

Contemporary Systems Thinking

Janet McIntyre-Mills

Systemic Ethics and Non-Anthropocentric Stewardship

Implications for Transdisciplinarity
and Cosmopolitan Politics

Contemporary Systems Thinking

Editor

Robert L. Flood

Maastricht School of Management



Contemporary Systems Thinking is a series of texts, each of which deals comparatively and/or critically with different aspects of holistic thinking at the frontiers of the discipline. Traditionally, writings by systems thinkers have been concerned with single theme propositions like General Systems Theory, Cybernetics, Operations Research, System Dynamics, Soft Systems Methodology and many others. Recently there have been attempts to fulfill a different yet equally important role by comparative analyses of viewpoints and approaches, each addressing disparate areas of study such as: modeling and simulation, measurement, management, ‘problem solving’ methods, international relations, social theory and last, but not exhaustively or least, philosophy. Bringing together many sources yields several achievements, among which is showing a great diversity of approaches, ideas and application areas that systems thinking contributes to (although, often with difficulties unresolved). There is a need for a series of books, each focusing in detail on the study areas mentioned above. While modeling and simulation are served well in the scientific literature, this is not the case for systems thinking in management, ‘problem solving’ methods, social theory, or philosophy to name a handful. Each book in this series makes a contribution by concentrating on one of these topics.

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Springer

Janet McIntyre-Mills
Flinders University
Adelaide
South Australia
Australia

ISSN 1568-2846

ISBN 978-3-319-07655-3

ISBN 978-3-319-07656-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-07656-0

Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014941689

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Dedication

*To the displaced and hungry
To my mother who taught me to question
To George Thompson on whom the light
of day might shine¹ I dedicate this book.
My hope is that we will be able to
re-evaluate our lives and relationships
with others.*

¹ Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa, by George Thompson edited by Vernon, S. Forbes, with poems by Thomas Pringle. Thompson relates his journey to map out some of the interior of South Africa and was described by the Baralong as one “on whom the light of day might shine”.

Summary

Since the commission on wellbeing that was requested by Sarkozy and the book that resulted from it, called: “Mismeasuring our lives” (Stiglitz et al. 2010), the global financial crisis has escalated to a social and environmental crisis that continues to unfold (Watson and Jones 2006).

The key message of this book is that simple living is both elegant and ethical. This requires a new stoicism, based on a sense of responsibility for others.

The old threat was ‘the other’; the new threat is shared problems and collective threats. (Held 2010, p. 14)

Kant connected the idea of cosmopolitanism with the standpoint of public reason. An individual’s entitlement to enter the realm of public reason is mirrored in the right to free membership in the global community of argument. (Held 2010, p. 15)

But for Kant the hospitality was always for visitors, not a recognition of the right to stay. The emotional dimension of our lives needs to be addressed in order to be able to extend our sense of solidarity to others including those who are voiceless. As De Waal (2009) stressed we evolved as a result of our ability to co-operate with empathy and to reciprocate. Reciprocity and empathy are the so-called ‘pillars of morality’ that were important for our evolution. Thus the ability to compete needs to be balanced by the capability to co-operate, the Stoics also stressed the need to think about living, not only in harmony with the state, but in harmony with the cosmos (see Held 2010, p. 61).

The cosmopolitan approach developed in this book draws on the liberative potential within many disciplines spanning Frans De Waal and Richard Dawkins (primatology and philosophy), Albert Hirschman and Hannah Arendt (on economics and politics), Amartya Sen (on economics and morality), Stuart Hall (on identity) and Martha Nussbaum (on social justice). The work of Joseph Stiglitz on wellbeing stocks is extended through drawing on Vandana Shiva (on the intersections spanning economics, politics and the environment).

Policy makers need to work together with many stakeholders who can contribute diverse ways of knowing, including non-anthropocentric approaches informed by an understanding of nature and other life forms. It also draws on the philosophy of Indigenous First Nations.

It is based on the idea that as human beings we have the right and the responsibility to care for the land on which we all depend equally by virtue of our humanity. But we also have the responsibility to care for those who are not part of our immediate human family. A transdisciplinary approach that includes stoicism along with Indigenous philosophy needs to receive more attention while conceptualizing a strong form of cosmopolitanism that respects a form of cultural or national identity that is not at the expense of others (including sentient beings), the environment or future generations.

