

Pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking for Professionals and Citizens



Abstract If critical systems thinking (CST) 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 aim of "CST for citizens" is thus not that professionals ought to take an advocacy stance in favor of certain groups of citizens but rather that we ought to develop CST so that ordinary citizens can use it on their own behalf. I believe that CST has a potential to give new meaning to the concept of citizenship, by enabling all of us to become more competent 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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KEY WORDS: critical systems thinking; critical systems heuristics; professionalism; reflective practice; citizenship; civil society.

A note concerning the name of my research program *

The original name of my research program, "CST for citizens" (Ulrich, 1995 and 1996b), referred to my interest in employing CST for the purpose of fostering a new critical competence among citizens, that is, among all of us, rather than among some professional systems methodologists only. In this

way I hoped to avoid the frequent confusion of my approach with that of my British colleagues. While the project title has not been very successful in this respect, it appears to have caused some misunderstandings of its own. In particular, as I will explain in this paper, I do not mean to imply any methodological need for CST to assume an *a priori* advocacy stance. Nor do I mean to exclude professionals, of course. Promoting professional competence has always been, and continues to be, one of the major applications of critical systems thinking as I understand it. My point is, rather, that good professional practice must not put concerned citizens in a position of incompetence, and hence, that professional competence cannot be adequately conceived without an underpinning notion of competent citizenship (Ulrich, 2000a). Reflective practice requires both competent professionals and competent citizens! For this reason, I have since changed the name of my research program to "CST for professionals and citizens." The challenge remains the same: it is to develop and pragmatize critical systems ideas so that ordinary people – including ordinary professionals – can own and use them.

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 methodologically useful criterion for identifying a successful pragmatization attempt. Instead, I suggest that we link the search for a methodologically more helpful notion of pragmatization to the philosophical tradition of (methodological) pragmatism, particularly to the work of Charles S. Peirce (1878) and his *pragmatic maxim* (for two earlier accounts of its importance to my work on CST, see, e.g., Ulrich, 1989 and 2001). 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 these three basic issues:

- For whom do we mean to pragmatize CST? What is the target group?
- What kind of difference do we want to make for the target group?
- In what kind of context should CST for citizens make a difference?

Pragmatizing critical systems thinking: 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. Yet there can be little doubt that it is indeed important that decision makers and professionals everywhere, in the public as well as in the private sector, need better tools for tackling the seemingly ever increasing complexity of the problems they face. It is thus certainly important for systems methodologists to translate their ideas into tools for problem solving and decision-making.

However, experience also suggests to me that we certainly must not overestimate what little readiness there is among top decision makers everywhere — whether in a public administration or private corporation — 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; in the case of a private corporation, all those potentially affected by what it does) rather than in terms of the system's own needs or even merely of its managers personal careers. Unfortunately, however, one of the truisms of applied systems thinking is that "the system" hardly ever thinks and acts systemically in this genuine sense of the word! 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 particular (rather than the system's) interests!

To be sure, this need not always be the case. We surely ought to support whatever readiness there is on the part of decision makers to think and to act more systemically; perhaps, too, we can even increase this readiness. There is thus nothing wrong with the idea of pragmatizing CST for managers and professionals, *so long as we do not stop there*.

Hence, I suggest we should evaluate our "success" in any specific pragmatization of CST in terms of two criteria:

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

There are many meaningful target groups of which we may think, among them not only politicians, public officials, corporate managers and professionals such as lawyers and judges, scientists and engineers, planners, researchers and evaluators, perhaps also physicians, teachers, media people, and many others. However, granted that an effort to reach such target groups may actually succeed in changing their ways of seeing problems and thereby may foster a deeper, systemic understanding of what they are doing

(= necessary condition), it still remains to be considered that *increased professional understanding alone does not secure improvement of 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 act in accordance with their understanding, even where it 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 will in fact be prepared to act responsibly to the best of their knowledge, we should not assume that whatever tools of reflection we offer them, such tools can help them determine what is good and rational for citizens. As I wrote already in *Critical Heuristics*,

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 it's 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. 289f).

[1]

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 post-modern condition.

Hence, the appeal to the good will of those in charge begs the real challenge in pragmatizing Critical Systems Thinking.

