Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens

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9.1. INTRODUCTION

If Critical Systems Thinking is to contribute to enlightened societal practice, e.g., with respect to the pressing environmental and social issues of our time, it should be accessible not only to well-trained decision makers and academics but also to a majority of citizens. This implies a need for pragmatizing critical systems ideas in such a way that they can be owned by citizens. The point of "Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens" is thus not that critical systems practitioners (or researchers) are meant to take an advocacy stance in favor of certain groups of citizens but rather that citizens themselves ought to be able to apply basic critical systems ideas on their own behalf. Unless the pragmatization of critical systems ideas is to have ultimately self-defeating elitist implications, the goal of pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens must be Critical Systems Thinking by citizens. In this short essay I argue that Critical Systems Thinking indeed has a potential to give new meaning to the concept of citizenship; it might enable all of us to become more responsible citizens. My question is, how can we harvest this potential? I propose that the way in which we seek to answer this question might constitute an important test for the methodological viability and validity of Critical Systems Thinking.

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9.2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "PRAGMATIZE" CRITICAL SYSTEMS THINKING?

What do we mean to achieve when we seek to “pragmatize” critical system ideas? Obviously, we want to get critical systems ideas used. We want practical men and women to understand and accept what we propose to them. But it seems to me that this obvious answer begs the question. It does not give us a sufficient criterion for identifying, much less for working toward, a successful pragmatization attempt. I mean one that does justice to the core ideas of Critical Systems Thinking and, in addition, justifies these ideas by leading to some kind of improvement out there in the wild world.

I would like to link a methodologically satisfactory notion of pragmatization to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, particularly to the work of Charles S. Peirce (1878) and his pragmatic maxim (for an earlier account of its importance to me, see, e.g., Ulrich, 1989). A better answer, then, might be this: our understanding and employment of an idea is “pragmatic” in the methodological sense of the term if it is clear to us what kind of difference the idea in question is to make in practice. “In practice” means: when the idea in question gets applied by someone in some real-world context. To pragmatize critical systems ideas thus requires a prior understanding of:

- What is the target group
- What kind of difference the idea in question should make for them
- In what kind of context

9.2.1. Pragmatizing Critical Systems Ideas: For Whom and with What Practical Difference in Mind?

The systems movement has not exactly excelled in translating systems ideas into tools for real-world problem solving, and critical systems thinkers have made no exception. Very recently Bob Flood (1995), in his book Solving Problem Solving, has undertaken a pragmatization of his particular version of Critical Systems Thinking, Total Systems Intervention, for the specific context of organizational problem solving.¹

As far as I can see, this pragmatization project is geared mainly toward decision makers and problem solvers in the private and (perhaps to a lesser degree) also in the public sector, that is to say, toward well-trained people who have something to say in business and government—managers, administrators, consultants, facilitators, and so on.

I have accumulated some experience in the public sector and I believe it is important for us to translate our ideas into tools for decision makers. To judge from my experience, we can hardly overestimate how urgently decision makers need better tools for tackling the seemingly ever-increasing complexity of the problems they face.

Nonetheless, I want to aim my personal pragmatization effort differently, for my experience in the public sector also suggests that we certainly must not overestimate what little readiness there is in the “system”—in a public administration or, for that, in any organization—to adopt a truly systemic way of thinking. To “think systemically” would mean for the systems managers to adopt a way of thinking that measures “success” in terms of improvements for the “larger system” (in the case of a public administration, the population to be served) rather than in terms of the system’s own needs or simply of its

¹For a review, see Ulrich (1996a).
representatives’ individual careers. Unfortunately, however, one of the truisms of applied systems thinking is that the “system” hardly ever thinks systemically! And the corollary to this exclamation mark reads: Systems like to be their own surrogate client; but what they like even more is to serve individual careers!

Now this need not always be the case. I agree that we ought to support whatever readiness there is on the part of decision makers to think and to act more systemically, and perhaps we can even increase this readiness. There is nothing wrong with the idea of pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking for managers, so long as we do not stop there.

