

Book Reviews

C.W. CHURCHMAN

The Systems Approach and its Enemies

Basic Books, New York, 1979, 221 pages

Like all other Churchman's books, this new incursion into the world of planning and inquiring systems is also thought-provoking. As in previous occasions, the reader must be prepared to 'interpret' what is being said and place it in the context of Churchman's way of thinking. The uninitiated must overcome the hurdle of Churchmanalia, a distinctive and colorful 'jargon' which the author uses to convey his thoughts. For a start, the book is concerned with four 'enemies' of the Systems Approach which in Churchman's scheme are: Politics, Morality, Religion and Aesthetics. Right away the reader is entitled to ask how can these four notions be 'enemies'. I will try to convey this meaning to the best of my ability, pleading forgiveness from the author and from readers. This review is my personal interpretation of what Churchman is telling us. I hope to entice many of you to read the original, find your own interpretation and be touched once more by the Churchman experience. In trying to be faithful to the author without unduly quoting, the following text has been paraphrased liberally:

"The systems approach is . . . one approach to the way in which humans should respond to reality; but it is a 'grand' approach . . . which [means] 'large', 'gigantic' or 'comprehensive'. It is one of the approaches based on the fundamental principle that all aspects of the human world should be tied together in one grand rational scheme, just as astronomers believe that the whole universe is tied together by a set of coherent 'laws'." (p. 8).

What is an 'enemy' of the Systems Approach? In this particular world, an enemy is anyone or anything that prevents it from achieving its design objective — that 'grand', 'comprehensive' rational scheme to which reference is made above. Churchman's book is devoted to a narrative of how the four enemies 'con-

spire' against the Systems Approach.

Politics: Politics is the first enemy of the Systems Approach (S.A.) The main idea is centered on the concept of 'polis' which can be interpreted as the formation of a community in order to defend its own ideas and its own discipline. Politics aims to maintain the polis and by so doing is antithetical to the S.A. The aims of Politics are served by the maintenance of beliefs within a small community. This explains the advantage of incrementalism where the sense of polis remains undisturbed by the adoption of nearby solutions. The S.A. looks at all this with distrust because, contrary to the objective of Politics, it wants to enlarge the scope of polis to make it as comprehensive as possible. To the S.A., the larger the system the better the chance of success in planning. To fight Politics, Churchman suggests the following strategy, told in a fable (p. 163):

"Once upon a time a prince was born. He had a loving fairy godmother who, in order to protect him when he became a man, gave him the ability to transform himself into a very large mouth so that he could swallow *any* enemy he met in the forest. So we are to picture the systems approach swallowing its enemy, the political approach, by incorporating into its general scheme the all too human urge to form polis and making that urge a central aspect of . . . implementation."

Morality: Morality is to be regarded as the "underlying spirit of all action that drives a person to act as he does" (p. 25). Churchman argues that humans tend to be 'approachers'; i.e. they become wedded (or binded) to a particular approach to the detriment of all others. The effort to embrace a cause (i.e. to be moral), seems to plant the seed of its own destruction. As an example, as soon as Politics feels that the life of its particular polis is threatened, it feels the need to threaten another polis in order to survive. Likewise, "morality usually stirs up countermorality which threatens to destroy morality" (p. 172).

Religion: Religion establishes a 'worshiper—worshiped' relationship. Different cultures worship different deities. As an example, in American culture, we worship the deity called 'the Economy'. The priests of this religion are the 'economists' who perform rituals in the name of 'economic theory'. We even have sacrificial lambs such as 'unemployment'.

Religion is an enemy of the Systems Approach when it establishes worship of a particular class instead that of the Whole. To be religious is to experience the uniqueness of belonging to a class at the detriment of other classes. Worship of a class is similar to the politician's bias toward a polis.

Aesthetics. The ideal inquiring system is one which combines the love of True with the love of the Good and that of the Aesthetic (or Beautiful). If in designing a system we forget beauty, then the design is unaesthetic. Aesthetic is hard to define but it is synonymous with intuition (a way to reveal truth unclouded by doubt, p. 193). Aesthetics can be understood as a form of 'awareness'. It can also be seen as the three pillars of wisdom where *faith* represents the need for a guarantor in the systems planning process; *hope* means 'belief in the desirable without perceived evidence'; and finally *love* means by joy, peace and happiness.

Having identified the enemies of the systems approach, the remaining question is: how can our enemies become our friends? As an example, is it realistic to hope for planners to become holistic? The answer is doubtful because Politics gives the planner a good reason why a nonholistic approach is preferable — it holds people together and permits action (p. 200), by endowing the polis with power and clout (p. 210).

