The Will of the People

STAFFORD BEER

The paper discusses the cybernetic mechanisms whereby our institutions fail to translate the will of the people into effective policies, and those by which the will of the people is an attenuated version of human potentiality in the first place. A systemic model is developed to account for the observed phenomena in terms of a cybernetic theory of the management process, and this is then exemplified from current dilemmas facing humankind. The model is subsequently extended to encompass the theory of viable systems, the principle of self-reference, and a model of self-hood which promotes new concepts that close the model into its starting point of human potential. The total approach bears on the capability of individuals, groups, institutions, societies and nations to realize themselves, and to thwart the dangers in which our civilization is plunged.

Key words: analysis, government, management, methodology, organizational studies, philosophy, planning

SUPPOSE that you were suddenly told: "In the pursuit of economies of scale, you have been put in charge of the whole Earth."

The logic of this appointment is appealing. Now you will be able to create a production plan whereby every living soul will be properly fed and sheltered. The resources exist for that, quite certainly; and now you will have the authority to contain greed. With the authority, presumably, goes the power to contain greed.

Already, you begin to suspect, there is something fiercely wrong. It lies not so much in the logic, as in the psychology. As for the logic, however, it could be mapped out in organizational terms: resources would be allocated geographically, and logistical programmes would be constructed... Well, yes, that would mean the creation of a vast bureaucracy, into the very fabric of which the termites of corruption would insidiously bore to the ultimate nerve-endings of the information flow: then the messages themselves would be corrupt. You could police it, using guns, the armed forces. You could put it in the hands of business enterprise, and market forces. Now you have institutionalized corruption—twice over. We are back to psychology again. Moreover, in the outcome, we are back with a bump to what we have already got.

Perhaps (what do you think?) you would be well advised to turn this job down. It looks as if, whatever you do, you will be in instant hot water, and the social realities will continue to look just like those with which we are already familiar. It'll all be the same in a hundred years, a hundred years from now. At least, it is tempting to think so; the temptation is to shrug off any responsibility, to disallow the possibility that the individual has any capacity to shape affairs. Stanley Holloway's monologue faces right up to it: For I'll be dead and you'll be dead, a hundred years from now. Finally, comes the ironic twist; it almost changes a sad tale into an amusing tale, and its catharsis minimizes personal accountability: And somebody else will be well in the cart, a hundred years from now. Yes, that makes me laugh.

The laugh is a product of my own culture, of course. To the vast peasant population of the world there is not much laughter, ironic or otherwise, in the fatalism that says: We'll all be dead in a hundred years. Nor is there any laughter in its ego-maniacal denial by the group of the frenzied privileged who are determined that cryogenic science shall freeze them into immortality. Yes: there is a growing number of people who truly believe that science will not allow them to die. But most people seem to proceed on the assumption that the world and our own species will stumble on through our own proximate generations, with conditions very much as they are. I do not know whether to call this the fate of the people, the expectation of the people, or indeed the people's will. Looking towards the future scans
a philosophical minefield—as well as those we noted, merely in passing, on the logical, the psychological, the logistic and ethical fronts.

And yet behind this exceedingly daunting and complex and maybe incomprehensible picture, wherein “it’ll all be the same in a hundred years”, lies a different picture altogether, wherein it will all be quite different. For if I’ll be dead and you’ll be dead, those who are then alive will be NEW PEOPLE. And these new people could be markedly different from us. At present, roughly half the world is under twenty. In cheerful disregard of all the philosophical problems involved, I cannot manage to believe that this youthful population really does embody a will to continue the march of their recent ancestors towards extinction. These people surely embody a will to survival—in the biological terms of adaptation, and in the spiritual terms of joyful children in a wonderful cosmos. Politics will be laid on them later; cynicism may get its canker into them; they may be exploited and tortured and killed. But for the moment, and for the continuing moment of our successive tomorrows, half and then more than half of us human beings will be within reclamation and could become a new embodiment of hope. This is something which, amid much and well-justified gloom, we can afford to celebrate. It is why we have a Lecture to celebrate the life of Lindsey Sutcliffe, because it was just this hope that she embodied.

**WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?**

If we could create a ‘firebreak’ in time, so that the Earth were uninhabited until a hundred years from now, and start all over again with a youthful and uncontaminated generation, where would the changes lie? They could not be with the fundamental physiology of humankind: evolution does not work that fast. But we might find men and women behaving differently, and even exploiting aspects of the persona that most people have not so far recognized in themselves. We might also expect radical changes in human institutions—because those would have to be newly created. It is surely inconceivable that a new generation, reconstructing affairs after a temporal firebreak, would arrive at the same unproductive and indeed threatening and fearful solutions that we have reached by chance and mischance over the last five thousand years. At once a new vision of the world is disclosed to our simulating eye, and we could spend a happy evening elaborating our own version of that Utopia. Because in simulations there is an endemic faculty of choice, and we could hold an auction of our preferences.

The problem with the world in which we actually operate, the world without a firebreak in time, is precisely that it seems to offer us no choice—because all the options have been used up, or are preselected. The vast preponderence of available energy is mortgaged by the military-industrial complex, in gigantic budgets for making war—let us disdain to call this ‘defence’—the ramifications of which extend throughout the economy of the entire world. Wars themselves are foisted onto small nations, who fight each other on behalf of their sponsors in various bouts of derring-do. Thousands of people are massacred, crushed up by the juggernauts that still we have no power to stop.

In all of this there are the people who make the whole system work. There are the military people and their bureaucracies, who are of course ‘only obeying orders’; there are the people from whom the orders emanate, who find themselves without alternatives because their options have been pre-empted; and there are the scientists and engineers and workers who design and build the implements of genocide. Most of the scientists alive, and they are most of the scientists who ever lived, are supported in their work as in their family lives by this machine. If you ask them what on earth they think they are doing, they reply that there is no alternative: almost all jobs in science, including the academic ones, are hooked in to the warfare network somewhere. And these are the very people, robbed of choice, who have often wondered how the fascist family-man can kiss goodbye his wife and children, and set off to a day’s work pulling out fingernails and imparting electric shocks.

Well, it is a matter of distancing oneself from the blood and the agony; and, well, it is a matter of where is one going to draw the line. We are all implicated in an enormous