors have clearly made use of argument in the process of laying out their ideas about possible ways of pursuing CST, we, as editors, have chosen to present these ideas as tastes for the reader to relish, as they themselves decide how to manage the dishes presented. We allowed for much leeway on the part of the authors. We did not try to force their arguments into some mold that we, the editors, might have thought was required by a book on CST. This provided scope for the authors to explore the issues as they saw fit and, we believe, it provides a richer experience for readers. Ultimately, we hope to enrich our readers' sense of the possibilities offered by CST.

In the first part (the Theory dish), we offer a taste of what it may mean to be a critical systems thinker. The chapters in this part address this question in a number of ways. Gerald Midgley addresses it in his chapter entitled "What Is This Thing Called CST?" with an overview of the manner in which CST authors have tried to delineate the meaning of CST and by suggesting further avenues for research. In his second chapter entitled "The Ideal of Unity and the Practice of Pluralism in Systems Science," Midgley makes a connection between unity and pluralism. He outlines a handful of pluralist theories that

[3]The Centre for Systems Studies is run on the basis of projects that are managed by a leader working with others interested in the area of the project. Members of the Centre choose the projects they wish to lead or become involved in. Projects mainly covered in this book include Community Reflective Practice, CST, Reflective Practice Forum, Systems Thinking in South Africa, and Total Systems Intervention. The projects traverse all three of the dishes mentioned in the main text with different slants. The authors in Part I are members *inter alia* of the CST project. The authors in Part II and III are members of the TSI project and/or the special project on South Africa and/or the community project. All of the Centre staff belong to the project called the Reflective Practice Forum.

attempt to break down the barriers of monolithic, or isolationist, thinking. He pleads for a pursuit of the ideal of unity alongside the practice of some form of methodological pluralism as part of the CST enterprise.

The third chapter in Part I is by Wendy Gregory and is entitled "Dealing with Diversity." Gregory explains the importance of dealing with diversity as a critical issue for critical systems "thinking and practice." She designs an argument for what she calls discordant pluralism. She explains how such a position may help to address concerns such as the possibility of dialogue between different perspectives, the motivation for listening to other perspectives, and the requirement for a critically reflexive stance as part of the discursive process.

Néstor Valero-Silva's chapter entitled "A Foucauldian Reflection on Critical Systems Thinking" shows one relevance of Foucault's critical thought for CST. Valero-Silva puts the focus on Foucault's work because, he reckons, it allows researchers to explore CST as a means of addressing main dangers that arise within our historical situation. He suggests that the notion of "improvement" may be linked to an attempt to address dangers that surface when we recognize that all alternatives are dangerous.

Part I ends with our own joint chapter entitled "Diversity Management: Theory in Action" in which we develop a complementarist position based on the (in)commensurability of theoretical and methodological approaches. The chapter outlines several fundamental dilemmas that we feel can be managed with the help of our notion of (in)commensurability. The chapter explains what is meant by this notion.

The second part of the book is a Methodology one. It comprises chapters in which authors write about the process of operationalizing theoretical approaches, thereby developing methodological principles for action.

The first chapter in this part is by Flood, entitled "Total Systems Intervention: Local Systemic Intervention." In this chapter, Flood explains how Total Systems Intervention (TSI) renders CST relevant for the management of "problems" in organizational and societal life. Flood spells out and at the same time extends and further operationalizes some of the tenets of TSI. The chapter presents an up-to-date conception of the philosophy, principles, and processes of this kind of interventionist approach. It also suggests a conceptualization of three modes of the process as part of the discussion of the process of TSI. The three modes are: a Critical Review Mode, a Problem Solving Mode, and a Critical Reflection Mode (in keeping with writings elsewhere in which Flood has suggested these modes for TSI).

The second chapter in our Methodology dish elaborates on an aspect of Flood's chapter by exploring in detail the Critical Review Mode of TSI. The chapter is entitled "TSI as Critique: The Critical Review Mode." In this chapter, Jennifer Wilby offers much original insight into the way in which the Critical Review Mode can be operationalized. She shows how the Critical Review Mode examines and compares a variety of methodological approaches. She shows what these comparisons involve in the light of TSI commitments.