Another possibility is to fight our enemies with reason, by showing them in a rational manner where they have gone wrong. Unfortunately, this approach will not work. Neither morality nor religion have yielded to rational debate in the past, especially if the debate is based on concepts of information (p. 200). What else can be done?

Churchman returns to his old theme of dualism between realism and idealism, between reality and vision. To know what reality is like, one needs to place oneself in our enemy's position and to understand the world from this vantage point (p. 205):

"Rational humans need to leave the body of rationality and place the self in another body, the 'enemy', so that reality of the social system can unfold in a radically different manner. From this vantage point he/she can observe the rational spirit and begin to realize not only what has been left out of it, but also what the spirit is like, especially its quality of being human."

In the process of understanding reality by becoming the enemy, the hero of the systems approach should not "give up his vision even though in reality

it fails over and over again" (p. 213). The vision is at the same time the sign, the dream, in the direction of which our hero counters the enemy (p. 213):

"The visionary must at one and the same time live his visions and the reality of the collective conscious."

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Lester C. THURLOW

The Zero-Sum Society

Basic Books, New York, 1980, 230 pages, \$ 12.95

An M.I.T. economist, Lester Thurow centered his new book around seemingly novel proposition: "When there are economic gains to be allocated, our political process can allocate them. When there are large economic losses to be allocated, our political process is paralyzed." Then of course, with political paralysis comes economic paralysis and inability to cope with the zero-sum characteristics of our economic 'game'. The losses equal the gains, for every winner there is a loser. The 'Zero-Sum Society' stops dead in its tracks — like a rabbit paralyzed by an encounter with a snake.

What are then Thurow's solutions to the above 'desperate' situation? Surprisingly, not a freer enterprise, renewed entrepreneurship, restructuring of taxes, encouragement of families, neighborhoods and local government self-reliance, etc., but larger and more pervasive government, comprehensive welfare state, central investment planning, more regulation, governmental ownership and control of major firms, and similar 'conservative' measures. I say conservative because that is what they are: more of the same, trying to look harder in the same direction — socialism.

Thurow plainly states that our experience demonstrates that, "there is no conflict between social expenditures or government intervention and economic success." He uses examples of Switzerland, Denmark, West Germany, Sweden, and Japan. He seems to be fascinated by their GNP per capita. But one has to live there to judge the advantages of higher GNP. What about higher costs of living, exorbitant taxation rates, privilege of no defense expenditures to speak of, growing unemployment, black market

and tax evasion, increasing number of strikes and disruptions, lack of competition and innovation, and a 'Big Brother'-watching atmosphere in these countries? What about their exporting success based on their ability to use other people's ideas profitably? In 1978, West Germany's *net* international payments for patents, inventions, licenses, processes, and other technological know-how and copyrights were \$ 729m, Japan's \$ 888m, Sweden's \$ 64m, etc. United States' *net gains* were \$ 5260m.

Such simplistic GNP-analysis should certainly bring Kuwait into the picture, the richest country in the world per capita GNP. And it does: "Our economic status was actually surpassed by Kuwait in the early 1950s," Thurow reminds his readers.

Thurow has of course assembled enough informed and illuminating discussions of other issues to make the book worthy of reading: energy, inflation, economic growth, environmental problems, regulations, redistribution – all of these issues are treated separately in individual chapters and one learns a lot about arguments and counter-arguments.

The grand synthesis comes in Chapter 8 – "Solving the Economic Problems of the 1980s". In addition to calling for that government gets more heavily involved in the economy's major investment decisions (like in Soviet Union, Eastern Europe or China perhaps?), strengthening environmental controls, fully utilizing the skills and talents of the economic

minorities, reducing income gaps, fair tax system capable of raising more public money, etc., Thurow also has a magic word: *equity*.

Equity, in Thurow's interpretation, amounts to an "equal chance to win". Because the group of fully employed white males comes close to having equal chance to win, its intra-group distribution of earnings should become a model for women, minorities and underemployed white males. Equalize the distribution of earnings between the groups and you have equity. How to go about organizing a society where everyone gets to play the same economic game as fully employed white males? Not by achieving more equal distribution of skills, education, productivity, etc., but by instituting a *guaranteed job program*. If private sector would not hire all the unemployed, then government would have to. Since it cannot, it would put pressure on the private sector to do so. What forms would this pressure take Thurow does not explore.

Thurow's book might be judged as very important in Britain: "Whatever is wrong with the British economy, it has little to do with the size of government; British growth since 1945 has actually been better than before", Thurow says.

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