The book:

- Makes a case for rights and responsibilities to be expressed through cosmopolitan praxis based on developing strong, as opposed to weak cosmopolitan approaches.
- Discusses systemic ethical praxis in response to the vexed challenge of how to bridge the false dualism of pitting the environment versus profit.

Food and energy are the bases for human wellbeing and security. Current approaches to international relations and war (Etzioni 2004, 2011) are unsustainable.

As the experience of suffering becomes more widespread, the notion of class will become central once again, because ‘the poorest people in the world will be the hardest hit’ (Beck 2009, p. 37). Post nationalism needs to be buttressed by human rights, rights to protect biospheres and the law of the sea.

Keywords: vulnerability, recognition of interconnectedness, extension of the social contract, transdisciplinarity, systemic ethics

Focusing Thoughts on Transdisciplinarity and Working Across Domains of Knowing

Gibbons et al. (1994) argued that the ability to work across boundaries is vital for ‘the new production of knowledge’ and vital for ‘*the dynamics of research*’ to address current complex challenges. A core capability will be to transcend disciplinary boundaries, synthesize diverse perspectives and critically analyse the role of science in public policy. These perspectives on the capabilities required to effectively contribute to the exploration and resolution of significant social and policy issues. The need to develop a support for human capabilities is vital. The Australian politicians and academics are becoming more competitive and dualistic.

Read together the overlapping chapters deepen the understanding of non-anthropocentric stewardship, governance, democracy and ethics.

The Australian Public Service Commission 2007 report entitled: ‘Tackling wicked problems²’ needs to be critically analysed in terms of the unexamined policy discourses. What are wicked problems? What are so called tame problems? Why is it problematic to think of taming or tackling problems as opposed to recognising our need to live in harmony with others and the environment?

In Flannery’s Quarterly essay on Australia’s extinction crisis, many wicked problems have been raised about our attitudes to stewardship. He explains that in his book ‘The Future Eaters’; he hypothesizes that we have eliminated many of the herbivores that used to provide the manure for our land.

² <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-> Accessed 8/01/2013 Rittel, H. and Webber, M. 1984, *Planning problems are wicked problems Developments in Design Methodology*. New York: Wiley. Wei-Ning Xiang 2012, Editorial: ‘Working with wicked problems in socio-ecological systems: Awareness, acceptance, and adaptation’, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 110:1–4. Wellbeing and existential risk: engagement to address the policy and governance challenges of mitigation and accountability, McIntyre, J. (School of Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University, janet.mcintyre@flinders.edu.au, presenting author, De Vries, D. (Computer Science, Engineering and informatics, Flinders University, denise.devries@flinders.edu.au, paper delivered at CASS Research Conference *Sustainable Environmental Policy and Global Governance*, Beijing, China, 18–19 September 2012 and submitted to the journal of convergence, China.

As the land deteriorates and dries out, it becomes more vulnerable to bush fires. The aboriginal use of fire management to reduce fuel load in the less hot months helped to reduce the risks. Flannery (2012, p. 54) explains the role as a 'human key stone'. Without stewardship activities such as reducing fuel load and protecting not only the environment but the creatures that live in it, we all become increasingly vulnerable. He criticises the tendency to polarise green politics and sustainability through politics. Sustaining the future ought to be beyond the right/left political debate.

How can governance protect the global commons and the collective good? How can complex social, economic and environmental challenges that are perceived differently by different stakeholders with different values be addressed?

Boundaries are sociological constructions. In biological systems, the most basic boundary is the membrane of a cell which opens and closes according to the context.

If we consider and adapt a hierarchy of systems (developed by Kenneth Boulding 1956), biological systems appear above inorganic systems because they are open and responsive to their environment and able to adapt and learn as self-evolving systems. Boulding starts by describing crystals and inorganic life, then clockwork structures that have the ability to evolve through learning as closed loop cybernetics systems.

The next level of complexity is the organic cell that is an open system that is able to respond to its environment and develop relationships with other living creatures. Through signalling they gradually develop a sense of shared meaning which become symbols for communication. The next step in the journey of ongoing evolutionary emergence is to develop a sense of self in relation to others and those whose shared meanings form a basis of a culture that is communicated to others verbally. An oral history is constructed in terms of an understanding of the land which is used as a library to store meaning. Written artifacts are developed based on stone, bark, paper, shared mechanically, digitally and as a means to store and transfer organic and inorganic design.

Finally, transcendental systems are able to evolve from one kind of category to another on a continuum. Emergence is based on the notion of the flows across all life and an appreciation of animal knowing. For example, an octopus can respond to its environment through adapting its shape and blending with the environment. They are sentient creatures with a sense of self and an ability to feel, remember, solve problems and teach others of their species³.

