Anthropic Construction of Social Systems

Richard Jung [1]

Center for Systems Research

[1] Center for Systems Research, Kouřimská 24, CZ 84 01 Kutná Hora, Czech Republic;
+420 607 587 627, Richard.Jung@post.Harvard.edu ; www.RichardJung.cz .

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Richard Jung
Center for Systems Research
Kouřimská 24
CZ – 284 01 Kutná Hora
Czech Republic
Jung@RichardJung.cz

Abstract

Social systems (relations between individuals) may be constructed objectively as systems of energy either under the metaphor 'organism' or under the metaphor 'machine'. They may also be constructed subjectively as systems of meaning either under the metaphor 'mind' or under the metaphor 'template'.

Most sociologists and system theorists, including myself, have sought to formulate social systems under the metaphor mind, *i.e.,* with constructs such as intention, experience, action, interaction and conversation. Such attempts have been far from successful.

The possibility to formulate social systems under the metaphor template has not been recently systematically explored. It may be possible to construct social systems from a subjective perspective as systems of meaning under this metaphor, with constructs such as convention, conscience, conduct, encounter and communication (semiotic and semantic). Such constructs could become the conceptual pillars of new anthropic formulations of social systems.

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[2] Original page number in R. Trappl (ed.). *Cybernetics and Systems 2008.* Vol. I, pp. 156-158. Austrian Society for Cybernetic Studies, Vienna A.

[3] Presented 28 March 2008 to the 19th European Meeting on Cybernetics and Systems Research (EMCSR 06), University of Vienna, Vienna A.

A sensible man should not demand of me,
or hope that when we mention a subject,
we shall make a complete exposition of it.[4]

1. Introduction

To argue as is done here in a short paper for a shift in paradigm for formulating sociological theory (*i.e.,* for constructing a social system) is a daunting task. The issue has a history long at least two and a half thousand years. Eminent thinkers debated it and wrote thousands of pages about it. Some I have read and a few I believe to have comprehended and remembered. I attempt a selection of key points out of an overwhelming array of facts and opinions. I employ terminologies peculiar to different disciplines and extract theoretical attitudes out of historical contexts in which they are embedded. The text makes unusual demands on a reader's familiarity with the histories of theories in various disciplines and his willingness to be terminologically multilingual.

2. The social system paradigm

Most modern attempts to formulate sociological theory (*i.e.,* to construct a social system) started from about the half of the twentieth century with the presumption that social systems consist of individuals who affect each other. The individuals were constructed implicitly, but more often explicitly, as minds. The minds influenced each other by actions. This seemed to be adequate to developments in psychology and social psychology. Actions were conceptualized in analogy with the use of the term in physics from Hero through Maupertuis to relativity and quantum theories, *i.e.,* as a distribution of energy through a space-time. The nature of this space-time has remained in sociology undefined or controversial. Perhaps due to the success of physical theories and the hypothetico-deductive mode of reasoning, methodological individualism and aggregation by statistics prevailed even in social studies, such as sociology and politology. It invaded even recent philosophy.

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[4] Maimonides, Introduction to "Guide to the Perplexed".

A system (an *n*-ary relation) can be defined on variables that spread a space-time of energy, which we can structure as a thermodynamic system and regarded it as a 'res movens'. Or it can be defined on variables that spread a space-time of meaning, which we can structure as a communication system. Communication systems can be analyzed as informatic (semiotic or semantic, signaling or language) systems and regarded as 'res agens'.

Systems may be conceptualized (*i.e.,* interpreted) within different metaphors. Thermodynamic systems can be interpreted within the metaphor 'organism', when their activity is regarded as 'behavior' ultimately explainable by the propensity to acquire, distribute and dissipate 'heat'. It can be alternately interpreted within the metaphor 'machine', when their activity is regarded as 📖 *157* 'performance' ultimately explainable by the constraints of various 'dispositions'. Communication systems can be interpreted within the metaphor 'mind', when their activity is regarded as 'actions' ultimately explainable by the propensity to experience 'intentions'. It can be alternately interpreted within the metaphor 'template', when their activity is regarded as conduct' ultimately explainable by the constraints of various 'conventions'.