Hence, I suggest we evaluate our “success” in any specific pragmatization of Critical Systems Thinking in terms of two criteria:

1. Do we reach target group X so that these people understand, accept, and actually use critical systems ideas? (necessary condition)
2. Do we pragmatize these ideas in such a way that the target group uses these ideas to help secure improvement in a systemic sense of the word? (sufficient condition)

There are many meaningful target groups of which we may think, not only managers but many other specific groups, especially professionals such as public officials, social planners, perhaps physicians, lawyers and judges, social researchers, teachers, media people, and so forth. Granted that an effort to reach such a target group may actually succeed in changing their ways of seeing problems and to foster a deeper, systemic understanding (= necessary condition), it still remains to be considered that increased professional understanding alone does not secure improvement for the larger system. Increased understanding implies not a shift of rationalities but only an increased capacity for control, whether this enlarged capacity will be used for responsible action or instead to further the current dominating concepts of rationality remains open (Ulrich, 1994, p. 32). It is the critical-emancipatory dimension of our own critical systems tools that requires us to consider this issue!

There is of course always hope that people of good will will act in accordance with their understanding, even where this implies a shift of rationalities; but should we base our effort on this hope alone? I am not inclined to do so—for the following methodological reasons.

First, even granted that decision makers in many instances may in fact be willing to act responsibly to the best of their knowledge, we should not assume that whatever tools of reflection we offer them, such tools can determine what is good and rational for citizens. As I wrote already in Critical Heuristics,

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a critical systems approach to planning must not be allowed to make itself the judge of what is “rational” and what is “irrational.” Rather than requiring [citizens] to submit to its a priori standards of rationality, a critical systems approach ought to recognize them as representatives of alternative, though no less partial, rationalities. . . Under the guise of rationality and expertise, the involved make themselves the client while treating the affected as means. (Ulrich, 1983, p. 289)4

Second, if we really want to help secure improvement, even where it implies a shift of rationalities, the crucial issue is how we can bring in these different rationalities—the
rationalities of all those concerned. We cannot simply leave out the clash of different rationalities that is so symptomatic of our postmodern condition.

Hence, the appeal to the goodwill of those in charge begs the real challenge in pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking. What does Critical Systems Thinking have to say on this issue?

My answer is not, as some commentators (e.g., Romm, 1994, p. 19f; Flood & Romm, 1995, p. 389) have suspected, that Critical Systems Thinking ought to take an advocacy position in favor of any of those other, possibly suppressed, rationalities, for instance by selecting as its key client the socially disadvantaged.

My answer is, rather, that Critical Systems Thinking as I understand it has a potential to give new content and new meaning to the concept of citizenship. Critical Systems Thinking can contribute to a much-needed new competence of citizens to understand the many prepositions with which politicians and experts face them every day and which so often represent forms of selective information or even disinformation, quite apart from their giving conflicting messages.

I think Critical Systems Thinking has this potential, and I believe it is our responsibility as critical systems thinkers to try to harvest this potential. I think we can achieve this by pragmatizing critical systems ideas in such a way that we make sure those different rationalities of which I spoke can express themselves and can get heard—without depending on the help of an “advocate” researcher or some intervening facilitator. The implication is that we must make critical systems ideas accessible not only to those who have the say yet may not be inclined to listen, but also and first of all to all those who may have something to say because they are concerned, be it as stakeholders or simply as responsible citizens.

If we want to find out to what extent critical systems ideas lend themselves to pragmatization and are apt to make a difference toward systemically understood improvement, I can think of no more valid test than Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens.

My call is thus not for an ideological kind of commitment but for scholarship (see Checkland, 1992). It is a matter of sincere scholarship to submit one’s ideas to the hardest possible test of which one knows and then to improve them dependent on the outcome of this test; any other attitude would mean that we do not really want to find out or that we do not really believe our ideas can make a difference—which would mean that what we say and what we claim about Critical Systems Thinking would not be in agreement with what we do as researchers.

9.2.2. Some Preliminary Conjectures on the Target Group “Citizens”

The concept of the “citizen” is a highly interesting one. I propose to study its importance for Critical Systems Thinking, and I would like to do so both from the perspective of modernity (the “citizen” is a key concept of the Enlightenment as well as of the French Revolution) and from a postmodern perspective.