The real challenge is that under real-world conditions of problem solving and decision-making, we are usually facing not only situations of lacking knowledge on possibilities to improve the situation, but also of lacking agreement on what would constitute an "improvement." *Conflict* of interests, needs and values – the clash of rationalities – is perhaps the most difficult problem with which critical systems practice has to grapple, for if there is no agreement on ends, what does it mean to design a good solution or even to justify its rationality?

What does CST have to say on this issue? Not very much, as far as I can see, at least not from a strictly *methodological* point of view. Most authors in the field appear to follow Jackson's (1991) and Flood and Jackson's (1991) claim that critical systems thinking demands from its practitioners a personal emancipatory "commitment," that is, an *ideological* stance. An ideological stance is an act of personal faith but not a methodological achievement, that is, it tells us little about how to achieve rationally defensible practice. Apparently because they do not see this, nor appreciate the *methodological* intent of CSH's emancipatory orientation, many commentators following Flood and Jackson have suspected that my approach to CST, as much as theirs, presupposes that practitioners must assume an advocacy position in favor of the specific rationality of some predefined group of citizens, for instance by selecting as its key client the socially disadvantaged (compare, e.g., Romm, 1994, p. 19f and Flood and Romm, 1995, p. 389).

My answer is a different one, though. CST's emancipatory orientation for me consists in bringing to bear its potential for giving new content to the concept of citizenship. It consists in pragmatizing critical systems ideas so as to enable a majority of citizens to acquire a new critical competence, and thereby to emancipate themselves from the premises and promises of those who usually have the say, decision-makers and professionals. I think CST has this potential, and I believe it is our responsibility as critical systems thinkers to try to harvest it. I think we can achieve this by pragmatizing critical systems ideas in such a way that those different rationalities of which I spoke can all express themselves and can get heard as much as possible in ordinary situations of problem solving and decision-making, 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 and who for precisely this reason may not be inclined to listen to others, but also to all those who may have *something* to say because they are concerned, be it as stakeholders or simply as responsible 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 ones 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 believe our ideas can make a difference – which would mean that what we claim about the merits of CST would not be in agreement with what we do as researchers.

If we want to find out to what extent critical systems ideas live up to our critical and emancipatory claims, I can think of no more valid test than developing and pragmatizing CST for both professionals and citizens.

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 CST, and I would like to do so both from the perspective of modernity (the "citizen" it is a key concept of the Enlightenment as well as of the French Revolution) and from a post-modern perspective.

T.H. Marshall's (1950) seminal study on *Citizenship and Social Class* still provides a good starting point for the "modern" perspective. He was interested in the historical development of citizenship rights and their importance for the rise 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" today, we usually mean all three aspects. (For a thorough account of the development of modern citizenship rights and theory see Barbalet, 1988.)

To be sure, one may question whether this account is still satisfactory today. The ongoing process of the "rationalization" of society, as Max Weber (1970) 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. Many aspects of the modernization process appear to undermine the role of citizenship. The concept of citizenship of which Marshall's work is representative does not, for instance, include the difficult but important

issues of industrial democracy and of the democratic control of science and technology. Citizen rights today appear rather insufficiently developed to control the process and its repercussions on the daily lifeworld of citizens, among them the vital risks of wanting ecological, economic and social sustainability of today's policies in both the private and the public sectors.

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. [2] It appears that to many citizens, the institutions that historically have been driving, and continue to drive, the process of rationalization, are increasingly losing credibility as guarantors of public welfare. Consequently, we begin to observe a fundamental shift of the locus of "control" (steering center) from *institutions* such as parliamentary democracy and political parties, bureaucracy, science, and industrial corporations to *citizens*. A new, increasingly differentiated and decentralized kind of political culture (or perhaps, at times, subculture) is emerging, in which citizens and citizens' groups gradually rediscover the manifold possibilities that civil society offers them for expressing their discontent and also develop new forms of public engagement, new channels and skills of mobilizing public attention against the activities and omissions of the "old" steering centers.

To be sure, we should not overlook some countertendencies such as the increasing political abstinence especially on the part of young people; however, the symptoms of a growing 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

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." At first sight, this may look like a late triumph of the project of modernity: *sapere aude!* dare to know! was Kant's motto for the Enlightenment. But it 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 which are the hallmark of modernity.

