Editorial

A New Decade, a New Spirit

1. INTRODUCTION

For a number of years there has been a growing interest in management science with the ideas of critical theory as promoted by The Frankfurt School of Sociologists from Germany, particularly through the recent works of one of its second-generation contributors, J. Habermas. This has turned out to be very relevant in terms of necessary critical developments in systems “problem solving.” More recently the notion of critique in systems thinking has been broadened by interpreting and applying some ideas of M. Foucault, who recognized the importance of critically dealing with dominant and suppressed knowledges (relevant to systems thinking). This short Editorial explores why this interest in critique should have arisen and what it means for the system sciences. We start by developing an understanding of the nature of critical systems science.

2. WHAT IS CRITICAL SYSTEMS SCIENCE?

“Critical” refers to an explicit state of awareness which reminds us, in the face of incomplete knowledge, that we must never accept knowledge or methodological output as total or absolute. “Science” is a pluralist concept and means rigorous inquiry driven by sets of coherent and consistent fundamental tenets. “System” introduces the idea of “comprehensiveness.” So we have “critical systems,” which is comprehensiveness without assuming absolute and totalizing wholeness. And by introducing “science,” we have a single term, “critical systems science,” which means different but rigorous types of comprehensive inquiry undertaken without assuming absolute and totalizing wholeness.
Now with inquiry we might have (a) heuristic sciences with the aim of developing knowledges or (b) utilitarian sciences with the aim of promoting intervention. I am interested in the heuristic and utilitarian sciences, although I do not think that they split so easily as I have had us believe above. That is why I argue for the liberation of systems theory, in the heuristic direction, and systems theory for liberation, in the utilitarian direction (see R. L. Flood, *Liberating Systems Theory*, Plenum, New York).

3. WHY IS IT NECESSARY?

It is necessary to help us to appreciate false consciousness and alienation with respect to knowledge and the human condition and to recognize the strengths and the inadequacies of various approaches to systems-based intervention.

4. WHAT ARE THE GOALS?

There are three goals: to liberate systems sciences from systems science, to position systems thinking as a dominant force in social theory and the practice of intervention, and to enrich our understanding of systemic concepts and methodologies in order to promote knowledge development.

5. WHAT IS THE TOTAL STRUCTURE OF THE WORK SO FAR?

In my view we can break down the work under the label “Liberating Systems Theory” (LST) as in Fig. 1. The majority of the work done so far

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**Fig. 1.** The structure of the work so far on critical thinking in the systems sciences, put within a Liberating Systems Theory framework.