The tragedy of the commons argument developed by Hardin (1968) is a construction informed by simplistic thinking. It has become an archetype for bounded thinking. Ironically and tragically, it is often used as the starting point for environmental thinking, but in fact it was an argument developed by Locke in support of the enclosure movement and private property in Britain. The argument being that contained areas of land are cared for better than the areas of land that are held in

³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/are-octopuses-too-intelligent-to-eat-1.1498845>.

common and shared. The example of common grazing land is shared. But ironically it is the privatization and commodification of land and natural resources that has led to environmental pollution and degradation.

The lack of trust between nations has evoked the rhetoric of nationalism, and state protectionism has led to 'seeing like a state' (Scott 1998), which in turn leads to the argument for competition, and the zero sum approach which argues that one nation can profit at the expense of others. The organizational philosophy and governance argument that flow from this philosophy is based on bounded compartments that can profit at the expense of others.

This belies nature and biology and wounds the spirit. There is no such thing as a closed system!

All systems are open. The potential for evolution is based on the interconnectedness of inorganic and organic systems. We are nurtured by plants and we return to the earth as organic matter. The biblical insight 'dust to dust' sums up the cycle of organic life.

The webs of relationships that are fostered across all forms of inorganic and organic life are recognized in physics. Each particle is in motion and it is the movement and flows of energy that make life possible.

The transfer of information through DNA from one living cell to another is repeated in all living systems.

The extent to which the human genome and the rat genome differ is perhaps less than 2%. The human animal evolved through thinking about its thinking and being able to relate to others based on the shared understanding and reciprocity.

Evolution was the result of both co-operation amongst human animals and competition for an ecological space where a tribe could live safely, eat, shelter and reproduce. When the human animal lived as a hunter, gatherer time was spent surviving. The camp fire and cave were the spaces for congregating and communicating stories. But whilst men and women hunted and gathered they communicated stories and maps of survival. By pointing out landmarks and telling stories (recalled by pointing to features in the landscape), history was held in the landscape and the land became the dreaming site.

When grain crops were cultivated and stored, people had more time to spend developing cultural artifacts that they defended. People within the pale of the civilized community were regarded as friends. Those outside were considered the potential enemies. They were beyond the pale and were part of the wilderness. They were perceived as wild, untamed and in some ways to be envied for their freedom. But a denial for the wilderness creates a longing and a wounding of the soul that is expressed through trying to re-connect with animals and nature to empower us.



Kudu horns decorate a shack on the Cape Flats, Cape Town, 2010 photograph by author



Status is indicated by the number of animals decorating the home within the Forbidden City, Beijing

As the communities thrived, the populations grew and the mechanical abilities developed to become vast digital information systems. The cities have lost their connections with the environment on which they depend. They have exploited and overtaken more and more of the wilderness.

The focus on anthropocentric humanism and human rights has led to an ethical divide between the *human and the animal* and then between *human and machine*. The human being is seen as the controller of nature.

But the divided nature of *control and compete* is only one part of the story. The continuum of relationships with nature and with animals needs to be seen as

co-evolving. *Co-operation and nurturing* is the other side of the coin. The feminine and the masculine principles are equally important. The notion of bounded gender is another construction. X and Y chromosomes are shared by males and females. The hormonal balance determines how masculine or feminine a human being appears. Identity is a matter not merely of biology, self-perception, but also social interaction and a sense of self.

Just as cells can open or close to allow in nutrients and to expel toxins, boundaries need to be open or closed according to the context in social systems. The ability to draw the line in social systems needs to be based on decisions that are made on the basis of questioning what to include or exclude.

This requires considering our values and realizing that we see the world in terms of these values. We *are* the boundaries according to Haraway. She exhorts those without a voice *to be the designers*. We can choose to destroy the environment or to be stewards based on re-wiring our brains through thinking about our thinking, co-operating and nurturing.

Just as our actions shape the landscape, our actions can shape our neuroplasticity and we can re-make the pathways in our minds (Arrowsmith-Young 2012).

West Churchman (1971, 1979, 1982) explains that ‘the systems approach begins when first we try to see the world through the eyes of another’. But he stresses that the world we see is filtered by our religious, moral, political and aesthetic values, and the same is true for everyone else.