The third chapter in this part is by Gillian Ragsdell and is entitled "Critical Creativity and Total Systems Intervention." Ragsdell particularizes the creativity aspect of TSI. She discusses ways in which the concept of creativity has been deliberated on in the literature. She uses this as a springboard to develop a working definition of creativity. Ragsdell shows that while creativity seems to require that people avoid conformist acceptance of

other people's expectations, it at the same time requires a critical awareness of value (including an awareness of other people's concerns). Value helps to avoid an anything goes position which leads to *any* so-called novel or original behavior being called creative. By extending this argument, Ragsdell develops critical creativity for TSI.

The fourth chapter in this part is authored by Werner Ulrich. His chapter is titled "Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens." Ulrich emphasizes the need to pragmatize CST, but not just for well-trained managers. CST must be accessible to citizens if it is to make inroads into enlightened social practice that is capable of addressing the complex environmental and social issues that civilizations face today. Ulrich explains how CST has a potential to give new meaning to the concept of citizenship that makes this possible.

The fifth chapter in this part, by Norma Romm, explores responsible judgment in methodology employment. The chapter is entitled "Systems Methodologies and Intervention: The Issue of Researcher Responsibility." Romm argues that this issue cannot be glossed over by those who wish to identify with systems thinking. After searching through some notions of responsibility that have appeared in writings on the subject and by relating this to examples of methodology practice, Romm prefers to understand responsibility as resting on discursive accountability. This allows practitioners to break out of rigid allegiance to favored points of view and to embrace variety, while admitting that they have to bear responsibility for their way of understanding things and for the actions they take.

The last chapter in this part is by Mandy Brown and is entitled "A Framework for Assessing Participation." Brown starts off reminding us of the prime importance that has been given to participation in leading systems research. She notes, however, that the concept seems to waiver between two aspects, based on differing criteria for assessing the value of participation, and that these differences have not yet been substantially theorized. The criteria are linked, on the one hand, to notions of efficiency and effectiveness, and on the other to the moral appeal of the democratic process. Brown proposes a framework with which to assess participation by locating ways in which the two criteria may be more transparently employed in any intervention. Her chapter also demonstrates that her framework can be used to reexamine claims made by self-named systems thinkers regarding methodology employment.

The third dish we call a Practice dish. It sets out examples of work that have been undertaken in an effort to become involved in improvement in the social matrix. The authors have assumed somewhat different roles in terms of their interventions that are here documented. In the first case Flood and Green operated largely as consultants but also with an interest in reflecting on the process of TSI, evaluating whether it made a difference in the way issues were addressed. In the second case Claire Cohen was a member of the group (in fact the president thereof) and so observations spring from a kind of in-house research-and-participant involvement. In the third case Norma Romm was involved as a consultant to a group of researchers and helped them to contribute to the research process via the consultancy. In the last case John Oliga undertakes an empirical-hermeneutical study of economic recessions as one form of empirical manifestation of the complex interpenetrations of four crises: economic/fiscal crises (from the economic sphere), rationality crises and legitimation crises (both from the political sphere), and motivation crises (from the sociocultural sphere). In all four cases the authors offer us food for thought

about ways to address issues in organizational and societal affairs from a holistic point of view.

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I

Theory
Commentary on Part I

As noted in the Overview, we do not wish to constrain our readers unduly by, for example, picturing the arguments presented in Part I as a set menu for consumption. Rather, we prefer to offer some brief and tentative comparisons between the ingredients of the arguments. In fact, comparison cannot be avoided in the process of evaluating arguments.[1] Furthermore, the significance of comparison is a crucial issue of concern to the authors in Part I and is an issue that Critical Systems Thinking (CST) has to grapple with in some way. We thus find it useful and instructive to organize our commentary in this part around the question, what is involved in comparison?

To begin with, all of the chapters in some way argue that it is important for a critical enterprise to allow for and encourage plurality. Uncritical thought is thought that refuses to admit that there may be legitimate ways of thinking other than through the framework it proffers. Uncritical thought is thought that refuses to acknowledge other ways of adjudicating between stances other than through a proffered criterion or set of criteria presented as the obviously rational one(s) to adopt. CST is an enterprise that searches for more comprehensiveness of vision than forms of reductionist thinking (ironically we must include here isolationist systems thinking). CST embraces the idea that plurality is preferable to adherence to a singular way of approaching our relationship with reality. Once it is accepted that as critical systems thinkers we cannot (should not) attempt to subsume all rationalities into a favored one and that there may be substantial differences between ways of approaching reality, what sense can we make of the idea that we can (should) compare ways of understanding? This question has been tackled in different ways by our authors. Let us look at and compare the manner in which the authors have engaged in comparison.

