Chapter 5  
The Social Construction of Human-centredness
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Introduction

Social Systems as Self-Observing Systems

In his book from 1947, Herbert A. Simon writes that ‘... administration is not unlike play-acting’, i.e. that the effectiveness of the administrative process will vary with the effectiveness with which an organisation’s members play their parts (Simon, 1947, p. 252). Twenty years later, Simon raises a significant question: How is it possible to construct a theory of administration – and, more generally, of social systems – if such systems are systems of play-acting? The problem is that if social systems are based on play-acting they are also based on self-observation, i.e., on humans observing themselves playing as themselves. In a theoretical context the problem is that if such systems work through self-observation, this includes self-observation through the theories constructed by, and of, themselves. For Simon, the problem is, insofar as the theory becomes part of its object, the basic precondition for constructing an empirical theory will be obstructed. Any such theory will contain nothing but ‘normative rules of good acting’, (Simon, 1969, p. x). Simon’s observation and conclusion can be confirmed – insofar as many administrative and organisational theories are unreflected catalogues of good practice, i.e. circular arguments of normativism. However, I cannot support Simon’s implicit conclusion that the phenomenon of self-observation should be avoided in administrative and organisational theories.

Quite the opposite, self-observation (including self-observation through social and organisational theories) is an indispensable fact of social systems. Consequently, we should not try to avoid self-observation and self-reference, but should make self-reference a significant object of and a reflected condition for our theory. One dominating set of normative rules in current social theories is human-centredness. It is difficult to think of modern analyses of social phenomena which do not base themselves on the idea that the human being is, or at least ought to be, the centre of the political system, the organisational system, the computer system, etc.
However, all too often what is actually meant by ‘human-centredness’ is not reflected. It is rather considered an indisputable precondition for, the *ex ante* of social theories. In this way, social theories forget about – and sometimes even deny – their own self-referential structure with the implication that unavoidable self-reference transforms into unreflected dogmatism. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to analyse a particular normative concept: human-centredness or antropocentrism, in order to reinforce its status as a self-observational – and not a dogmatic – concept. In other words I try to support self-reflection as an important part of human-centred systems theory. I do so by reconstructing the social construction of human-centredness in 15th century’s Europe.

**The Current Status of Human-centred Systems Theory**

The roots of the current theory of human-centred systems and technology can be found in 1979, when the first copies of Mike Cooley’s *Architect or Bee?* were disseminated through informal networks (cf. Cooley 1987 p. 1). In direct inspiration, in 1984 Karamjit Gill opened his SEAKE Centre in Brighton. Actually, the *concept* was first used in 1987, when the revised edition of *Architect or Bee?* was published, coining and defining the concept of human-centredness (cf. Gill, 1990, p. 6), with practical reference to the English LUCAS plan and to the European ESPRIT project *Human Centred CIM System*, and the same year the first volume of the journal *AI & Society* with the significant subtitle *The Journal of Human-Centred Systems and Machine Intelligence* was available. In 1988 *The Human Centred Systems Book Series* was launched in Japan. And in 1992 the *International Research Institute in Human Centred Systems* was inaugurated. Evidently, the efforts toward developing the concept of human-centredness had both practical and theoretical aims. Human-centredness provides a practical alternative to the Tayloristic approach to production, as well as a theoretical alternative to the Newtonian–Cartesian mechanistic paradigm (cf. Gill, 1990, p. 4 and p. 11). It is evident that the pioneering document concerning human-centred technology is Mike Cooley’s book. However, when reading the book it is interesting to note that much is said about the concrete social conditions of human-centredness, i.e. the socio-political process leading to the articulation of a human-centred perspective in production and use of technology, while relatively little is said about the semantic contents of human-centredness. This constitutes the first issue of this paper: what does ‘human-centredness’ actually mean?

My second issue concerns the social and cultural context of human-centredness. Obviously, it is not a universal concept, and its values do not have universal or global significance. On the other hand, the idea of installing the human\(^2\) as the centre of the world is not a 20th century phenomenon. For me, it is important for current human-centred programmes and ‘movements’ to know that they are part of a long and influential tradition. Thus, I will trace the historical roots of human-centredness.