Once we realize that perceptions do indeed matter. In fact, perceptions can shape matter and they have a role in stewardship of living systems or using resources in ways that leave little for future generations of life.

The boundary between the past, present and future was permeable for many traditional religions. The boundaries have become much more fixed in this generation. The respect for the wisdom of the past and the respect for the needs of future generations needs to be fostered through drawing the line in the sand to ensure that decisions are ethical.

Social boundaries need to be drawn based on expanding pragmatism from narrow competition to considering the consequences for others and future generations of life.

The notion that bounded national states can survive in ongoing competition for the last of the non-renewables is unsustainable.

The sub theme (a tentative hypothesis this book explores) is that the size of territory, or geographical space that human beings are able to engage with, is a result of the number of neural connections they are capable of making. As mammals evolved their brain size increased. Human mammals need to use design creativity and bricolage to be able to make sense of the planetary challenges they are facing. Unfortunately many elected leaders are unable or unwilling to think about the relationships with others, the environment or the next generation. The space and time seem to be limited. The argument developed in this book is that we are on the brink of:

- Being able to overcome this deficiency through being compassionate and through recognising our hybridity.
- Lapsing into nationalist conflict over the last of the non-renewables. This could involve a race to the bottom through war.

Space, time and identity are changing as our awareness of interconnectivity is re-discovered. Being at one with others, will require learning the ability to multi-task and to be inclusive, in the same way that those who are socially skilled in public contexts enable everyone to feel that they are respected and being listened to. It requires giving time and an aesthetic sense of good manners across cultural contexts⁴.

How should we live? How should wellbeing be defined? Should we follow a definition of wellbeing based on:

contentment and experienced wellbeing, in a Benthamite hedonic utility sense? Or do we care about eudaimonia or life purpose, in an Aristotelian sense? Particular individuals will value one more than the other depending, in part, on what they are capable of. While scholars surely can measure both, from a societal and policy perspective, which dimension of happiness should policy aim to maximise? (Graham 2011, p. 121)

I have used the concept ‘Wall Street’ to symbolise economic rationalism and ‘well-being’ to symbolise a re-framed approach to ‘being interconnected’ and through treading lightly. The free software detailed in volume 1⁵ provides a way to enable people to explore the question, how should we live and what constitutes wellbeing? Participants are invited to consider what have, they need, what their turning points are for the better or the worse and what the barriers are. The services that help them meet their needs are detailed as well. The software updates as it is used.

The IPCC formula suggests that the privileged lives of some could lead to existential risk for people and the planet (Bostrom 2011).

This has implications for the way we live and the need to change our way of life through living sustainably. Representation, accountability and sustainability challenges need to be met through addressing the consumption choices that are currently very unequal. The gaps between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless have become wider and wider.

⁴ Being part of a wider world is partly as a result of being an immigrant with dual citizenship, being able to travel and feeling a connection through friends, family and students with a wider world. Not having my own children enabled me to spend time lobbying for homeless children in South Africa with whom I identified strongly and also with the creatures with whom I have shared my home and garden. But this sense of connection was taught in spiritual lessons by my parents to respect ‘all creatures great and small’.

But keeping in touch with nature and with others requires time and attention. Too many contacts lead to a very thin, sporadic form of communication. Those who feel closest to one are affronted when emails are neglected. Face book becomes frightening when profiles are misunderstood or misinterpreted. The notion that technology will enable the limited capacity of human beings to engage with complexity is misplaced. In some ways it can lead to overload and compassion fatigue. I feel the need to tune off and tune out of digital links. Being in the garden, walking through the hills and being in touch with close family requires not being wired in to a mobile. Achieving balance between public and private lives is always an art and needs to be undertaken with a sense of spirituality and aesthetics. Compulsive networking leads to exhaustion and a sense of excluding those with whom one is in physical contact. Drawing boundaries remains important and can only be informed through ethical moral codes.

⁵ The software linked with this project is at https://socsci.flinders.edu.au/fippm/pathways_1g//Log in at wellbeing.csem.flinders.edu.au.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Peter Turner who lives in Alice Springs for his mentoring and friendship since 1997, when we met in Alice Springs and for all the conversations since the International Systems Sciences Conference in Brisbane entitled “Making Live-able, Sustainable Systems Unremarkable” (July 12–17th, 2010 at the University of Queensland).

My thanks to Flinders University, the University of Indonesia and to the Australian Learning and Teaching Commission for funding in recognition for a citation on systemic approaches that enabled me to develop the chapter on teaching and learning with colleagues at the International Federation of Systems Sciences, Pernegg in 2011.