Gerald Midgley, in his first chapter in Part I, reviews three previously announced commitments of CST—which he prefers not to call commitments because this implies solidified learning rather than continual questioning. He compares arguments in the CST literature by suggesting how they have addressed these commitments. In organizing his comparison, Midgley encourages the reader to consider his arguments about similarities

[1]In offering this minicomparison between the chapters in Part I—as with all of our commentaries—we have checked that our account does not meet any serious objection from the authors. But we also are aware that even if serious objections are absent, this does not mean that the authors would themselves have written the commentary in a similar way or even that they all endorse it with complete acceptance. The question of how one mediates between taking responsibility for decisions at points in time, while including sufficient degrees of participation so that one's decisions can be both informed and defended in the light hereof, is a difficult question itself. It is a question with which some of the authors (especially in our Practice part) have tried to grapple in their chapters.

and differences between the various accounts of CST in terms of their bearing on these commitments. The reader is aware that it is Midgley who is organizing the comparison in terms of the agenda of his chapter and that the similarities and differences are viewed through the author's perspective. This he accepts when he argues that escape from holding a perspective is impossible. Yet, or just because of this acceptance, the reader does gain some insight by the way that the comparisons are made. What makes the comparison work, we say as editors, is that Midgley clarifies for the reader that comparison is presented from his point of view and is meant as a device to help the reader to appreciate connections in texts which they otherwise might not have done. Once it is accepted that the things being compared (arguments in texts) are being connected (by Midgley), the reader gains some additional insight into the tasteful arguments—including Midgley's.

Gerald Midgley's second chapter does not directly address the issue of what comparison may involve, but implicitly admits that whenever arguments are connected there is no getting away from the adoption of some paradigm to effect the connection. Comparison like all enterprises is thus linked to some perspective. Midgley argues that it is not possible to grasp things from a metaparadigmatic stance. It is not possible in this way to grasp the relationship between theories and methodologies. When one compares different theories and methodologies it is not possible to avoid inhabiting a paradigm and this is why researchers need to be self-reflective.

We continue to compare our authors' chapters in terms of our chosen theme—the comparison theme. Wendy Gregory in the third chapter is explicit on this issue. She talks about the notion of comparison suggesting that there must be some possibility of communication across the diversity of viewpoints—despite the claims she encounters that comparison is impossible because of the incommensurability of theoretical positions. She suggests that even though we may accept that positions exist that are radically diverse (antagonistic in some way), it is still possible for each to learn from the other. Although the positions may not be reconcilable, it is possible to compare them sufficiently well so that each is able to learn from the other. Comparison is understood as juxtaposition between alternatives. This does not mean that the information coming to each from the other will be communicated as is, for it is admitted that in the process of communication, there still may be radical differences even about the meaning of the terms being used. And this is for the better, she argues, drawing on a range of authors to elucidate the argument. It allows for the identity of each perspective to remain respected rather than being subsumed under the other. For this to take place, Gregory argues, requires a critical reflexive attitude. She outlines what this means (to her) in the form of discordant pluralism.

Néstor Valero-Silva also has something to say about comparison. The author, following Foucault, grapples with the issue that methodologies can be used to enforce disciplinary practices in society. He thus compares the use of methodologies and the ways in which they impact on a Foucauldian kind of enforcement. Valero-Silva compares methodologies used in this way with use of strategies to encourage different practices, i.e., less disciplinary rooted. He suggests that when methodologies are used in a way that is not critical about theoretical assumptions being made and the impact on society that might result, they are mostly driven by a concern for social order, solidarity, and consensus. This drive for order can be compared with a drive for a different way of effecting improvement. So Valero-Silva compares notions of improvement by, in Gregory's terms, juxtaposing the alternatives, thereby hoping to enrich the readers' insight into ways in

which we might proceed differently if we are less concerned with the kind of order that Valero-Silva couples with a disciplinary mentality. He suggests that a theory that could help us to evaluate current forms of rationality would allow for some sort of comparison between different forms of thought. Valero-Silva is not explicit on what is involved in this comparison, but he does believe that thinking (indeed CST) can be used to effect comparisons. This is despite the radically different character of the things being compared (in this case, forms of thought).

