Chapter 16

MAKING FRIENDS OF ENEMIES
From critical systems ethics to postmodern ethics

Yu, J.E.

Abstract The paper evaluates the contributions of contemporary philosophies namely critical philosophy and poststructuralism as a means for facilitating communication and participation in practice. On the one hand, this paper examines the contributions that critical systems thinkers have made to 'critical systems ethics'. The approach seeks to improve social practice. On the other hand, the paper outlines the idea of a poststructuralist philosophy, by drawing on Foucault and Deleuze to reconstruct 'postmodern ethics'. To open up new forms of possibility within the postmodern ethics, an alternative mode of thinking is proposed.

Key Words: Critical systems ethics; poststructuralist philosophy; postmodern ethics; images of thought.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I wish to evaluate the contributions that contemporary Western philosophies namely critical theory (philosophy) and poststructuralist philosophy have made to develop a systems approach that tends to be governed by ethical and moral judgements in a participative manner. Understanding a systems approach and its rationale from Churchman's philosophy, I identify a great achievement in 'critical systems heuristics', which is characterized by efforts to make what might be called the 'emancipatory systems approach'. On the other hand, I examine an alternative mode of thinking that Foucault and Deleuze have directed at poststructuralist philosophy focusing in particular on his concerns about the complex and dynamic relations of knowledge, power and ethics within which decision makers have engaged in social inquiring process in a
participatory manner. Following Foucault’s concept of problematization, Deleuze visualises an event that encounters randomness and unpredictability of chaotic behaviours which we experience in organizational and social contexts. This provides us with a new discourse to pose a set of questions and problems to open new possibilities to organize the collective thought to bring about social transformation through the ‘postmodern ethics’ that is likely to happen within the ‘post-industrial society’.

16.2 CHURCHMAN’S IDEA OF A SYSTEMS APPROACH

West Churchman (1968, 1979) believes that knowledge comes from “others” or “enemies” as we remember what he said, ‘The systems approach begins when first you see the world through the eyes of another’. In this famous phrase, Churchman suggests that people can step outside a system they are in and mentally try to consider it through the lenses of other people’s values.

To Churchman, the “enemies” of systems approach provide a powerful way of learning about the systems approach, precisely because they enable the rational thinker to step outside the boundary of a system and to look at it. It means that systems thinkers are not necessarily involved within a system but are essentially involved in the “outside” of systems rationality. In Churchman’s systems approach, decision makers or system designers admit the freedom of individual thinking and our world view is very restricted and that it is possible to develop an alternative ‘mode of thinking’. Philosophically, Churchman (1968, 1971)’s systems approach is influenced by the dialectics of Kant and Hegel and is an example of a Singerian inquiring system. Kant (1988) believes that underlying any fact-network there will be taken-for-granted assumptions which cannot be questioned on the basis of that fact-network. In this sense, Kantian notion of categorical imperatives is developed from the taken-for-granted assumptions and it constructs the moral code of conducts that aims at a universalistic orientation in human life (Yoo, 1991, p. 54). Kant (1956) tries to consider the human will as if we are acting from duty or inclination by trying to apply our goals to the rest of society. By starting from the premise that man(sic) is rational and that he recognizes himself as a means and as an end, Kant expects this form of rationality to enable actors to treat everyone as equals. That is what Kant proposes in the form of a moral maxim. On the other hand, Hegel’s notion of the dialectic follows a trilogy of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The description of a fact on the basis of the set of assumptions forms a thesis. It then follows that to challenge one set of assumptions by another set