I also acknowledge and thank both Bevin Wilson and Norma Romm for commenting on a draft of this manuscript.

I thank Systems Research and Behavioural Science for allowing me to include sections of material published as two articles, entitled:

McIntyre-Mills, J. 2012. ‘Anthropocentricism and wellbeing: a way out of the lobster pot?’ Syst. Res. Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) doi:10.1002/sres.2131.

I acknowledge that sections have been presented at the following conferences and that abstracts appear in the proceedings or on the conference websites:

McIntyre-Mills, J. 2012. ‘Risk and resilience: towards a post carbon economy?’ United Kingdom, Systems Society, St. Anne’s, Oxford, 30–31 August, Easy Chair Conference Platform.

McIntyre-Mills, J. 2012. ‘Beyond containerism: challenges for democracy and post national governance’. United Kingdom, Systems Society, St. Anne’s, Oxford, 30–31 August, Easy Chair Conference Platform.

McIntyre-Mills, J. 2013. *Cosmopolitan Politics: Can cosmopolitanism address the criticisms raised by the left?* Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics, University of Milan. June 28th Paper and abstract accepted at conference SASE website double blind refereed Abstract in conference proceedings.

This is the second of the two volumes comprised of a series of essays that can be read separately and in any order or as chapters on a common theme, namely how should we live and what are the implications of our social, economic and environmental choices?

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About the Author



Janet McIntyre-Mills is an Associate Professor at Flinders University and an Adjunct Professor at the University of Indonesia. Her books address social and environmental justice concerns and include, for example: ‘Global Citizenship and Social Movements’, Harwood, McMillan, ‘Critical Systemic Praxis for Social and Environmental Justice’, Springer; ‘Systemic Governance and Accountability: Working and Re-working the Conceptual and Spatial Boundaries’, Springer; ‘User Centric Policy Design to Address Complex Need’s, Nova Science. Emergence has recently published ‘Identity, Democracy and Sustainability’. It proposes a new architecture for governance.

Her research addresses wellbeing, consciousness and cosmopolitan ethics associated with the design and transformation of governance and democracy. It focuses on excessive social, economic and environmental consumption and suggests ways to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change through protecting cultural ecosystems. She is a board member of several journals, including the *Journal of Globalization Studies*, *Systems Research and Behavioural Science*, for example. She is an elected board member of Research Committee 10 on Participation and Organizational Transformation of the International Sociological Association, and has participated in Research Committee 51 of Socio-cybernetics. She is also a member of the International Systems Sciences and the Action Learning and Action Association.

Chapter 1

Cosmopolitan Politics

Making a Case for Systemic Praxis

1.1 Introduction: Earth Democracy and Earth Governance

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see modern society with new eyes, and this birth of a ‘cosmopolitan vision’ (Beck 2006) is among the unexpected phenomena out of which a still indeterminate world of risk society is emerging. Henceforth, there are no merely local occurrences. All genuine threats have become global threats. The situation of every nation, every people, every religion, every class and every individual is also the result and cause of the human situation. The key point is that henceforth concern about the whole has become a task. It is not optional but the human condition. (Beck 2009, p. 19)

Entangled social, economic and environmental challenges posed by food, energy and water shortages require a revision of compartmentalist or containerist approaches limited to the nation state and informed by failed enlightenment agendas (McIntyre-Mills et al. 2006a). As Eyerman (1981, p. 55) stressed, false consciousness refers to:

an experience in society, ideology to a proposed or offered explanation of that experience. One however that only further distorted real understanding. As these questions developed within the Frankfurt School during these years of emigration and exile, the problem of how real understanding was at all possible, became the central one.

As the experience of suffering becomes more widespread, the notion of class will become central once again, because ‘the poorest people in the world will be the hardest hit’ (Beck 2009, p. 37).

Global citizenship ought to become a concept supported by international law and social justice movements (McIntyre-Mills 2000). Change requires necessity, desire and will (see Bogue 1989 on Deleuze and Guattari). The goal of this research with local government—inspired by the Aboriginal mentors (McIntyre-Mills and de Vries 2011)—is to foster an understanding that ‘We are the land’ (Getano Lui 1993).¹

¹ Dualistic thinking needs to be recognized as part of a failed enlightenment project and we need to ‘rescue the enlightenment from itself’ (McIntyre-Mills et al. 2006a) through recognizing our co-determination of the environment of which we are a part.