Soft Systems Methodology: a 30-year retrospective

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This note summarizes the argument to be presented in the author's Plenary Address.

I

What is now known as Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) has been continuously developed and honed in a programme of action research which is now in its thirtieth year at Lancaster University. Development continues, but SSM can fairly be described as 'mature', that maturity stemming from a conscious focus not on systems theory, not on systems practice, but on the relation between the two: how the two continuously create each other.

II

Initially, the action research was structured by trying to use a hard systems engineering (SE) approach in messy management problem situations. That methodology failed; and rethinking the fundamental basis of SE led to SSM. SE is a systematic appraisal of alternative means to achieve objectives taken as given. The experiences in the research programme required a more holistic systemic approach, and SSM emerged as a learning system.

III

Four key thoughts made sense of the experiences and hence shaped SSM:

(1) focus on the fact that all management problem situations contain people trying to act purposefully; model purposeful activity;

(2) accept that one observer's 'terrorism' is another's freedom fighter; make models according to a pure, declared worldview;

(3) establish a learning process by using a number of such models to structure debate about change, by using the (pure) models to question the (messy) situation; the debate seeks the accommodations between conflicting view points which enable 'action to improve' to be taken;

(4) turn activity models into models related to information support for purposeful action.

SSM thus "aims to bring about improvement in areas of social concern by activating in the people involved in the situation a learning cycle which is ideally never-ending" (von Bulow).

IV

This emergence of SSM established the two fundamental stances in systems thinking: hard and soft, the distinction between the two depending upon the attribution of systemicity. Hard systems thinkers choose to see the world as systemic (hence: SE, RANDSA, Classical OR etc); soft systems thinkers choose to see the world as problematic, but believe that the process of inquiry into the world can be organized as a learning system (hence: SSM, Appreciative systems theory etc).

V

Within the overall process of SSM many detailed processes are now available: rich picturing, social analysis, political analysis, modelling, using models to structure debate etc.

VI

As methodology, the logos (principles) of method, SSM is undecidable: every use will entail three inseparably linked elements: methodology as words on paper; user; perceived situation. Outcomes may be dominated in different cases by different mixes of these three. This means that the core constitutive rules for SSM are necessarily at a high level: a belief that social reality is not a given, but is continuously socially constructed; explicit use of certain devices (including concepts of purposeful activity modelled according to declared worldviews); a process of exploration to gain insight leading to action.

VII

Though normally taught initially as a stage-by-stage process, internalized SSM comes into its own as a sense-making process. So: sophisticated uses are always situation-driven, not methodology-driven. Overall, SSM is best seen as a practical way of operationalizing Vickers' notion of the social process as an appreciative system.

Reference

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This will be published during 1999. It will be included in re-published versions of both Systems Thinking, Systems Practice (1981) and Soft Systems Methodology in Action (1990)