

Liberating Systems Theory

ROBERT L. FLOOD

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Flood's book is a part of an extremely ambitious project concerned with a synthesis of critical social theory and systems thinking. It is wide-ranging in its scope: tackling issues of systems theory and practice in terms of epistemology, ontology and ideology, and also examining histories of systems thinking. The book presents arguments in progress, which form, in Flood's own words, 'a highly integrated but not totalizing, closed, or complete whole. It is . . . an argument that awaits critique'. The critical contents of this review should thus be seen as a response to an invitation and as a measure of the book's worth and stimulus to critical thinking. It is difficult to do such a richness of complex argumentation justice in the space of a short review, and so I must be selective, offering only a limited view of the book's content together with some comments on both content and presentation.

Intercontinental journeys

The first chapter sets the scene by summarizing insights or reasons for the book's existence. Using a geographical metaphor, Flood delineates his personal journey through three paradigmatic continents, those of positivism, interpretivism and critique. In language laden with implicit value loadings (which I shall enjoy unpacking elsewhere), we learn of travels from the 'suspicious' homeland of positivism, through the interpretivist continent, peopled by 'civilised intellectuals', ever on to the critical continent, where 'emancipation' and 'liberation' can be found. This language somewhat contradicts the complementarist approach that is advanced: appreciating the complementary styles of thought from each continent. The basic problem is that on an ideological level, the paradigms are conflicting.

The substantive content of the book's argument then unfolds in the chapters that follow. Chapters 2 and 3 summarize and introduce the thesis of the whole book, presenting the different interpretations of the title that the book is concerned with, and introducing some of the ideas and arguments from social theory that will be used. A brief review of social theory in terms of views on truth and meaning is presented in terms of the foundationalism versus anti-foundationalism debate. Aspects of the work of Habermas and Foucault are introduced, and it is argued that a 'meta-unity' of these can be formed. In tackling so many different issues, and in particular in dealing with the work of two such prolific and wide-ranging authors as Foucault and Habermas, it is obviously impossible to satisfy every reader. To me, this was the least satisfactory part of the book. Habermas' 'model' of knowledge-constitutive interests and Foucault's methods of interpretive analytics/genealogy are introduced sufficiently to act as a background for their use in later chapters. However, Habermas's epistemological argumentation, based on his theories of communicative action and universal pragmatics, which is used later in the book, is not presented in any detail. While the discussion succeeds in establishing interpretive analysis and knowledge-constitutive interests as complementary methods of inquiry, it glosses rather too hurriedly over the question of meta-unity in any other sense. Given debates elsewhere, for example Rorty¹, Dewey², Fraser³, Habermas⁴, about the distance in ontological and epistemological terms between Habermas and Foucault, this must remain one of the parts of Flood's project which requires further development.

Chapters 4 to 6 deal with one particular reading of the book's title: the question of liberating 'systems theory', and involve extremely interesting applications on the methods of Foucault and Derrida in particular. This part of the book aims at: 'trying to work out a position where the full potential of systems thinking can be clearly understood and not masked by self-misunderstanding or self-grandeur'. One task is a critique of conceptual reflexivity, the idea that a limited or finite set of concepts is sufficient to explain everything. Another is to explore the influences of contrasting theoretical viewpoints on the use of system concepts, firstly by tracing historical developments in abstract notions of 'system', and then by considering types of systems paradigm. The ideas of Ackoff, Checkland, Ulrich, Simon and Churchman are discussed, and placed with respect to the ontological and epistemological breaks and discontinuities that are identified in the discourses of

systems thinking. Throughout, we return repeatedly to the importance of studying the subjectively intended meanings of authors and the use of language. Attention then turns to reviewing different ideas on the nature of history and the progress of knowledge, and different approaches to the history of systems thinking. The case of General Systems Theory is examined as an illustration of the production, contestation and suppression of knowledge. Flood concludes that the notion of General Systems Theory has, to date, been criticized and summarily dismissed on the basis of refutable criteria, by non-reflective positivists, neo-positivists and interpretivists, positions which Flood himself will reject as inadequate on epistemological grounds later in the arguments of the book.