This perspective, if it is not entirely mistaken, may explain the recent revival of interest and academic debate with respect to the old idea of *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. Civil rights are an important issue in this context, but they clearly are not sufficient to enable citizens to be *active* citizens. To this end, citizens also need new skills and, along with it, a new notion of *competent* participation. This is the background against which I would like to pragmatize CST for professionals and citizens.

The issue, then, is one of *enabling (or perhaps better, training) citizens for citizenship*. A basic consideration is that enabling strategies 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, CST for professionals and 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 simple and clear and 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 and professionals 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 CST 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?

Pragmatizing critical systems thinking: What core ideas offer themselves for pragmatization?

At present, I know of only one key concept of CST that promises to meet the requirements which I have mentioned. This is of course the methodological core idea of critical systems heuristics: the idea of a critical employment of boundary judgments or short, *boundary critique* (Ulrich, 1983, pp. 225-314; 1987; 1988b; 1993; 1995; 1996a, b; 1998, 2000a, b; 2001; 2003). It says that both the meaning of a proposition (the "difference" it makes) and its range of validity (its "rationality") depend on how we

bound our reference systems, that is, on the one hand, the specific system to be improved (in CSH's language, the "system of concern") and on the other hand, the context of other interests that may be affected and which we therefore consider for their own sake (in CSH's language, the "context of application"). When it comes to bounding these reference systems, experts are no less lay people than ordinary citizens. Surfacing and questioning boundary judgments therefore provides citizens with a key for identifying and challenging uncritically asserted rationality claims of decision-makers and experts in a logically compelling way – if only they understand the importance of boundary judgments and get some training in surfacing them systematically. Which is what critical system heuristics is trying to achieve. [3]

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, that is, make a difference between valid and invalid propositions. The concept allows us to identify invalid propositions by uncovering the dogmatic or cynical employment of boundary judgments. It explains us why and how ordinary citizens are capable of contesting propositions and of advancing counter-propositions without having to be experts about the issues in question – at least so 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. This is rather trivial, but its implication for systems thinking is not so trivial:

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.

Note that this concept of CST makes *systematic boundary critique* a constitutive, because intrinsic and indeed unavoidable, part of any critical systems approach. Unlike much of what has been written about critical systems methodologies, 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 CST clearly departs from its prevalent description in terms of so-called "commitments" that it is said to embrace, for instance, commitments to "critique," "emancipation," and "pluralism" (Schechter, 1991, p. 213); to "critical awareness," "social awareness," "human emancipation," a "complementary and informed development of all different strands of systems thinking at the theoretical level," and a "complementary and informed use of systems methodologies" (Jackson, 1991, p. 184f); to an advocacy stance of CST in favor of "the socially disadvantaged as its key client" (Romm, 1994, pp. 19f and 23f, and 1995a, p. 158; Flood and Romm, 1995, p. 389) [4]; or to "critical awareness, emancipation or improvement, and pluralism" (Jackson, 2000, p. 375). In fact these authors not only describe CST in such ideological terms but *define* it so. However, a definition is neither a compelling theoretical argument nor a practical achievement.

Anyone can claim such things as critical awareness and dedication to emancipation; the point is to ground them methodologically.

A second reason why the concept of the critical employment of boundary judgments is so fundamental is this. It means that *the systems idea and the*

idea of critique cannot be practiced 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 reference system, will lead into an infinite regress of grounding the underlying validity claims and thus will ultimately depend on ideal conditions of rationality. Habermas' (1984) model of rational discourse illustrates this implication well; for it is not without reason that the model needs to refer to an anticipated "ideal speech situation". On the other hand, *systems thinking* without critique amounts to a covert use of boundary judgments, the normative implications of which are not made a subject of discussion [5]; 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 systemically.

CSH's concept of boundary critique – of a critical employment of boundary judgments, that is – thus provides a crucial methodological link between the systems idea and the idea of critique.