A good starting point for the first perspective is probably still the seminal study of T. H. Marshall (1950) on Citizenship and Social Class. He was interested in the historical expansion of citizenship rights and their importance for the development of modern capitalist society, especially its social relationships, institutions, and class inequalities. He identified three dimensions of citizen rights that he considered important, namely, civil rights (civil liberties), political rights (rights of political participation), and social and
economic rights (the right to social security and welfare). Since Marshall, these three aspects have become an indispensable part of the concept of citizenship—so much that when we speak of "civil rights" we usually mean all three aspects. [For a thorough account of the development of modern citizenship rights and theory, see Barbalet (1988).]

It might be questioned, of course, whether this account is still satisfactory in view of the specific problems of our contemporary society with its ongoing, scientifically and technologically driven process of "modernization." I think especially of the problems of ecological, economic, and social sustainability. Many aspects of the modernization process appear to undermine the role of citizenship. The historical process of the "rationalization" of society, as Max Weber could still designate the expansion of the spheres of control of scientific and bureaucratic rationality to ever more areas of life, appears to continue as rapidly as ever and to affect the lifeworlds of citizens ever more. Our contemporary concept of citizenship, of which Marshall’s work is representative, probably does not live up to this contemporary condition of industrial society. It does not, for instance, include the difficult but important issues of industrial democracy and of the democratic control of science and technology. Particularly in view of the expanding sphere of control of scientific rationality, citizen rights appear rather insufficiently developed to control the process and its repercussions on the daily lifeworld of citizens.

Perhaps a more "postmodern" perspective can help us to understand the specific requirements of a contemporary concept of citizenship. Postmodernity stands for a fundamental (or better, fundamentally skeptical) change in our understanding of the process of the rationalization of society. I think it is important to develop a clear understanding of the changing nature of this ongoing process and, with it, of the changing role of the citizen. The changes in the role of the citizen that are of particular interest to me point toward a fundamental shift of the locus of "control" (steering center) from institutions such as science, bureaucracy, parliamentary democracy, and industrial corporations—instutions that historically have been driving, and continue to drive, the process of rationalization—to citizens. I think a new, increasingly differentiated and decentralized kind of political culture (or perhaps, at times, subculture) is emerging in which citizens and citizens' groups learn to utilize their civil rights, and based on them all of the available media of publicity and of legal action as well as, at times, civil disobediance, as means to counter the activities and omissions of the "old" steering centers. There are of course counter-tendencies such as symptoms of increasing political abstinence (e.g., on the part of young people), but the symptoms of a deinstitutionalization and "decentralization" of political processes appear more significant to me. The phenomenon of political abstinence within the "old" political system is probably itself a symptomatic expression of the shift of the political to new political arenas, it need not necessarily mean a general loss of political interest; citizens turn away from the institutionalized political system rather than from the res publica as such. Take, for example, the observation that when environmental issues are at stake, citizens in many societies now increasingly dare to "think themselves" (aude sperare)—dare to know!—was Kant’s motto for the Enlightenment). Who else if not active citizens can ultimately be expected to be in charge of controlling the increasingly threatening repercussions of the "rationalization" process on the social lifeworld? Civil rights are

\[\text{\footnotesize{It might be necessary to restrict the focus to our Western societies, but in view of the global implications of the process I suspect that some basic patterns common to most societies, including developing countries, will emerge.}}\]
an essential issue in this process of change. But what at first sight looks like a late triumph of the project of modernity has paradoxical, "postmodern" implications: the gradual awakening of citizens in environmental and other matters goes along with a manifest loss of meaning and (steering) function of the very institutions that are the hallmark of modernity—parliamentary democracy, bureaucracy, science, the private corporation.

This perspective, if it is not entirely mistaken, might explain the recent revival of interest and academic debate with respect to the old idea of a civil society. With the rediscovery of the civil society, active participation of citizens in the governance of collective affairs becomes a central theme of the concept of citizenship. And so does, as a consequence, the idea of an enabling (or empowering) state, i.e., a state that sees one of its major functions in enabling its citizens to play this active role. It might be stimulating to see Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens against such a background, a topic that, of course, needs much more careful elaboration than is possible here.