The final substantive chapter (chapter 7) turns to questions of inquiry, and establishing an adequate epistemology for systems practice. Six different styles of inquiry (pragmatism, methodological isolationism, theoretical isolationism, imperialism by annexation, imperialism by subsumption and, finally, complementarism) are introduced and reviewed critically. This is a development of Flood's earlier work^{5,6}, building on work by Jackson⁷ and Reed⁸. Habermas' epistemological argumentation is identified as the 'hidden epistemology' behind complementarism, as a prelude to a more detailed consideration of epistemology. Three rationalities are considered: non-reflective positivistic; non-reflective interpretivistic; and critical or self-reflective. Of these, only the latter is found to amount to an adequate basis for systems practice. Although labelled as a discussion of the epistemology of systems practice, this debate also touches on questions of ideology and ontology, and is perhaps the most complex section of the whole book. The issues it presents will need to be debated further. I would have welcomed a closer consideration of the very fundamental issues involved in notions of truth and meaning, as well as an expansion of the treatment of ideology. In particular, a development into considering notions of praxis, (intended here to signal concern for the links between systems practice, social changes and ideological stance), would have been rewarding, but maybe I need to search for this in Flood and Jackson's book on creative problem solving⁹. The acceptance of a critical systems rationality/paradigm however, does not amount to a rejection of methods associated with other systems paradigms, these, at a methodological level are regarded as complementary. It is here that I have most problems with Flood's presentation of his thesis using a discursive style, as the switches between different levels, theoretical and meta-theoretical for example, are not always clearly signposted.

A considerable part of the book is drawn from earlier articles authored or co-authored by Flood, the latter being well signposted, the former less well so. It is useful to find them drawn together in one place, and the seams are generally well camouflaged. Adherents of Foucault's genealogical methods will find the comparison of the book and articles rich sources for analysing Flood's changes in stance on many issues.

On maps with incomplete keys—up the paradigmatic creek without a paddle?

One of the book's least user-friendly features is the lack of navigational aids, a particular disadvantage I suspect for any reader who has little exposure to social theory. There is a section at the end of the book entitled 'Terms and Concepts: some critical observations' in which Flood suggests the meanings he wishes to portray, but does not attempt to provide a definitive glossary. While it would be quite inappropriate to attempt to be definitive, this section provides only a partial guide. Many of the terms therein have a multiplicity of readings in current use which are not reflected in the entries—see for example: ideology, psychoanalysis, rationality, transcendental. The lack of signposts to these do not help the reader in a critical approach to the book's arguments. There are also many terms missing from this section, for example: legitimacy, liberation, emancipation, reductionism, discourse, dialectic, power, knowledge etc, all of which are used in very particular ways within the text. These do not appear in the index either. The index is intensely frustrating, being very sparse, and there is also no index to authors. In terms of other irritations, the book has: the usual crop of misprints; some missing footnotes; a complex set of embedded subsections (to 4 levels) in chapters, with a fascinating jump from 6.2.3.2 straight to 6.2.3.4; and finally, a binding that released its hold on the pages before I'd finished the first draft of this review—should I read into this a statement on the inevitable logic of disintegration inherent in poststructuralist thought?

In terms of a metaphor which Flood himself uses at several points, drawn from Korzybski, we can see this book as a collection of maps. If we remember, as Flood reminds us, that the map is not the same as the terrain it depicts, being but just one possible representation of it, then it may serve us well. However, I should not be too surprised that if a reader were to attempt to navigate from Habermas to Foucault using only this map, they would find a gaping chasm, labelled perhaps 'post-modernism', and the distinct lack of any bridge labelled 'meta-unity' to cross it.

As earlier comments have indicated, I believe I would have found it hard to read much of the book without considerable prior exposure to social theory. Indeed, those without a considerable grasp of the work of Habermas, Foucault and their various commentators and critics, run the risk of missing a lot of the richness of Flood's text, since he does not always signpost the connections and allusions explicitly.

