

Andreas Hirsland presents

**Richard Jung's
Experience and Action:
Selected Items in Systems Theory¹**

*at the 3rd Heinz von Foerster conference
on systems/systemics,
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Ladies and Gentlemen!

Thank you very much for the invitation to the 2007 Heinz von Foerster Congress. I feel quite honoured to have been asked to contribute to this “author meets critics” session, namely to present Richard Jung’s book on “Experience and Action: Selected Items in Systems Theory”. As a sociologist currently mainly engaged in qualitative research in the field of unemployment in late modernity (or as Ulrich Beck would call it “Second Modernity), it seems that I am quite far away from the topics stressed in this conference. To be honest, I am not sure, if I am the dedicated addressee.

On the other hand, not being directly engaged in the ongoing discussion on systems theory, it might just be that view of an “outsider”, which might bring up some points of interest and expose the value of the specific work I am going to talk about.

The book assembles thirteen essays, written over nearly half a century on different occasions in the context of various academic fields (endeavours), partly unpublished or hard to find. Thus one can be grateful to the editors that they have made these works accessible to a broader public and especially to younger scholars, who did not have the pleasure yet to meet Richard Jung in seminars or lectures.

¹ R. Jung 2007e.

Experience and Action: Selected Items in Systems Theory.

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Wien A, 2007, pp. 304. ISBN 978-3-901941-13-9.

However: Thirteen essays on “Selected Items in Systems Theory” – this sounds somewhat fuzzy and one might suspect an inconsistent collection of papers.

On the contrary: the title is a mere expression of modesty, since – in my opinion – the volume opens up a gate to a thrilling intellectual endeavour, namely to a unified approach to science with special concern to sociology and the social sciences. Thus, there must be a coherent approach binding these essays together – to this I will come back soon.

Another version of my reading is, that the book deals with the constitution of Man within society, namely the Self as an expression / locus of experience and action. And of course there might be another version of reading, that the book as well deals with the Constitution of Society through Man (and many other topics, I will not focus on here).

It is exactly the neglecting of any kind of unidirectional theorizing, which is the starting point of Richard Jung’s thinking. Therefore his starting point is “Indefiniteness” which has not to be mistaken as “void”. Opposed to this is “Form” – not emerging from “Indefiniteness” but seen as traces of Indefiniteness collapsing into form (when disturbed), forming entities in space-time, eventually disappearing in Indefiniteness again or being transformed or replaced.

Taking this as a point of departure, it is only consequent to abandon ideas or figures which are based on the either / or distinction that goes along with ontological realism. To overcome this fallacy the concept of “Sive”, dating back to Baruch Spinoza’s “Deus sive Natura”, is introduced. It is used as an intellectual operator for descriptive conjunction-disjunction replacing the binary code of “either / or” by “and/or”. By this the tendency to regard juxtapositions as oppositions should be overcome. Instead juxtapositions are considered and looked at as alternations, handling them as “both / and”. This goes along with a clear commitment to epistemological pluralism and a constructivist approach without ending up in the fuzziness of relativism.

Far away from that, the concept of “Sive” applied in the field of epistemology leads to an approach that aims to overcome the pitfalls still echoing the “Methodenstreit” in Economics, Sociology and Psychology lasting for over a century. This approach is tremendously well informed through the history of philosophy (including Buddhism) and science and their differentiation into the recent landscape of disciplines. What lies at the bottom of the “Methodenstreit” is not so much the methodology itself but a controversy about the nature of things to investigate and the appropriate way to do so.

Following the basic distinction between indefiniteness and form mentioned earlier, the debate is rather about different forms than different substance. Building on this we should argue less about the different, partly latent, ontological groundings of the nature of man as they are outlined in Naturalism, Humanism or in a behaviourist late modern tradition seeing man as an artefact of external societal and cultural forces working on him.

So if one regards these approaches not as based on a solid ontology but considers them themselves as “forms” in the sea of indefiniteness, they just represent different constructions of how to conceptualize man and of how to investigate him. Here the main controversy is the well known “Verstehen-Erklären” controversy, with many proponents of the “Erklären” approach doubting if “Verstehen” could be scientific at all. If interpret him right, Richard Jung shares at least some of these doubts, giving the following definition of science (I quote and you will see that his language is more precise than mine):

“Personally, I think of science as a recently institutionalized human activity regulated by norms favouring systematic inquiry into domains of concrete phenomena, replicable interpretations of these phenomena within abstract conceptual systems, and theoretical explanation of – and deductions of generalizations about – interpreted actual occurrences in the domain of inquiry” (180).

According to this, the weak point of Humanism and the related hermeneutics is the lack of an

equivalent to scientific explanation as it arose in the tradition of (not only) Naturalism. On the other hand, the scientific approach itself has its weaknesses in the field of conceptualization. Regarding human experience and what humans do – there is a reason why I do not use “act” –, it is concepts stemming from the humanist perspective that help to clarify conceptualizations used in so called “strong science”, e.g. intentionality, reflexivity...

The aim therefore is to bring these two together by, on the one hand, opening up science and “Erklären” so that they are based on conceptualizations grounded on Phenomenology and on the other hand to open up Humanist intellectual heritage to science. This is not restricted to methodology in a narrow sense but goes further, considering Humanism as a special form of curiosity towards the phenomena of life among others, each of them fulfilling different epistemological purposes. Talking about different curiosities that stand behind scientific research thus stresses the point that each inquiry is legitimate in its own right but should be carried out according to scientific standards quoted above.