One important consideration is that strategies of enabling (or perhaps better, training) citizens for citizenship must not rely on a concept of the citizen that would run the risk of excluding ordinary people from the start. Our pragmatization attempt thus must not depend on any special cognitive requirements. Citizens are not equally skilled, but in democracy this fact must not make any difference to the equality of citizens as citizens, according to the principle: "one man or woman, one vote."

For this reason, too, Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens is probably a much more radical (and demanding) idea than pragmatizing critical systems ideas for any other target group. To mention just a few core difficulties:

- Citizens do not usually like nor understand abstract academic ideas but want to know the practical implications of ideas. We must thus be very simple and be able to demonstrate compelling, concrete applications.
- Citizens are not prepared to use "methods." We must thus take our ideas down to a very fundamental methodological level where they are apt to make an immediate difference to the usual ways of "seeing" things.
- Citizens are less likely than managers to accept (systems) jargon. Nor will they be inclined to dedicate any substantial amount of personal resources to familiarizing themselves with complicated frameworks. We must thus be very substantial and certainly not gimmicky.
- Citizens, I take it, are smart. They will not accept Critical Systems Thinking for its beauty but only for its practical significance. We must thus be pragmatic in the full philosophical sense of the word.

The next question, then, is: Can we do it? How? What critical systems ideas, if any, lend themselves to this end?

9.3. WHAT CORE IDEAS OFFER THEMSELVES FOR PRAGMATIZATION?

At present, I know of only one key concept of Critical Systems Thinking that promises to meet the requirements that I have mentioned in a very preliminary form. The core idea of which I think is of course the key concept of Critical Heuristics, I mean the idea of the critical (or polemical) employment of boundary judgments (Ulrich, 1983, pp. 225–314; 1987; 1988b, 1993). It says that the practical implications of a
proposition (the "difference" it makes in practice) and thus its meaning depend on the context of application we consider. When it comes to bounding the context to be considered, experts are no less lay people than ordinary citizens. Surfacing and questioning such boundary judgments therefore provides citizens with a key for contesting uncritically asserted rationality claims of experts in a logically compelling way—if only they understand the importance of boundary judgments and get some help (training) in surfacing them systematically. Which is what Critical Heuristics is trying to achieve.8

For me, this concept is important because it appears to represent a rare example of how critical systems ideas translate into methodologically cogent forms of argumentation, i.e., make a difference between valid and invalid propositions. The concept allows us to identify invalid propositions by uncovering any dogmatic or cynical employment of boundary judgments. It explains why and how ordinary citizens are capable of contesting propositions and of advancing counterpropositions without having to be experts about the issues in question—as long as they use the concept critically only.

Interestingly, the concept is based on a genuinely systems-theoretical conjecture: We cannot conceive of systems without assuming some kind of systems boundaries. If we are not interested in understanding boundary judgments, i.e., in critical reflection and debate on what are, and what ought to be, the boundaries of the system in question, systems thinking makes no sense; if we are, systems thinking becomes a form of critique.

In distinction to much of what has been written or claimed about Critical Systems Thinking, this concept of systematic boundary critique is not just "added on" to existent systems methodologies without any intrinsic methodological necessity to do so. In this respect, my understanding of Critical Systems Thinking distinguishes itself markedly from the frequent descriptions of Critical Systems Thinking in terms of so-called "commitments" that it is said to embrace, e.g., commitments to "critique," to "emancipation," and to "pluralism" (Schecter, 1991, p. 213) or to "critical awareness," to "social awareness," to "human emancipation," and to the "complementary and informed development of all different strands of systems thinking" both at the theoretical and the methodological level (Jackson, 1991, p. 184f) or to an advocacy stance in favor of "the socially disadvantaged as its key client" (Romm, 1994, pp. 19f, 23f, 1995a, p. 158; Flood & Romm, 1995, p. 389).9 Anyone can claim such things as critical awareness and dedication to emancipation; the point is to translate them methodologically.