This is an idea which the critical tradition itself has not forwarded as yet but which, I believe, provides a key not only for a critical transformation and pragmatization of systems theory but also for pragmatizing critical theory itself. I am referring, of course, to Habermas' (1984) above-mentioned core concept of discursive rationality, which in a theoretically compelling but pragmatically desperate way identifies rational discourse with an ideal speech situation in which undistorted communication would be possible.

For the post-modernists among my readers who at this point are ready to make their farewells, as they think "Ah! Ulrich is a modernist – let's forget it," I hurry to add that boundary critique represents to me a fruitful and

systematic way to pragmatize the Foucaultian notion of *problemization*, too (Foucault, 1984, p. 384). Problemizing or, as I like to say, "making 'the problem' the problem," (one of my preferred ways to define heuristics from a critical point of view, see Ulrich, 1983, p. 22, and 1988b, p. 416) is something very fundamental for my conception of a critical systems approach, although it is not based on Foucault. [6] Adopting a Foucaultian perspective might indeed provide us with an interesting perspective (although surely not the only one) of what boundary critique is all about.

For these and other reasons, I trust that the concept of a critical employment of 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 emphasize this one concept because to me it is the most fundamental concept that of CST has as yet uncovered. I do not mean to suggest, however, that it alone provides a sufficient basis for turning CST into a conceptual tool for citizens, nor do I think it is the only conceivable systems idea that fulfils the requirements – I am confident that it is not!

Critical systems heuristics already offers a few other basic concepts that I cannot introduce here in any detail, among them:

- the concept of the *process of unfolding* (Ulrich, 1983, Ch. 5; 1988b),
- the concept of *purposeful systems assessment* (Ulrich, 1983, Ch. 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), and
- the concept of *systemic triangulation* (Ulrich, 1998; 2000; 2003).

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. The reason is that 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*.

Pragmatizing critical systems thinking: in what contexts should it make a difference?

The contexts at which I am aiming include

- professional practice (focus: applied science and expertise);
- political practice (focus: civil society); and
- everyday practice (focus: social lifeworld).

As a general term that encompasses all three contexts, I propose to use the terms "reflective practice" or "reflective practice in the civil society" (Ulrich, 2000), as distinguished from more specific terms such as "professional practice."

I cannot explain here in any detail the way in which my concept of reflective practice differs from that of its originator, Donald Schon (1983), who of course was mainly referring to a context of professional practice. Let me merely point to one key difference: in addition to the intuitive dimension of tacit knowledge and artistry that is in the centre of Schon's *reflection-in-action*, I think an adequate concept of reflective practice today needs to include the ethical dimension of the consequences that professional, political or everyday practice may impose on others. This is an essential aspect that I find rather absent in Schon's approach. In other words, CST for professionals and citizens will understand reflective practice not only as a concept of epistemology (theory of knowledge and expertise) but equally as a concept of practical philosophy (ethics). I must refer the

reader to some of my other pertinent writings on this whole issue (Ulrich, 2000a, b, 2003).

To conclude this introductory essay, I would like briefly to turn the reader's attention three possible misunderstandings that I have observed frequently in the literature on CST with regard to the contexts in which CST ought to make a difference. They concern:

- the importance of the public sphere,
- the importance of the emancipatory interest, and
- the importance of methodology.

The importance of the public sphere

At the outset, I have briefly alluded to the circumstance that in my concept of CST, reflective practice is usually *discursive* practice. An essential aspect of the context to be considered is thus the question of what, if anything, makes sure that discourse is always possible, so that concerns that get suppressed in a given problem situation can always be carried over to new arenas of discourse.

Ultimately, the guarantor of such openness can only be a functioning civil society. A key aspect of civil society in this regard is the notion of an open *public sphere* where people can ultimately voice their concerns if they have been ignored in more restricted or local discourse settings. It follows that CST for professionals and citizens cannot be properly conceived without considering its role for, and dependency on, a functioning public sphere. If we neglect this implication, we are bound to end up with flawed conceptions of CST's critical intent and emancipatory significance.

The emancipatory significance of CST depends on whether it enables citizens to argue their concerns in a variety of discursive arenas that range from particular local discourse situations to the public sphere. No

methodological device can possibly supersede the democratic idea as a source of both individual emancipation and collective legitimation; and the democratic idea includes as an essential ingredient the idea of a functioning public sphere. Again I have to refer the reader to other writings where I have discussed this fundamental issue, and the confusion it has caused in the systems literature (Ulrich 2000b and 2003).