In the last chapter in Part I, we as authors have something to say about comparison. Our chapter outlines a (meta)theory called Diversity Management. The main purpose of the argument is to reconstruct CST around the management of dilemmas that bubble up when reasoning whether theories are either commensurable or incommensurable. We develop a notion of theory-in-action in which comparisons have to be effected because some form of commitment will always be engaged in if only by default, in which case a favored position is adopted as the point of focus for understanding and intervention. We argue that it is preferable to admit that understanding and intervention are continually occupied by the process of comparing positions. If this is not admitted, it is all too easy to slip into isolationist, imperialist, or (simple) pragmatist solutions as a way of managing the differences between viewpoints. We postulate that a strict translatability between positions in the process of comparison is not possible. What is possible is to proceed to choose criteria in terms of which investigators and interventionists make connections. This should be informed by wider theoretical debates as well as by issues of contemporary concern. Only then can investigators and interventionists argue that their comparisons (and the ensuing actions) are in some way defensible.

It remains for the reader of this minicommentary to judge whether our comparison between the chapters is defensible! Our intended agenda, we note, is to discuss variety between the chapters in terms of the way they address the notion of comparison, and at the same time to give our readers a starting point to connect or juxtapose or compare the chapters.

1

What Is This Thing Called CST?

Gerald Midgley

1.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces and critiques some early ideas about Critical Systems Thinking (CST), a research perspective that is said to embrace a set of fundamental commitments. Five were identified by Jackson (1991a), and three by Schecter (1991) and Flood and Jackson (1991a).[1] The three commitments are:

- *Critical awareness*—examining and reexamining taken-for-granted assumptions, along with the conditions that give rise to them
- *Emancipation*—ensuring that research is focused on "improvement," defined temporarily and locally, taking issues of power (which may affect the definition) into account
- *Methodological pluralism*—using a variety of research methods in a theoretically coherent manner, becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses, to address a corresponding variety of issues.

The definitions given above are my own. They are inevitably an oversimplification of the range of issues considered important by critical systems thinkers, but are useful for indicating the general interests pursued by proponents of the perspective.

Having declared some general interests, it would seem appropriate to ask, "What *is* CST?" My immediate response would be to reply, "There is no one such thing." There are, in fact, many different perspectives on CST offered in the literature. What they all

[1]Jackson's original five commitments were to critical awareness, emancipation, complementarism at the methodological level, complementarism at the theoretical level, and social awareness. When these are reduced to three, the two forms of complementarism are expressed as a single commitment to methodological pluralism. This reduction is possible because methodologies embody theoretical assumptions, so if methodological pluralism is accepted, theoretical pluralism needs to be dealt with at the same time. Also, Jackson's original commitment to social awareness, which is defined as awareness of the possible social consequences of applying different systems methodologies, is not listed as a separate commitment when they are reduced to three. It becomes an implicit part of the commitment to emancipation, which ensures that research is focused on improvement.

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Critical Systems Thinking: Current Research and Practice, edited by Flood and Romm, Plenum Press, New York, 1996.

have in common, however, is an interest in questions about, and surrounding, the nature of the above commitments. But there are no consensually accepted definitions of them. Indeed, different writers have evolved very different understandings, and continue to develop their ideas in communication with other people. CST can therefore be seen as an evolving debate around a set of themes that are considered important by a significant number of systems practitioners. The term "debate" is central here as it emphasizes dynamism and continued development rather than the stasis of a final definition.

In consequence, the view I will present of CST in this chapter should be seen as a further contribution to the debate rather than as a statement of a final position. And I will be treating the work of other writers in a similar manner. I intend to focus on one particular vision of CST (presented in a number of places by Flood and Jackson, but most notably in Flood & Jackson, 1991a), and will highlight some problems with their argument that I believe require further attention. I will then draw for inspiration on earlier work by Churchman (e.g., 1979) and Ulrich (1983) in order to argue that it is possible to address these problems. A different vision of CST will emerge as a result.

However, before presenting Flood and Jackson's views, I need to say why I have decided to focus on their work rather than that of the many other authors who have either written explicitly about CST, or have done work in a similar vein. My answer is that, between 1988 and 1991, Flood and Jackson produced a substantial body of literature communicating their own particular vision of CST, and this has been quite influential. Two particularly notable contributions are Jackson (1991a) and Flood and Jackson (1991a). The first seeks to provide concise definitions of Jackson's original five commitments. The second is a book of edited readings by a variety of authors, and in my view the commentary surrounding the chapters is exceptionally clearly written. In fact, both of these works are *so* clearly written that I believe there is a danger that Flood and Jackson's vision could be regarded as definitive, and this could threaten the continued development of CST.