2.1 History of sociology as a Methodenstreit

History of sociology can be read as a history of debates or conflicts about within which metaphor sociology should be formulated. Such confrontations stretch from the middle of the 1st Century B.C. till the middle of the 20th Century. Engaged were the greatest intellects of the time. Among those that come to mind are of course the ancient Greek philosophers and the Buddha, Justinian and Tribonian, Ibn Khaldun and Thomas Aquinas, Descartes and Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, Pareto, Rickert and Evans-Pritchard. Although the term *Methodenstreit* is usually applied only to two great debates in Germany at the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries, it could in my view characterize the chain of debates that continues, not only in Europe, but sporadically also in Asia, for the last 25 centuries.

A common characteristic of these successive debates, sometimes prolonged and acrimonious, is

that they are both ontological and normative. They are ontological, in that they attempt to establish (by argument, not by observation or deduction) the attributes of the substratum (ultimate substance) of the particular field of study (scholarship, science). They are also normative, in that they attempt to prescribe (to legislate) a particular method of study of the field, characteristically called a "discipline".

The attitude expressed here is that all the metaphors are ontologically vacuous. The adoption of one over another is a matter of epistemological preference or strategy. It does not deny the possibilities of understanding offered by the others.

While interpretation of living entities within the metaphors 'organism', 'machine' and 'mind' continue to lead to major and sustainable gains in other disciplines, in sociology they have not done so — unless one regards the fruitful application of the metaphor 'organism' in demography, epidemiology, ethology and ecology as developments of domains of sociology.

2.2 Social systems as systems of templates

Another paradigm, within which construction of social systems is attempted, could be explored again. Within this paradigm, the entities studied would *not* be interpreted as objects in physical space-time of energy, *i.e.,* as thermodynamic systems that are analyzable as res movens. They would *neither* be interpreted as heat generating organisms with propensities manifesting themselves by behavior, *nor* would they be interpreted as performing machines constrained to do work by their dispositions.

Whereas the entities studied would be regarded as subjects in semiotic space-time of meaning, *i.e.,* as res agens, they would *not* be interpreted as 'minds' (eidolons, spirits, ghosts, images) generating experiences and actions according to their intentions. Instead, the metaphor template interprets a system (a set of relations) as a set of conventions, each with the inner pole of conscience and the outer pole of conduct.

Each template defines a Self, a form that stands out of indefiniteness as a swath in the space-time of meaning. Such definitions are multiple and influ-

ence each other. The inner definitions that anchor conscience are of the existence, the identity and of the essence of the Self. They specify the bubble of the Self as a regulator, its mission and its image. The outer definitions that mold conduct define the Self as a consumer, its role, its sva-dharma. They define it as a producer, an office and a status. All the definitions are normative, *i.e.*, conscience is a moral state of the Self, while conduct imbues a situation with value.

The Self constructs its history, *i.e.*, the development of its definitions, as a narrative. Its discourse about its relation with other Selves constructs its history as composed of encounters. Discourse about the Self and other Selves has a normative component, *i.e.*, is moral. The resultant is that all encounters have a normative component, *i.e.*, are moral. This, incidentally, has been very clearly seen both by Freud and by Marx.

The Self constructs itself as heterarchical in (semiotic or semantic) space and itinerant in time. Since it is inherently normative, it thus constructs meaning in the world beyond its here and now.

2.3 The Self metabolizes indefiniteness

Conscience and conduct operate as modal converters of indefiniteness into meaning. They digest and excrete indefiniteness by successive modal shifts. They successively reach into the future and transform it first as indefinite potential conscience and conduct, then as a separation of the Self and its situation, as a commitment, as the individuation of the Self, a posture it assumes and as a calling. In the here and now there is a definite engagement with the world. The own construction of the Self by these narratives of conscience and conduct then fades into the indefiniteness of the past by modal shifts into narratives of calling, posture, individuation, commitment and separation, until it dissolves into potentiality and indefiniteness. It narrates recursively its life as a swath in the space-time of meaning.