The importance of the emancipatory interest

I have observed a tendency of many commentators to associate CST's emancipatory orientation with an advocacy stance. This is another reason why I prefer not to define CST in terms of an "emancipatory commitment": apart from its ideological character, it encourages the mistaken reduction of CST's emancipatory orientation to an advocacy stance. Although I do not mean to exclude advocacy under all circumstances, I do not think we should make it a defining feature of CST. My reason is that making advocacy a constitutive element of CST tends to undermine the very methodological task that pragmatizing CST for professionals and citizens ought to achieve. I consider it to be our primary task as systems theorists to demonstrate how systems ideas can give us new critical competences in the contexts that I have mentioned. With a view to the discursive nature of critique, the task in essence is to promote reflective practice in less than ideal discourse situations, that is, in situations of distorted discourse. That is what in my understanding the emancipatory interest of CST is all about.

Assuming the need for an advocacy position of CST begs this issue. As I have said earlier, a commitment to advocacy represents a personal act of faith but not a methodological achievement. Resorting to advocacy in my view means drawing the wrong conclusion from Habermas' model of rational discourse; its underlying "emancipatory interest" must be redeemed by methodological means, not by resorting to an act of faith.

My methodological counterproposal to an advocacy stance consists in the before-mentioned 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 in some other discursive setting and ultimately in public sphere. Through the systematic use of boundary critique, we can pragmatize the ideal speech situation in the form of a systematic critical process of unfolding the selectivity of specific validity claims such as problem definitions, proposals for improvement, evaluations of consequences, and so on. A thus-understood *process of unfolding* (see Ulrich, 1983, Ch. 5, and 1988b) responds to the genuine methodological intent of the emancipatory interest, namely, of making everyone involved or concerned aware of the limitations of claims that are seemingly "objective" or are taken for granted. In the spirit of an ideal speech situation, but under everyday conditions of an asymmetry of power, knowledge, and argumentative skills, this kind of approach can ensure a basic critical competence to ordinary discourse participants. It can achieve this because, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Ulrich, 1983, Ch. 5; 1987; 1993; and 2000a), it does not require any special expert knowledge or argumentative skills that would not be obtainable to ordinary citizens.

Rather than in an act of faith (in the sense of a commitment to advocacy), this proposal puts its faith in the *liberating force of boundary critique* in an open, civil society. This is how I understand the challenge posed by the emancipatory interest.

Reviving the Systems Idea

The question thus poses itself: What critical systems ideas, if any, might

become a source of the envisaged critical competencies for a great majority of ordinary citizens and professionals? The core concept that I have in mind is fundamental to my own approach to critical systems thinking, an approach called Critical Systems Heuristics (Ulrich, 1983). I mean the concept of *the critical employment of boundary judgments* (Ulrich, 1983, pp. 225-314; 1987; 1993) or in short, *boundary critique* (Ulrich 1995; 1996a, b; 1998; 2000; 2001a, b). It says that the practical implications of a proposition (the "difference" it makes in practice) and thus its meaning as well as its validity depend on how we bound the system of concern, i.e., that section of the real world which we take to represent the relevant context. Our judgment of the merits of a proposition (e.g., its preferability to some alternative proposition, or its "rationality") will depend heavily on this context, for the context determines what "facts" (e.g., consequences) and "values" (e.g., purposes) we will identify and how we assess them. With respect to this crucial issue of boundary judgments, experts are no less lay people than ordinary citizens. Surfacing and questioning boundary judgments thus provides ordinary people with a means to counter unqualified rationality claims on the part of experts or decision makers – as well as other citizens – by demonstrating the way they may depend on debatable boundary judgments.

The importance and limitation of methodology

Finally, a short word on the importance of methodology. I have been emphasising the importance of methodological reasoning because I think our task as systems methodologists is not to proclaim critical systems thinking for its beauty or for that of our personal commitments, but rather to show *how it works*, by translating 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.