Thus, following Richard Jung, the inquiry into life is guided by different frames of interest which can be formulated as forms themselves. These can be explicated as different metaphors or systems of discourse expressing different epistemic attitudes and concerns, leading to different interpretations of life which are – remember “sive” – equally necessary for the conceptualization and explanation of the diverse phenomena of life. Therefore the task is to construct the respective theories and descriptions of phenomena in question in such a manner, that they are mutually conceptually exclusive and at the same time open to be integrated in the frame of science.

The key to this is what I might call the notion of “system” as a meta-metaphor making the world respectively “worlds” accessible and – sive – at the same time constructing it / them through formation. To quote again:

“Systems are formal entities of the mind and culture. Systems are n-ary relations (sets of relations on a set of variables)” (194)

Looking at the field of science from this point of abstraction there are, according to Richard Jung, formally five kinds of systems whose activity constitute the phenomena sive are the phenomena under consideration:

- Individuals
- Groups
- Aggregates
- Collectives
- Situated Individuals

Let me concentrate on Individuals resp. Situated Individuals, the systems that are most explicitly elaborated in the essays assembled in this volume. The suggested metaphors derived from different discourses in order to reconstruct the diverse intellectual processes involved in the various interpretations of life are:

- The Mind (sive)
- The Organism (sive)
- The Machine (sive)
- The Template

Within these Metaphors activities can be conceptualized as

- Action (as related to Mind)
- Behaviour (as related to energy / heat)
- Performance (due to specific dispositions)
- Conduct (guided by / through conventions)

On the basis of these distinctions, formulated very carefully and with strong formal clarity, one can readdress the question of how to combine “Verstehen” with the formal requirements of science

as “Erklären” / explanation. Considering Individuals, Minds, Actions as Systems these concepts can – not only potentially as Richard Jung demonstrates – be converted into a set of related variables which is then open to the application of the formal rules of “explanation” – that is deduction from antecedents (Explanans) to a chosen Explanandum.

This is performed in the way Richard Jung develops his version of a “general theory of action” which goes beyond common understandings of action as “actors seeking goals in situations”. His approach also deals with the relation of an actor to a situation but refines the implied direct link between intention and the teleological notion of “goal”. Goals – and complementarily “sive” intentions - are not simply “there” but are related to imbalances in the system’s structure related to a specific situation. Therefore, goals are chosen under the constraints of a given situation as well as under the conditions of the inner state of the acting system. By the way: the starting point of vital imbalance is clearly influenced by the reception of theories developed in modern biology and cybernetics.

Within the general theory of action the reason to act at all is seen in a “general principle of the maximum reduction of inauthenticity” (203) if the acting system is under stress due to boundary conditions (independent variables) that act as source of disturbance. Thus action is in the last instance aiming at the systems’ state itself, as Richard Jung reformulates the general principle of action as a “categorical imperative”:

“Action must reduce as much as possible any discrepancy between the state of the organism and its definition as an actor” (204).

So if action occurs in situations it can be not properly understood neither be explained by immediately introducing the term “intention” as an explanans for certain observable or introspectively accountable action. Intention must at least be as much related to “experience” as to “action”. Both are two distinct but complementary forms of how intention manifests itself: subjectively as systems of experiences as the inner aspect of intention and on

the other hand as its outer aspect directed towards an object, made observable in/through action. But both, experience as well as action does not occur unconditionally as mentioned above. If action aims at what Richard Jung calls the “Management of inauthenticity”, one has to go further (or “deeper” if you like) and so he does by introducing subsystems of which intention is composed. The interplay of these subsystems is governed by the general principles, cited above.

The system of orientation deals with uncertainty, the system of motivation deals with tension and the system of decision deals with risk. Thus the now enlarged triune system of intentions is systematically referring to goals relevant to the acting system itself, which is the reduction of (epistemic) uncertainty, minimizing tension and risk. A large part of the essays are dedicated to thoroughly elaborate these special theories and I can assure you, it is a thrilling intellectual pleasure to follow the author on this way.

But my time here is limited and so my system of decision tried to minimize the risk of being incomprehensible while talking on these topics by not having made clear their preliminaries. Maybe as being personally exposed in a professional context in which the Methodenstreit is still latently continuing, I was motivated to reduce tension by clarifying some of the problems with the help of the thought outlined in this book. At least it helped to reduce my uncertainty about whether there is a “bridge” between the Naturalist tradition and the Humanist tradition by which my own way of thinking and experiencing was influenced. For the moment, practising “phenomenological systems analysis” as proposed by Richard Jung helped to generate more clarity and it will probably continue to do so.

My intention, in whatever use of the term, was to raise your curiosity to study on your own the approach I have presented– I can assure you it will be a fruitful endeavour in many ways. If I might not have succeeded in that, remember: my talk on the subject was highly selective, maybe too simplistic and too imprecise, as far as the use of concepts is concerned.

Nevertheless, and last but not least, I have not yet touched upon the third version of reading this volume that I mentioned in the beginning: the Constitution of Society. There is a suggestion by Richard Jung that systems of actions can be integrated into systems of interactions, then systems of transactions and into systems of transformation covering more and more aggregate units. This idea is not dealt with extensively in this volume but there are hints of how one could proceed and the “tools” seem to be already there. Maybe there will come another occasion to talk about another book or at least an essay? I would certainly appreciate that.

Thank you very much for your attention.