Now, when I talk about Flood and Jackson as a pair, it must be noted that they stopped writing together in 1991. Since then, Flood has shifted his position on CST substantially. In my view, this shift is best seen in Flood (1995) and Flood and Romm (1996 and this volume). However, I do not wish to discuss this later work because it belongs to a "new era" of CST. I would suggest that the seeds of this "new era" were already germinating in Midgley (1990, 1992a,b), Flood (1990), and Gregory (1992), and the publication of the book you are now reading marks the opening of some of its first flowers.

So, what is CST from Flood and Jackson's (pre-1992) point of view? I will answer this question by taking each of the three commitments in turn, clarifying the meanings the two authors give them. In producing this review, I do not wish to imply that the authors share the same perspective on every issue, but there is a substantial amount of common ground. At this stage I should also make it clear that the accounts I shall give will inevitably be oversimplified, and I suggest that interested readers consult the original literature as referenced.

1.2. METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Let us start with the commitment to methodological pluralism, or "complementarism" as Flood and Jackson also sometimes call it. The principal publications by Flood and Jackson (and co-workers) dealing with this issue include Jackson and Keys (1984),

Jackson (1985a, 1987a,b, 1990, 1991a,b), Flood (1989, 1990, 1993, 1995), and Flood and Jackson (1991a,b). Methodological pluralism, as Jackson (1987a) and Flood (1989) define it, makes explicit use of a metatheory to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies, and the methodologies are thereby viewed as complementary.

Jackson and Keys (1984) and Jackson (1987b) develop a pluralist metatheory by classifying systems methodologies according to the assumptions they make about social reality. For example, quantitative modeling methods assume that there is agreement on what the research problem is (if there isn't, then it is difficult for the researcher to know what to model), while qualitative debating methods work on the assumption that there is disagreement that needs to be discussed (if there is full agreement, then debate becomes redundant). The authors argue that, because different methodologies make different assumptions, it is appropriate to use them in practice in a complementary fashion to deal with a variety of different contexts. Thus, they propose a specific metatheory, "the system of systems methodologies," which aligns various methodologies with the contexts that, in an ideal world, they should be most capable of dealing with. Flood (1990) describes this treatment of methodologies as "metaparadigmatic": the system of systems methodologies sits above and coordinates methodological paradigms. It can therefore be used in practice to aid critical reflection on methodology choice.

This is the instrumental aspect of Flood and Jackson's work on methodological pluralism, where the focus is on how methodologies can most appropriately be used in practice. However, it has also been underpinned by an epistemological theory (a theory about the nature of knowledge) originally proposed by Habermas (1972). Habermas calls this the "theory of knowledge-constitutive interests," and it was first introduced into Flood and Jackson's vision of CST by Jackson (1985a). Now, Habermas's work is immensely broad, and cannot be summarized adequately in a few paragraphs. Nevertheless, Jackson (1985a) offers his own understanding of the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, which I have reproduced below:

> According to Habermas there are two fundamental conditions underpinning the socio-cultural form of life of the human species—'work' and 'interaction'.
>
> 'Work' enables human beings to achieve goals and to bring about material well-being through social labour. The importance of work to the human species leads human beings to have what Habermas calls a 'technical interest' in the prediction and control of natural and social events. The importance of 'interaction' calls forth another 'interest', the 'practical interest'. Its concern is with securing and expanding the possibilities of mutual understanding among all those involved in the reproduction of social life. Disagreement among different groups can be just as much a threat to the reproduction of the socio-cultural form of life as a failure to predict and control natural and social affairs.
>
> While work and interaction have for Habermas . . . pre-eminent anthropological status, the analysis of power and the way it is exercised is equally essential, Habermas argues, for the understanding of all past and present social arrangements. The exercise of power in the social process can prevent the open and free discussion necessary for the success of interaction. Human beings therefore also have an 'emancipatory interest' in freeing themselves from constraints imposed by power relations and in learning, through a process of genuine participatory democracy, involving discursive will-formation, to control their own destiny.