I don't. If anything will change the world to 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.") CST for me is not in the first place a specific method but rather a generic critical approach to practice; a critical attitude aimed at laying open the conditioned nature of all justification (Ulrich, 1984). By opening up alternative contexts for perceiving situations and claims raised about them, CST as I understand it aims to enrich and change our ways of "seeing" things. Out of this effort can grow a spirit of mutual tolerance as well as a new competence in dealing with the claims and results of our methods.

Insofar as CST is a method, too, 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 indeed. To conclude, let me characterize this motive of my project – the essential difference it ought to make – by means of two phrases that (I hope) aptly summarize both its spirit and its systematic intent.

CST for professionals and citizens aims at a practice of systems thinking as if people mattered.

If people matter, it is not the task of professionals, much less of systems methodologists, to play the role of experts that "facilitate" discursive processes for them or even define what constitutes an "improvement" to them; their task is, rather, to put the people concerned in a situation of competence in which they can speak for themselves and engage themselves in participatory practice.

Hence a second way to sum up the spirit and systematic intent of CST for professionals and citizens is the following:

CST for professionals and citizens aims to pragmatize systems thinking so that people can own it.

This, if you wish, is my personal "emancipatory commitment." But as I have tried to make clear, the methodological intent of the emancipatory interest cannot be redeemed by such a commitment and does not depend on it. We must learn to live up to of the emancipatory interest through *methodological discipline* rather than ideological proclamations.

I do not mean to say that CST currently has all the methodological answers. But I do have hopes that if we develop and pragmatize it properly, it can make a difference.

In any case, it will be an excellent methodological test for the validity and viability of our ideas.

Notes

[*] This text is a thoroughly revised version of a talk given to the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull, Hull, United Kingdom, on 28 November 1995 (Ulrich, 1995 and 1996b). At that time I was a Visiting Research Professor at the Centre and took the opportunity to present my research program on "CST for professionals and citizens." Despite the rather difficult methodological issues that this project raises, the talk tried to give an easily accessible introduction, by sketching out some basic concerns and hopes that I associate with the project. At the same time, it tried to clear up a few misconceptions about the nature of critical systems thinking, misconceptions that have become even more prevalent in the literature on CST since. For both reasons, this original outline of "CST for professionals and citizens" may still be of interest to the visitors of this web site as a basic first introduction.

The present revision has given me an opportunity to reformulate some passages in response to a number of confusions that I have observed in the literature on CST since the original two publications. The confusions in question appear to have caused mainly by the fact that there exist different conceptions or "strands" of critical systems thinking and practice. Many commentators have tended to overlook or blur

the different aims and methodological ideas of these different strands. The fact that I first presented the project at Hull should not mislead readers to overlook the ways in which my understanding of CST, which draws on my work on critical systems heuristics (CSH, Ulrich 1983), differs from that of my Hull colleagues. One important difference is that for me, CST aims at giving a new critical competence not only to professional systems methodologists but also to as many citizens as possible. This explains why the focus of my approach, unlike that of my Hull colleagues, is not on "methodology choice" but rather on reflective practice in general. I do not believe that reflective practice, in everyday life as in professional intervention, can be secured and justified by the use of (however sophisticated) methodologies used; rather, it seems to me, reflective practice depends on the ways in which all those involved in and concerned by an issue interact and try to find solutions with which everyone can live. Hence, as a rule, reflective practice is discursive practice. I therefore understand CST as a discursive approach rather than one of methodology choice (for a detailed recent argument, see Ulrich, 2003). **[BACK TO TEXT]**

- [1] In the original text, the term "witnesses" was used instead of "citizens," as the specific critically-heuristic category (or type of boundary judgments) that refers to the citizens who represent the alternative rationalities and live practical concerns of those affected vis-à-vis the systems designers. Compare Ulrich, 1984, pp. 256-258, 264f and passim (see index to the book). **[BACK TO TEXT]**
- [2] 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. **[BACK TO TEXT]**
- [3] For a more complete account, the reader is referred to the original sources mentioned earlier in this paragraph. **[BACK TO TEXT]**
- [4] In the quoted sources, the authors appear to ascribe an advocacy position to critical systems heuristics. This does not conform to my intentions. **[BACK TO TEXT]**
- [5] In this regard, traditional "hard" systems thinking bears its name justly: rather than making the assumed context of each application a subject of systematic boundary critique, it assumes the context to be given. This amounts to a "hardening" (hypostatization) of boundaries that actually depend on the subjective perceptions of systems researchers or designers and thus are rather "soft." I suggest that this is in

