

What it is to be human and part of a loving community

Cybernetics of Cybernetics Competition

"I stepped out of the discussion for a while, but your latest post really helped me understand M&V and their appeal for others in the group. Specifically, it was your phrase "what it is to be human and part of a loving community." Previously, I was hearing Maturana say that "Human beings are machines." And that seemed cold and alienating. But now I'm seeing that the focus on relationships and interactions has a loving element to it. So apparently, we're loving machines?"

Michelle Holliday 3rd December 2010, extract from post on Maturana's Systems Theory of Living Discussions Group

An E-mail Conversation

On 14th October 2010 GuilhermeKujawski asked members of theCybcomCybernetics Discussion Group if they had seen "stuff published by Tiqqun magazine" and pointed to an article which provides a Marxist critique of what theTiqqun Magazine refers to as the *Cybernetic Hypothesis*. In this critique cybernetics is linked to imperial governance through the following narrative:

Abraham Moles, cybernetics' most zealous French ideologue, who here expresses this unparalleled murder impulse that drives cybernetics: "We envision that one global society, one State, could be managed in such a way that they could be protected against all the accidents of the future: such that eternity changes them into themselves. *This is the ideal of a stable society, expressed by objectively controllable social mechanisms.*"

http://cybernet.jottit.com/chapter_1

Joel Isaacson immediately responded to the original post as follows:

Tiqqun is obviously dated, by at least 10 years. It was run by far-left situationists, autonomists and post-structuralists influenced by French/Italian philosophical traditions, and mostly rooted in dialectical/Marxist ideologies.

Their descriptions of (and attack on) the "cybernetic hypothesis" have been colored by radical leftist dispositions and thus the lumping of cybernetics and capitalism into one package constituting devious capitalist control tool in order to enslave the masses.

Their understanding of the underlying technical aspects of cybernetics is lacking and they cast the issues in much wider socio-politico-economic contexts. Their conclusion was that (like capitalism itself) cybernetics (a diabolical tool of capitalism) is on its way out, mostly for being in profound contradiction to the ultimate dialectical processes that are at work in society (according to Marxist dogma). In other words, the cybernetic hypothesis is failing for not being compatible with dialectics.

There is no point in debating these misguided views in this forum. The only amusing comment that may be apropos here, I think, is that the process of "recursive distinctioning" that we discussed here around 2008 captures classical cybernetic tenets on the one hand (being an extension of Bateson, for example) and autonomically generates dialectical processes on the other hand. Thus, a capitalist-produced automaton ends up behaving as a dialectical process par excellence. Perhaps Tiqqun is in need of repair...

PS "tiqqun" means "repair" in Hebrew, from whence it is derived.

What followed was an unusually large burst of activity on the Cybcom list with 124 messages under this topic heading in the following month¹. These emails followed exactly Joel's suggestion and discussed in great detail the nature of recursion and contrasted it with repetition. In this very active discussion a number of themes emerged which were commonly seen on this discussion group. These included discussion about the nature of information, and attacks and defences of Maturana's and Pask's work. Interestingly there was no discussion of the way in which, however lacking in "understanding of the underlying technical aspects of cybernetics," cybernetic concepts might be shaping the current capitalist trajectory.

The cybernetics of cybernetics competition

Margaret Mead's call is for a society for the promotion of cybernetics that recognizes and acts according to cybernetic understandings. She draws attention to the way that organizations are conservative and can become stultified and inward looking. This is highlighted in her story about the Society for General Systems Theory who had rejected her ideas not on the basis of their quality but rather because she an old woman in tennis shoes and was not an insider. Margaret Mead calls for the ASC to "plan an organization in relation to its purposes."

So, what does this email conversation, which is not part of the ASC, have to do with a competition that urges us to think how the American Society for Cybernetics can guide itself cybernetically? Firstly, I think there is a sense in which cybernetic ideas, often only partially understood, have both influenced or become embedded in the modern capitalist project (for example markets are seen as systems that are self-regulated) and cybernetics as a discrete discipline does seem to be on the way out (though in my opinion not for the reasons given in Tiqqun) and certainly has little influence.

In order to respond to Margaret Mead's call we are not simply being asked to ensure that the ASC acts cybernetically. Just as Gregory Bateson observed that "you cannot not communicate," organisations cannot not operate cybernetically – in other words they will always act with self-regulation and through processes of feedback even where that means they become conservative or self-destructive. The email conversation is a clear example of self-regulation which is evident in the redirection of the conversation to the familiar territory of detailed discussion of the minutiae and long standing squabbles within the cybernetics community.

For me reflection on the email conversation suggests a need for a deeper reform, it calls for the ASC to become more reflexive and to do this I will argue that there is a need to reconsider the purpose of the ASC.

¹ Interestingly the announcement of this competition in the same list elicited only 3 email responses!