It is this theory that Flood and Jackson claim can be used to underpin the system of systems methodologies. However, the two authors are not in total agreement on how this underpinning should be achieved. To keep matters simple, I will concentrate on the position that has been discussed most widely in the literature—that proposed jointly by Flood and Jackson (1991b). In short, they suggest that "'hard' and cybernetic systems

approaches can support the technical interest, soft methodologies the practical interest, and critical systems heuristics can aid the emancipatory interest."

To explain in more detail, "hard" and cybernetic systems approaches are those that have modeling as their central activity. In relation to the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, these methodologies are viewed as supporting one particular human interest—our technical interest in predicting and controlling our environment. In contrast, "soft" methodologies involve managing debate between people so that learning may be facilitated, ideas evaluated, and plans for action developed. In relation to the theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, these too are seen as supporting one interest—this time, our practical interest in achieving mutual understanding. Finally, critical systems heuristics is concerned with subjecting assumptions in planning to ethical critique. It asks both the researcher and participants in dialogue to address a number of questions concerning the issue of whose views should enter into the planning process, and how this should be achieved. According to Flood and Jackson (1991b), this can support the remaining human interest—our emancipatory interest in freeing ourselves from restrictive power relations.

We therefore see that Flood and Jackson have a particular understanding of methodological pluralism that critically aligns methodologies with contexts for use, and that supports this alignment with an epistemological theory of universal human participation in work and interaction. It is the notion that work and interaction are fundamental to the human condition that gives rise to our interests in prediction and control, mutual understanding, and freedom from oppressive power relations. We can now move on to examine Flood and Jackson's understanding of the commitment of CST to emancipation.

1.3. EMANCIPATION

The principal publications by Flood and Jackson dealing with the notion of emancipation include Jackson (1985b, 1991a,b), Flood (1990), and Flood and Jackson (1991a). It is important to note that Jackson (1991a) talks in terms of *human* emancipation. According to him,

> critical systems thinking is *dedicated to human emancipation* and seeks to achieve for all individuals the maximum development of their potential. This is to be achieved by raising the quality of work and life in the organizations and societies in which they participate.

This is linked into Habermas's (1972) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, described in the previous section. Jackson (1991a) argues that emancipation, in the terms specified above, can only be achieved by addressing all three human interests (in prediction and control, mutual understanding, and freedom from oppressive power relations) as and when issues concerning them arise in systems practice. This view is also promoted by Flood and Jackson in their (1991a) joint work. Having clarified the meaning for Flood and Jackson of the commitment to emancipation, we can now look at their work on critical awareness.

1.4. CRITICAL AWARENESS

The principal publications by Flood and Jackson (and co-workers) dealing with the commitment to critical awareness include Jackson (1982, 1985b, 1990, 1991a,b), Flood

maker (Churchman, 1970). Thus, the business of setting boundaries defines both the knowledge to be considered pertinent *and* the people who generate that knowledge (and who also have a stake in the results of any attempts to improve the system).

Not only did Churchman introduce this fundamental change in our understanding of "system," but he also made clear the importance of critique. When discussing "improvement," Churchman (e.g., 1979) followed Hegel, who stressed the need to expose our most cherished assumptions to the possibility of overthrow. To be as sure as we can that we are defining improvement adequately, we should seek out the strongest possible "enemies" of our ideas and enter into a process of rational argumentation. Only if we listen closely to their views and our arguments survive should we pursue the improvement.

Churchman produced a great deal of highly influential work in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the 1980s several other authors began to build on it in significant new ways. One of these authors was Ulrich, who has acknowledged his considerable intellectual debt to Churchman in several "tribute" papers (Ulrich, 1988a,b, 1994). Once again I must say that it is impossible to do Ulrich's work justice in only a few paragraphs, so I recommend consulting his original work, particularly Ulrich (1983).

Ulrich created the methodology of critical systems heuristics. For him, the term "critical" has its roots in the work of Habermas, but mostly his later writings.[4] Habermas (e.g., 1976) argues that critique is a dialogical process emerging from the inherent potential of language to allow us to question. However, dialogue may be distorted through the effects of power either directly, when one participant coerces another, or indirectly, when participants make unquestioned assumptions about the absolute necessity for, or inevitable future existence of, particular social systems. To overcome these effects of power, we need to establish what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation": a situation where any assumption can be questioned and all viewpoints can be heard.