A second reason why the concept of the critical employment of boundary judgments is so fundamental is this. It means that neither the systems idea nor the idea of critique are practicable independently. Either idea implies validity claims that cannot be redeemed except with the help of the other. Critique must be grounded, otherwise it is empty; but any attempt to ground it without systems thinking, that is to say, without overtly limiting its context of valid application, will lead into an infinite regress of grounding the underlying validity claims and thus will ultimately depend on ideal conditions of rationality, as Habermas's (1984) model of rational discourse illustrates well (it is not without reason that the model depends on an anticipated "ideal speech situation"). On the other hand, systems thinking without critique amounts to the covert use of boundary judgments, the

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8For a more complete account, the reader is referred to the original sources mentioned earlier in this paragraph.

9In the quoted sources, the authors appear to ascribe an advocacy position to Critical Systems Heuristics. This does not conform to my intentions. Particularly in Norma Romm's (1994, 1995a,b) recent accounts of Critical Heuristics, I find it difficult to recognize my writings. For a preliminary clarification see Section 9.4.2 of the present chapter.
normative implications of which are not made a subject of discussion; its claims to systemic understanding and comprehensiveness merely cover its partiality. Hence, the systems idea and the idea of critique actually require each other. We need to marry them, so that systems thinking can be practiced critically, and critique can be practiced systematically.9

The concept of the critical employment of boundary judgments thus provides a \textit{crucial methodological link between the systems idea and the idea of critique}. This is an idea that the critical tradition itself has not forwarded as yet but that, I believe, provides a key for pragmatizing a core concept of contemporary Critical Theory, namely, Habermas’s (1984) theoretically compelling, but pragmatically desperate, identification of “rational discourse” with an “ideal speech” situation in which undistorted communication would be possible.

For the postmodernists among you who now are ready to retire from this presentation, at least mentally, because you think “\textit{Ah! Ulrich is a modernist—let’s forget it.}” I hurry to add that I might just as well say that the critical employment of boundary judgments appears to me a fruitful and systematic possibility to pragmatize the Foucauldian notion of “\textit{problematization}” (Foucault, 1984). Problematizing or, as I like to say, \textit{making the problem the problem}, one of my preferred ways to define heuristics from a critical point of view (see Ulrich, 1983, p. 22; 1988b, p. 416), is something very fundamental for my conception of a critical systems approach, although it is not based on Foucault.10 Adopting a Foucauldian perspective might indeed provide an interesting possibility to understand the concept of the critical employment of boundary judgments.

For these and other reasons, I trust that the concept of a critical employment of

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9 In this regard, traditional “hard” systems thinking bears its name justly: it does not, in each application, make the boundaries of its application context a subject of systematic discussion but, as it lacks the tools to do so, assumes the context to be given. This amounts to a “hardening” (hypostatization) of boundaries which actually depend on the subjective perceptions of systems researchers or designers and thus are rather “soft.” I suggest that this is in fact a \textit{defining characteristic} of all variations of hard systems thinking. An equivalent way to define hard systems thinking is by way of reference to its character as “tool design” rather than social systems design; \textit{because} it does not make the boundaries of its application context a subject of systematic boundary critique, it ends up with designing “means” for supposedly given “ends.” This second common feature of all variations of hard systems methodologies—its unquestioned reliance on a decisionistically misunderstood \textit{means-ends schema} (cf. Ulrich, 1983, p. 329, with reference to Checkland, 1981)—can thus be explained through the concept of boundary judgments.

10 This core message of Critical Systems Heuristics has recently been recognized by Gerald Midgley (e.g., 1995, pp. 96ff; and particularly 1996). His reception of CSH comes closer to my intent than the original reception by M. C. Jackson (see footnote 1 above) and, following him, by a majority of commentators. In this respect, I welcome Gerald’s paper: indeed, I need to point out, however, that I cannot agree with some important aspects of his (1996) account. A large part of this account is inaccurate as it unquestioningly reiterates earlier accounts by some critics of CSH, apparently taking their assumptions on CSH for granted. See Ulrich (1997).