2.4 Holistic units

Within the interpretation of systems as templates, the term conduct is used as a holistic concept, im-

plying a configuration of coordinated changes in the system's relation to its environment. It is a reflection of a whole, a gestalt where calculus of 📖 *158* variations applies to the equilibration of various deformations of the system boundary caused by different demands of conscience and requirements of different conventions. This applies to units at all levels of analysis.

2.5 Anthropic confabulation

Although they are strings of meaning, narratives (even ideological or religious) are anchored by reference to indexicals in physical space-time. Conventions (including proverbs) may refer to actual or imagined persons, locations and dates. This may be a stylistic device or a suggestion of how they could be translated into another (e.g., a personal) narrative. They are also anchored in more general units of semiotic or semantic space time, (e.g., life span, courtship, legal, religious, scientific, ethnic or kinship histories). In semantic narratives the mode of interpretation is unashamedly anthropic, treating the world as a world of meaning created if not by, then indeed for, humans. They treat the subjectivized human perspectives as privileged in the space-time of meaning.

History of mankind thus becomes a history of imposition of meaning on the Selves and on the world. From an objectivist pint of view, it or its parts may be regarded as confabulations, filling in gaps in memory to create a coherent and comprehensive view of the meaning of the universe and of humans, or of a particular human, in it.

2.6 Social system as a web of accommodations

In the construction of social systems under the metaphor mind as systems of action the analogy of a gas is often used. If constructing a social system under the metaphor template as a system of conduct, more suitable perhaps would be the analogy of a fluid, with its turbulence, often seemingly chaotic activity and attributes such as compressibility and viscosity.

The essential characteristic of all units of meaning, including individual existence, is their separateness (aloneness) and impermanence (temporali-

ty). Heidegger has captured both in the description of one existence among others with terms such as *das Mitsein* (the being together) or even better as *das Mitweilen,* the dwelling for a while together.

Aggregations of any template components — conventions, states of conscience, various conducts, Selves and their narratives — can be characterized as mutual accommodations. A social system can then be seen as a web of accommodations of narratives. A narrative of accommodation of narratives we call history.

Study of social systems may be, according to the metaphor within which it is conducted, pursued as a natural or a moral science (a *Geisteswissenshaft*). Under the metaphor 'template', the study of social systems becomes a *Geisteswissenshaft,* employing specifically the discipline of history.

2.7 Post-modern social system theory

Among the several major modes of constructing systems, the post-modern mode emphasizes openness, pluralism and modesty.

There appears in postmodern systems theory no possibility to construct a universal axiology, ethics, morality or ideology. Instead there is an acceptance of the inevitable existence of multiple local possibility spaces and multiple local futures (local scenaria). Thus an epistemological, ontological and axiological pluralism is intrinsically associated with post-modernity. Also consistent with it is epistemological, ontological and axiological modesty.

A postmodern system theory would thus not be a conceptually unifying theory with the same terminology, but a set of dictionaries at all levels of accommodation. Each of these dictionaries would inevitably be fuzzy, polysemic and tainted with the usual impossibility of perfect translation.

3. Summary

The question may arise: where do templates and conventions come from? It may seem important especially to a reader familiar with a recent link in the *Methodenstreit* chain, the link from Hume to Lewis. The leitmotiv of this paper is that such question is

another instance of the ontological fallacy that permeates the age long *Methodenstreit*. Neither templates nor conventions (and their subordinate notions) are in or of the world. They in-exist in our imagination or thought and are encrypted in our culture as devices to make sense of and give meaning to entities or events that we believe to be (in) the world.

Reference

Given the great temporal and substantive range of the issues that have been dealt with, any attempt at referencing would require a list that would be encyclopedic and far longer that the total space allocated to the text. Those who wish to find more about some of the points of view and terms used in the text may find it useful to consult Jung, R. (2007). Although the volume primarily explores the use of the metaphor 'mind', due to the availability of space some of the notion presented here are more extensively discussed in the book[5].

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[5] Jung, R.
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Edition echoraum. Wien A, 2007, pp. 304.
ISBN 978-3-901941-13-9.9