However, while Ulrich (1983) accepts the *principle* of Habermas's understanding of critique, he nevertheless criticizes him for being utopian. For all viewpoints to be heard, the ideal speech situation would have to extend debate to every citizen of the world, both present and future. This is quite simply impossible. Ulrich sees his task as the *pragmatization* of the ideal speech situation, and the marriage between critical and systems thinking is the means by which this can be achieved. Truly rational inquiry is said to be *critical*, in that no assumption held by participants in inquiry should be beyond question. It is also *systemic*, however, in that boundaries always have to be established within which critique can be conducted. Indeed, Ulrich claims that both ideas are inadequate without the other. Critical thinking without system boundaries will inevitably fall into the trap of continual expansion and eventual loss of meaning (as everything can be seen to have a context with which it interacts, questioning becomes infinite). However, systems thinking without the critical idea may result in a "hardening of the boundaries" where destructive assumptions remain unquestioned because the system boundaries are regarded as absolute.

A priority for Ulrich is to evolve practical guidelines that can help people steer the process of critical reflection on the ethics of drawing system boundaries. For this purpose,

[4]Flood and Jackson base their vision of methodological pluralism on Habermas's earlier work, although they also draw on his later work in other contexts.

this[6]: there is still a crying need for further research, both to enhance critical systems heuristics (in theory and practice) and to develop other approaches to making critical boundary judgments. In particular, we must begin to move away from "mechanical" applications of critical systems heuristics, where participants in inquiry simply answer the 12 questions in the form of a list, toward a situation where they become an integral part of the whole inquiry process, interwoven (where appropriate) with other systems methods. Encouragingly, research along these lines is already well under way (see, e.g., Cohen & Midgley, 1994; Gregory, Romm, & Walsh, 1994; Flood & Romm, 1995). What I am proposing, then, is to define the commitment to critical awareness in terms of the ethical critique of boundaries, and to continue to conduct research to enhance both the theory and practice of boundary critique.[7]

It is important for me to give further support to this position, especially as it challenges Flood and Jackson's understanding of methodological pluralism, where all of the different systems approaches are aligned with their most appropriate contexts of application. Flood and Jackson could reply to me by saying that boundary critique is redundant in situations where coercion has not been identified. However, the most immediate question that springs to mind is, "How do we identify coercion?" and related to this, "Whose views do we take into account?" Answering these questions will involve the researcher and other interested parties in *making critical boundary judgments*. In other words, making up-front boundary judgments cannot be avoided in *any* research situation. Failure to realize the full implications of this will inevitably result in some of the most important boundary judgments—those that determine who the researcher will talk to and how the initial remit of the work will be defined—being made in an uncritical manner.

Having dealt with the first problem of critical awareness in Flood and Jackson's vision of CST, we can now move on to the second: the tendency to give uncritical priority in interventions to an organizational boundary. This is directly addressed by bringing to the fore the notion of making critical boundary judgments. If the researcher and/or participants engage in a process of questioning boundary judgments, then the proposed use of an organizational boundary would have to be justified. While some researchers might fear that commissioning organizations will be put off by this kind of questioning, my own experience is that this rarely happens: many people welcome the chance to look at how the problem they have identified interfaces with others, and appreciate systemic logic. People often understand that their own activities have a wider impact that needs to

[6]Flood and I are currently working on the development of a new approach to making critical boundary judgements that will become an integral part of Total Systems Intervention [a meta-methodology first proposed by Flood and Jackson (1991b) and then substantially developed by Flood (1995)]. We hope that this will be published during 1997 or 1998.

[7]Of course, defining critical awareness in this way does not mean that we are in a position to abandon critical thinking about the different possible uses of methods. For Flood and Jackson, critical awareness about methodology is of principle concern. However, I view the critique of methods as a special case of critical awareness, supporting the pursuit of methodological pluralism. I also argue that analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of methods could usefully incorporate the ethical critique of boundaries: judgements about the appropriate uses of methods are dependent on boundary judgements about what possible effects we should be looking out for. Interestingly, a method for critiquing other methods and methodologies and then integrating them into a pluralist framework has recently been developed by Flood (1995) and Wilby (1996, and this volume). In my view this offers an effective means of operationalizing critical awareness about methodology, but could be more explicit about the need for an ethical critique of boundaries.