11 Of course of course that Foucault’s approach, unlike my own, is primarily historical. He is interested in the history of ideas or particular “discourses” (e.g., in psychiatry or in the penal system), and in the question of how the micropolitics of power-knowledge shaped those discourses, rather than in a systematic methodological purpose such as that of Critical Systems Heuristics. I do not wish to blur this or any other differences between Foucault’s and my own critical approach (a danger to which Dr. Jorge Davila, Merida, Venezuela, has kindly drawn my attention); nevertheless, I see a possible relevance of systematic boundary critique (in the sense of Critical Systems Heuristics) for understanding Foucault’s historical analysis. I cannot see why the different orientation of Foucault’s critique should preclude any attempt to understand it in critical systems terms. Nor do I think it should deter critical systems thinkers from seeking to adopt a more Foucauldian, i.e., historically conscious and “postmodern” (non-universalist), perspective of rational design and discourse.
boundary judgments—or boundary critique—is fundamental enough to lend itself to pragmatization. Because it is fundamental, it must be possible to demonstrate its relevance in everyday situations of communication, debate, and decision-making.

I also am confident that it will be possible to find didactic means for conveying this relevance to a majority of citizens and for helping them to uncover boundary judgments systematically, as well as to deliberate alternative ways to bound the context at issue.

I emphasize this concept because to me it is the most fundamental concept of Critical Systems Thinking. But I do not mean to suggest that it alone provides a sufficient basis for turning Critical Systems Thinking into a meaningful tool for citizens, nor do I think it is the only conceivable concept that fulfills the requirements—"I am confident that it is not!"

Critical Heuristics already offers a few other basic concepts, e.g.,

- The concept of the process of unfolding (Ulrich, 1983, Chapter 5; 1988b, 1996b)
- The concept of purposeful systems assessment (Ulrich, 1983, Chapter 6)
- The concept of a symmetry of critical competence (Ulrich, 1993)
- The three-level concept of rational systems practice (Ulrich, 1988a)
- The concept of critical systems ethics (Ulrich, 1990; 1994)

These concepts appear helpful to me, but I do not consider them to be as fundamental as the concept of the critical employment of boundary judgments—"for the simple reason that in a way they all represent applications of the concept of boundary critique. One of the good things with the concept of boundary critique is indeed that it seems to be not only fundamental but also fruitful enough to develop such "applied" second-order concepts of boundary critique."

I am confident that more such concepts can be found. I already mentioned an example that I want to explore more, I mean Foucault's concept of "problematization." It seems very easy, almost natural, for me to interpret (and perhaps pragmatize and operationalize) this Foucauldian key concept (at least I understand it thus, although it appears to have received little attention in the literature on Foucault's work) in the terms of boundary critique. Perhaps some other systems thinkers who are interested in Foucault's work would like to discuss this idea with me (e.g., Dávila, 1993; Flood, 1990; Valerio-Silva, 1995; 1996 in this volume).

As a second example, I also find Gerald Midgley's (1992) concept of "marginalization" a good example of a helpful application of boundary critique and I would like to bring it to bear on my current favorite idea of developing Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens.

I hope that for some readers it just "clicked" and you find yourself thinking of some of your favorite ideas and how they might be reinterpreted in terms of applied boundary critique. If it did not click or whenever it will, please do not hesitate, let me know and let us see together whether these ideas have any potential for popularizing Critical Systems Thinking.

9.4. IN WHAT KIND OF CONTEXT MIGHT CRITICAL SYSTEMS THINKING FOR CITIZENS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Regarding the contexts of application in which I expect Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens to make a difference, I should like to avoid three possible misunderstandings.
They concern

- The importance of the public sphere
- The importance of the emancipatory interest
- The importance of methodology

9.4.1. The Importance of the Public Sphere

Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens aims to prepare citizens for critical participation in matters of public concern. An essential aspect of the context to be considered is thus a clear notion of the functioning of the public sphere.

It appears to me that this requirement has rather been neglected in our discussions up to now. I myself probably was not always explicit enough in this regard, although I did emphasize and explain the methodological importance of the democratic principle, and particularly of a functioning public sphere, in key places of my argument in Critical Heuristics and elsewhere (see, e.g., Ulrich, 1983, pp. 118f, 266f, 296f, 313f; also 1993, pp. 605, 608; 1996b, pp. 5f, 37–40, 48–50). Perhaps I did not sufficiently take into account the different cultural background of many a reader. As a Swiss citizen, I might have taken the assumption of a (however imperfectly) functioning public domain for more obvious than it actually may be. I find this topic so important that I will deal with it in a separate paper (Ulrich, 1997).

