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A GENEALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOFT SYSTEMS THINKING, ACTION RESEARCH, AND MANAGERIAL AUTHORITY

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Abstract

A genealogical analysis of the attractions of the “democratic-participative” view of the relationship between employee behaviour and legitimate managerial authority has been developed. This view of managerial authority; inherent in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) - however attractive it may be - renders IS modelling impossible. Consequently, because SSM advocates regard employee behaviour as entirely free (underdetermined), SSM models cannot be standardly used for generating IS models. It is concluded that systems practitioners need new methods (tools and techniques) to develop appropriate understandings of the relationship between management and subordinates in the organisations in which they are seeking to use of systems methodologies to bring about improvements. The person, in SSM, is not a dangerous individual: he or she is a potentially erratic actor. A consequence of the “free will” philosophical underpinning of SSM being that all manner of informal distractions from the environment, or personal “bent”, etc., may cause the subject to “attribute meanings” to the organisation and its activities which are potentially dysfunctional. The bona fide SSM practitioner is supposed to be committed to such a view of human behaviour, and the genealogical history of the contemporary desirability of such a view (from a managerial perspective) has been put forward. On this view, the subjects may enter a debate to decide, in a democratic-participative manner, which activities are “truly relevant”. Once this has been decided, and the interests of the actors have been “accommodated” the institutionalised repression of those wills-to-activity that are “truly erratic” can now “legitimately” take place. However, there is an inevitable price to be paid for this conception of the erratic actor - that price is that organisational process modelling is rendered (philosophically, but quite literally) impossible; hence the many arguments propounded by SSM advocates about systems models as being only “relevant” to a study. If information systems are to be developed (along traditional lines at any rate) it should be possible to model organisational processes (existing or desired) at an early stage. It has been argued that this cannot be done using SSM in a bona fide manner, and this is the price that must, ultimately but inevitably, be paid if one is to treat employee behaviour as being underdetermined by managerial directives. Of course, if SSM is utilised in IS analysis and design, the price to be paid by the organisational actors will include increasingly intrusive examinations into their “real” (subjective) motives for their behaviours; these motives will be construed as stemming from circumstances and influences both within and outside the organisation.

Keywords: Soft systems methodology, genealogy, action research