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4

A Foucauldian Reflection on Critical Systems Thinking

Néstor Valero-Silva

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas represent two of the most influential contemporary philosophers of the postwar era. Their studies of modern society have contributed to continuous debate and development in moral and legal philosophy, sociology, gender studies, organizational analysis,[1] and more recently, in systems science, especially within the paradigm of Critical Systems Thinking. However, it is important to highlight that most of the Critical Systems literature (e.g., Ulrich, 1983; Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Jackson, 1991; Midgley, 1992) has concentrated almost exclusively on the work of Habermas. Only Flood (1990) has considered Foucault in any depth, but he has tended to focus on the earlier work. As far as I am aware, Foucault's later work has not yet been assessed by critical systems thinkers at all.

There may be many possible reasons for the dominance of Habermasian thinking. One is Habermas's well-established reputation as part of the Frankfurt School's efforts to challenge traditional conceptions of science and social theory, as initially proposed by Horkheimer (1972) and Adorno (1979). Another is Foucault's refusal to systematically construct and argue for a theory, a feature that he shares with other contemporary thinkers. A third is that Foucault's philosophy does not provide a normative framework to guide and evaluate social action. Finally, Foucault's refusal of the notion of "improvement," at least in universal terms, does not appeal to the systems community which is to a large extent confronted in its daily work with issues related to the "improvement" of the effectiveness of organizations within the hard and soft systems perspectives.

There are a number of questions related to the debate between Habermas and

[1]See the contributions of Burrell (1988) and Burrell and Cooper (1988).

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Critical Systems Thinking: Current Research and Practice, edited by Flood and Romm, Plenum Press, New York, 1996.

Foucault that are beyond the scope of this chapter to tackle—questions like whether Habermas's (1984) description of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system (against which his notion of emancipation is developed), or his evolutionary model, or his theory of communicative competence can bring hope for the future, or provide a more feasible model for the assessment of the present state of affairs, or even a normative framework to guide social action.

However, it is important to highlight here that I do not assume that Habermas's thought is less critical about modern society than Foucault's, but rather, that they both represent alternative ways of continuing with the tradition of critical thought initially proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno. In this context, I will highlight, first, some of the differences between Foucault's and Habermas's ideas, which make them theoretically incommensurable. This is intended to make certain that any attempt to "mix" their ideas because of some superficial similarities is avoided. Second, I will offer a brief description of Foucault's philosophy in terms of his "critical ontology of ourselves" and the relationship between power and knowledge. Finally, I will reflect briefly on what Foucault can offer to the project of Critical Systems Thinking.

4.2. FOUCAULT AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

A major problem when studying both Habermas's and Foucault's work has always been to establish their connections (Flood, 1990). However, I think that one must approach their ideas assuming, as Couzens-Hoy (1994) does, that

> whereas Foucault is interested in the historicity of reason, Habermas is interested in the theory of reason. Each sees his question as the only possible way out of what Horkheimer and Adorno called the dialectic of enlightenment. That is, the modern search for knowledge that promised enlightenment and freedom but has produced domination and barbarism as well. (p. 146)

Nevertheless, we must also highlight the fact that Foucault acknowledges the relevance of Habermas's work in the development of contemporary philosophy, while regretting the lack of communication that existed between them. In this sense, in an interview with Raulet (1983), he says,

> If I had been familiar with the Frankfurt School, if I had been aware of it at the time, I would not have said a number of stupid things that I did say and I would have avoided many of the detours which I made while trying to pursue my own humble path—when, meanwhile, avenues had been opened up by the Frankfurt School. . . . And when I was a student, I can assure you that I never once heard the name of the Frankfurt School mentioned by any of my professors. (p. 200)

According to Raulet (1983), in a separate interview Habermas praised Foucault's

> masterly description of the moment reason bifurcated. This bifurcation was unique. It happened once. At a certain point, reason took a turn which led it to instrumental rationality, an auto-reduction, a self-limitation. This bifurcation, if it is also a division, happened once and once only in history, separating the two realms with which we have been acquainted since Kant. (p. 201)

After assuming that both philosophers represent different alternatives in Adorno and Horkheimer's critical path, let us try to clarify some of their major differences. First, from the paragraph just quoted, we can clearly see that Habermas acknowledges a bifurcation of reason, that since it only occurred once can be rectified. However, Foucault assumes that reason is in a constant process of bifurcation in some way or another. In this sense Foucault remarks,

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