Let me simply say here that for me the critical function of "discourse" is always embedded in a public sphere in which multiple processes of participation with varying degrees of publicity and various domain-specific contents interact and together shape public opinion and will formation. The emancipatory significance of Critical Systems Thinking depends on whether citizens can argue their concerns—especially those that may be suppressed in a given local discourse situation—in a variety of different discourses within a public sphere. The search for rationality through discourse cannot dispense with the democratic idea—but the democratic idea includes as an essential ingredient the idea of a functioning public sphere.

So here we have yet another reason why pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking for citizens is important; ultimately, the emancipatory significance of Critical Systems Thinking depends on its "going public"! This requirement appears to have been neglected in virtually all comments thus far regarding the issue of whether or not critical systems approaches, and Critical Heuristics in particular, are capable of dealing with situations of an asymmetry of power (or, in a now-current terminology that is not Critical Heuristics's original terminology, with "coercion"). Those authors who conclude that Critical Heuristics cannot deal with coercion, e.g., Wilmott (1989, p. 74), Ivanov (1991, p. 45), and Midgley (1996), appear to share a tacit assumption, namely, that "emancipation from coercion" is a singular event that must take place within a locally and temporally fixed discourse, according to the motto: emancipation here and now! But if one first assumes that the boundaries of emancipatory discourse are given in such a way, what is the point of subsequently concluding that Critical Heuristics cannot possibly help secure emancipation from coercion? Is it not a truism that no dialogical approach will ever prevent those in control of a local discourse from closing down the debate when it seems appropriate to them?
The real issue for an "emancipatory" methodology is whether it enables people to deal in a "competent" way with such situations of (actual or potential) closure of discourse, i.e., situations in which those in control can suppress critical discussion by closing down the discourse or simply by threatening to do so. It seems to me that Critical Heuristics holds a potential of achieving this. It shows us a way how we can render citizens more capable of arguing their locally suppressed concerns in the public sphere. The critical employment of boundary judgments enables them to lay open to themselves and to others the conditioned nature and partiality of the locally prevailing positions (those supported by power rather than by argument). They can thus publicly expose the limited rationality of the positions in question without risking to be convicted immediately of not being "competent" or knowledgeable enough about the issue at hand.

Such an approach promises to give a new meaning to the concept of citizenship: to the traditional meanings that we have come to associate with the concept since the earlier-mentioned seminal study of Marshall (1950), namely, the historical emergence of civil, political, and social rights, it adds the new dimension of (cognitive and discursive) civil competencies. This for me is a truly essential aspect of my project "Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens."

9.4.2. Does Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens Imply an Advocacy Stance? The Methodological Importance (and Ambiguity) of the Emancipatory Interest

I mentioned in Sections 9.2.1 and 9.3 that a number of commentators have associated my ideas on Critical Systems Thinking with an advocacy position of the critical systems practitioner, e.g., in favor of the "socially disadvantaged" as his or her "key client." I would like to make it clear that this runs counter to my intentions. I do not, in principle, advocate the idea of an advocacy role of Critical Systems Thinking, though I do not mean to exclude it under all circumstances. My reason is that I consider it to be our primary task as systems theorists to meet the methodological challenge that is contained in our quest for improvement through Critical Systems Thinking. The task is to show what possibilities there are to deal systematically with the ever-present situation of distorted discourse.

Assuming the need for an advocacy position of Critical Systems Thinking for me begs this issue. Instead of finding a critical solution to this issue, it resorts to an act of faith. This means deriving the wrong conclusion from Habermas's theory of cognitive interests. The "emancipatory interest" which according to that theory is constitutive of critical science must be redeemed by methodological means, not by resorting to an act of faith.

My methodological counterproposal to an advocacy stance consists in the concept of a symmetry of critical competence (Ulrich, 1993). This concept explains how the emancipatory interest, and with it the ideal speech situation, can be pragmatized, at least so long as discourse is not closed down or, when closed down, can be resumed by those closed out at some other place in the public sphere. Through the systemic use of the earlier-mentioned concept of boundary critique, the ideal speech situation gets pragmatized as a practicable, critical process (the process of unfolding, see Ulrich, 1983, Chapter 5; 1988b) in the sense intended by the emancipatory interest, namely, of making oneself and others aware of seemingly natural, because "objective" or simply covert, constraints. In
the spirit of an ideal speech situation, but under everyday conditions of an asymmetry of power, knowledge, and argumentative skills, this approach can ensure to all participants a basic critical competence; for it does not depend in any way on theoretical competence, expert knowledge, or any special argumentative skills that would not be obtainable to ordinary citizens.