To travel hopefully

The general issues that I would like to raise all share a common theme: the use of language, which on many levels is a central concern of the whole book. Firstly, there is the use of the terms emancipation and liberation. There are, at least, two senses in which these can be taken. Firstly, as referring solely to intellectual liberation or emancipation, as implied for example by some of the discussions in chapters 3 and 6. Secondly, these can be read in a much wider sense, to imply more than just the liberation of knowledge, as for example in the stated aim of 'liberating systems' theory (taken from the opening of chapter 7): 'Systems theory for liberation and emancipation of individuals, races, genders, workers and whoever else may be disadvantaged or in need of more equal opportunities and self-determination'. Is emancipation/liberation knowledge of the existence and workings of power, interpreted in Habermas' sense of the word, or a changing of the relations of power? The tension between the two interpretations in the book mirrors a similar tension in the different readings that are possible of Habermas' work. At some points the achievement of self-reflection is identified as co-extensive with emancipation while in later works more of a separation is found between self-reflection and practical engagement, this issue is particularly well covered by Held¹⁰ and summarized by Bernstein¹¹. This is an area where further expansion would have been particularly helpful, although perhaps this is to be found elsewhere with the discussion of the practice of liberating systems theory⁹.

A second issue, which is also one of language, is that although Flood has dealt thoughtfully in two of his chapters with issues connected with the use of language, in places, he runs into the danger of having his own subjectively intended meanings misinterpreted (at least by this reader!). One example: given his view, quoted earlier, that the argument of the book is 'a highly integrated but not totalizing, closed, or complete whole', I was somewhat surprised to find the name 'Total Systems Intervention' given to the methodological body of thought which Flood argues is underpinned by the ideas of this book. The 'Total' in that name conjures images completely at variance with Flood's complementarist vision presented in the final chapter of the book, and with the critical spirit of his whole thesis.

There is also the question of literary style. (I am somewhat hesitant in raising this. Does my personal preference betray an insufficiently open and conciliatory approach, nay, even isolationist tendencies? — see footnote 3 p 186.) In terms of the discursive style of this book I found myself wishing for a slightly heavier editorial footprint in the text. Some of the sentence structures acted as a barrier rather than an aid to my understanding: is this inevitable when the series editor is also the author? I could not help contrasting the book to that of Ulrich¹², which presents similarly complex arguments, yet with much less opacity (and with the most wonderful index).

It is perhaps useful to finish by considering the author's own view of how to read this volume. He suggests two ways: firstly as a history of systems thinking, and an attempt to think out the relationship between the different strands that have emerged; secondly as an engagement with the ideas of Foucault and Habermas, with their interplay and application/relevance in the case of systems theory. More broadly, this second strand/seam represents an engagement with debates of social and critical theory, and could also be seen as an attempt to rehabilitate systems theory within the social sciences. I found the book more successful in the first than the second sense. I remain somewhat uncertain of the audience envisaged for the book, as there is simultaneously not enough

of an introduction to critical theory for the novice (although hopefully the book will serve as a stimulus to reader's own journeys of exploration), and not enough of the ongoing (and passionate) debates for the non-novice. Those (small?) reservations aside, I thoroughly welcome and recommend the book. I found it (by turns) intriguing, irritating, interesting, infuriating and inspiring, but never boring. Its engagement with the concerns of critical theory and systems theory and their interaction is highly pertinent and a welcome addition to the small but growing debate within the OR community on these issues. For those happy to acknowledge the existence of an ideological underpinning for every position, and wanting to engage with the development of an epistemological basis for their own practice, this text will be valuable. For those concerned to explore the interface between OR and social science, this must represent essential reading.

ANN TAKET

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Marketing Research (2nd Edition)

A. PARASURAMAN

Addison-Wesley, Wokingham, 1991. xiv + 898 pp. £24.95

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Research for Marketing

MICHAEL J. BAKER

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Applications in the area of marketing receive relatively little attention in the OR literature. For example, in this journal there were only 11 papers with a marketing theme between 1987 and 1990 in contrast to 48 papers on Production Control, Planning and Scheduling. Whilst OR units have played an extremely significant role in the development of, for example, geodemographic classification systems and store location and assessment¹, there is greater potential for OR involvement in Marketing Research and in the development of Marketing Information Systems.

Both the books above, in their different ways, illustrate marketing problems and opportunities, and argue the case for the provision of marketing information by research. 'Marketing Research' by Parasuraman is the second edition of a popular US text, and is structured in seven sections: Introduction; Key Aspects of the Marketing Research Process; Data Collection Procedures; Designing Forms and Scales for Collecting Data; Data Analysis; Communicating with Research Users.

Such a structure, with minor modifications, would not be out of place in a Business Statistics text. The content is different, however, in that use is made of real marketing examples to illustrate concepts, techniques, etc, and several marketing case studies are provided at the end of each section. The intended audience is students who are taking their first course in marketing research—