fact a defining characteristic of all variations of hard systems thinking, for it lacks the conceptual tools to question its own underpinning boundary assumptions. An equivalent way to define hard systems thinking is by reference to its character as "tool design" rather than social systems design: because it does not systematically question the boundaries of the system to be improved, as well as those of the application context to be considered (a distinction it ignores), it ends up designing "means" for supposedly given "ends." As soon as one considers both alternative systems of concern and alternative contexts of application, the questionable (rather than given) character of the ends would become apparent. This second common feature of all variations of hard systems methodologies – its unquestioned reliance on a decisionistically misunderstood means-end schema (cf. Ulrich, 1983, p. 329, with reference to Checkland, 1978) – can thus equally be explained through the lack of boundary critique. **[BACK TO TEXT]**

- [6] I realize 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 these discourses, rather than in a systematic methodological purpose such as that of CSH. I do not wish to blur this or any other differences between Foucault's and my own critical approach; nevertheless, I see a possible relevance of CSH's notion of systematic boundary critique 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 Foucaultian, i.e., historically conscious and "postmodern" (non-universalistic), perspective of rational design and discourse. **[BACK TO TEXT]**

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Additional sources

A more recent and more substantial introduction to the topic can be found

in the following working paper, which can be downloaded from the page "[Selected Papers for Downloading](#)" of this web site:

Systems Thinking as if People Mattered: Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens and Managers. Working Paper No. 23, Lincoln School of Management, University of Lincolnshire & Humberside, June 1998.

For the most up-to-date presentation currently available, see:

Reflective practice in the civil society: the contribution of critically systemic thinking.
Reflective Practice, 1, No. 2, 2000, 247-268.

A prepublication version of this paper is available in the download section of this web site.

Finally, the misconceptions of CST mentioned in this paper have recently been examined in detail in my following publications:

Critically Systemic Discourse, Emancipation, and the Public Sphere. Faculty of Business and Management Working Papers, No. 42, University of Lincolnshire & Humberside, Hull and Lincoln, UK, October 2000.

Beyond methodology choice: critical systems thinking as critically systemic discourse.
Journal of the Operational Research Society, 54, No. 4, 2003, 325-342.

Links to related materials on CST available on this web site:

1 **A Brief Introduction to "Critical Systems Thinking for Professionals & Citizens"**

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Originally published as *Working Paper No. 23*, Lincoln School of Management, University of Lincoln (formerly University of Lincolnshire & Humberside), Lincoln, UK, June 1998, 19 pp. [ISBN 1-86050-146-X]

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3 **Reflective Practice in the Civil Society: The Contribution of Critically Systemic Thinking**

Prepublication version of a paper published in *Reflective Practice*, 1, No. 2, 2000, pp. 247-268. [ISSN 1462-3943 print, ISSN 1470-1103 online] .

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4 **Five Myths about CST**

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This is a revised and expanded version of a talk given to the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull in Hull, United Kingdom, on 28 November 1995 and originally published as *Critical Systems Thinking for Citizens: A Research Proposal*, Research Memorandum No. 10, Centre for Systems Studies, University of Hull, March 1996 [ISBN 0-85958-873-4].

Another version of this paper was published as "Critical systems thinking for citizens," Chapter 9 in R.L. Flood and N.R.A. Romm (eds.), *Critical Systems Thinking: Current Research and Practice*, New York: Plenum, 1996, pp. 165-178 [ISBN 0-306-4545-3].

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Ulrich, W. (2003). Pragmatizing critical systems thinking for professionals and citizens, *Werner Ulrich's Home Page*, http://www.geocities.com/csh_home/cst_pragmatizing.html (HTML version) or http://www.geocities.com/csh_home/cst_pragmtizing.pdf (PDF version).

Content last modified 26 Aug 2003 (first published 7 March 2002)

References last updated 9 July 2004

Last editorial and layout corrections 16 Aug 2004

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