Promoting Cybernetics

As a society the formal purpose of the ASC is in its constitution which says that its purpose is twofold:

1. The advancement of cybernetics as a science, a discipline, a meta-discipline, and a practice by:
 - systematically accreting, evaluating and disseminating knowledge about cybernetics and its applications, unconstrained by disciplinary and other boundaries.
 - developing and refining cybernetics' concepts, ethics, models, research methods and other techniques of inquiry.
 - applying these means to improve systems in the manner cybernetics advocates (e.g., better reflexivity, balance, autonomy, manageability and design).
 - informing the public, educating students, sustaining practitioners, and accrediting cybernetics curricula and graduates.
2. The promotion of cybernetics as basis for an interdisciplinary discourse which:
 - propagates understanding of circular and reflexive systems, their designers', actors', observers', and investigators' roles, and how change affects all via interrelationship and interactivity.
 - affirms cybernetics' principles and values in any domain thus addressed (e.g., self-government and deliberative democracy in the domain of politics).
 - creates and nurtures connections between cybernetics and other disciplines, philosophies, sciences, and arts

These two purposes given in the constitution reflect a principally academic approach to promoting cybernetics – promoting it as a science or as an interdisciplinary discourse. As an academic I can see and understand this desire to establish a way of thinking that often challenges orthodox scientific understandings. However even with this limited aim there has been little success. Over the years a partial understanding of cybernetic theories have been embraced in a number of disciplines and practices such as family therapy, organizational management theory and more recently the idea of complex adaptive systems in complexity theory. But these are superseded or incorporated without the underpinning understanding of cybernetics.

This competition has encouraged me to reflect on the process by which I became first intrigued by cybernetic ideas and then passionate enough to study and develop them in my own field of practice. The starting point for me was to see them being used in family therapy. Later as I studied the literature I started to see that an understanding of cybernetics has implications for all aspects of my life. It led me to realise that, as Maturana and Varela say, the knowledge of knowledge compels:

*'The **knowledge of knowledge compels**. It compels us to adopt an attitude of permanent vigilance against the temptation of certainty. It compels us to recognize that certainty is not proof of truth. It compels us to see that the world everyone sees is not **the** world but **a** world which we bring forth with others. It compels us to see that the world will be different only if we live differently.'* (Maturana and Varela 1992:245)

At the start of this paper I cited Michelle Holliday's insightful comment in which she highlights that cybernetics (at least second order cybernetics) is not simply about machines but involved an understanding of "what it is to be human and part of a loving community." Such an understanding is far from new. In the posthumously published book *Angels Fear* Gregory Bateson expresses something essentially similar when he says:

'I am appalled by my scientific colleagues, and while I disbelieve almost everything that is believed by the counter-culture, I find it more comfortable to live with that disbelief than with the dehumanizing disgust and horror that conventional occidental themes and ways of life inspire in me. They are so successful and their beliefs are so heartless.'(Bateson and Bateson, 1988:52)

Transforming the ASC

From what I have seen Margaret Mead was right to warn of the danger that the ASC, like the Society for General Systems Theory, might become insular and conservative with little meaning for those outside it. If we are to take her injunction that the ASC should steer itself according to its purpose I am arguing that the starting point for this journey is to reflect on the purpose of the ASC. Whilst the need for the ASC to continue to develop and promote cybernetics as a science and an interdisciplinary discourse remains a key concern, this paper argues for something more. It argues for an additional and central purpose for the ASC. This is for it to promote cybernetics as the study and practice of what it is to be human and part of a loving community.

The competition calls for entries that offer a means for implementation and this is no easy matter. It is a relatively simple process for an organization to change its constitution and to add a new central purpose. A bigger question is how the ASC can grow to embody this purpose. Michelle Holliday offers us the hope that this widening of purpose (or is it simply a reemphasis) will be attractive to those outside who see cybernetics as the study of control in machines. In my own practice when working with organizations my aim is to stimulate the resources within the organization by encouraging reflection on current practice but not to offer solutions. The CofC competition itself attempts this sort of stimulation. From the point of view that the ASC is a network of conversations a key issue is to open up the possibility of conversations that are reflexive and to open new conversations. In this spirit I would like to offer some ideas about how the ASC might widen interest in cybernetics. As mentioned earlier there are a large number of fields in which cybernetics has been partially assimilated or where there is a history of cybernetic ideas having been used. In the ones with which I am familiar (principally family therapy and organizational theory) this has been a partial use of cybernetic theory and certainly hasn't addressed the proposed new purpose. My practical proposal is that the ASC should establish small groups of members in each of these fields to consider how cybernetic ideas have been used and to open communication with practitioners about how a focus on cybernetics as the study and practice of what it is to be human and part of a loving community might inform practice and theory in these fields. This might lead to published papers, collaborative research or changes in understandings of cybernetics both within and outside of the ASC. These new conversations will need to be incorporated into the network of conversations that is the ASC. And this is a challenge for the committee to develop ways of using this process to widen conversations within the ASC.