In place of an act of faith (in the sense of a commitment to advocacy), this proposal puts its faith in the liberating force of boundary critique, within a functioning public sphere.

Perhaps this is a utopia. But then, is there any better utopia to strive for? Our efforts always are, and need to be, directed toward some ideal of improvement. The important thing is that we do not merely proclaim some meaningful ideal but develop practicable concepts and tools for getting a little closer toward it in practice. The democratic ideal is meaningful to me because it enables those who know best to decide on what constitutes "improvement": the citizens themselves. I certainly do not proclaim this ideal in an attempt to circumvent the methodological challenge: Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens is my proposal for working on the challenge.

9.4.3. The Importance and Limitation of Methodology

Finally, a short word on the importance of methodology. I have been emphasizing the importance of methodological reasoning because our task is not to proclaim Critical Systems Thinking for its sheer beauty but to show how it works, i.e., to translate it into methodologically compelling criteria and guidelines. This may make me look like a true believer, as if I believed "methods" could change the world.

Of course not. If anything will change the world for the better, it is the ideas and values of people. Methods may sometimes help us to find or support ideas and values, but they cannot replace the spirit that moves a person. (I think it was Kant who observed that "he who has no character needs a method.") Critical Systems Thinking for me is first of all a spirit or an attitude, a (self-)critical ethos of laying open the conditioned nature of all justification (Ulrich, 1984), rather than a method or a basket of methods. By opening up alternative contexts for perceiving the seemingly given (be it a "problem" or a "solution"), Critical Systems Thinking as I understand it aims to change our way of "seeing" things. This has both a self-reflective/critical and a creative side, two aspects that cannot really be separated: to the extent that we learn a little bit more (however imperfectly) to see through the conditioned nature of our understanding, we also learn to uncover alternative ways to see things. Out of this effort can grow a spirit of tolerance, as well as a new competence in dealing (self-)critically with the claims and results of our methods.

Insofar as Critical Systems Thinking, too, is a method, one of its most fascinating prospects to me seems its potential to support ordinary citizens without any special expertise in gaining a new competence in citizenship. I find this prospect very important and motivating; on the one hand, as I have argued, because of the methodological validity test it implies, and on the other, because in non-totalitarian societies at least—but ultimately also under dictatorial regimes, as the recent history of Eastern Europe illustrates—it is the citizens who are called on to "see" things and to articulate as much as possible their ideas and concerns about them.

To conclude, let me describe this motive of my project by means of two phrases that (for me) aptly summarize both its spirit and its systematic intent.
The first way to sum up my hopes for the pragmatic difference that Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens ought to make is this: Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens aims at promoting a practice of systems thinking and design as if people mattered. If people matter, it is not the task of systems scholars and systems designers to speak for the people nor to improve the world for them but rather to enable them to speak for themselves and to become responsible citizens, i.e., citizens who take on responsibility for contributing to societal improvement through engagement in the public sphere.

Hence, a second way to sum up the spirit (and systematic intent) of Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens is the following: Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens aims to pragmatize systems thinking so that people can own it. This may be considered to be my personal "emancipatory commitment." But as I have tried to make clear, the methodological importance of the emancipatory interest for a critical approach is quite independent from such a commitment. This importance must be understood, and redeemed, methodologically. As I have tried to argue, the quest for securing improvement through Critical Systems Thinking—which is how I define our mission—requires us to accept the challenge.

I do not mean to say that Critical Systems Thinking today has all of the answers. I propose a project, not an answer. But I do think that Critical Systems Thinking has a contribution to offer. I do have hopes that if we develop and pragmatize it properly, it can make a difference.

In any case, pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens will be an excellent methodological test for the validity and viability of our ideas. Let us try and see.

REFERENCES


