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Dear Dr. Henshaw:

I am pleased to learn that you are examining the life of "general systems theory." Any such examination nowadays tends to be a post mortem, since — although the International Society for Systems Sciences (ISSS) keeps a website and still holds annual meetings — the movement is moribund by almost any standard. For the official history of the ISGSR-ISSS you might try browsing in their official website. Also, a PhD thesis compiled by Debora Hammond in 1997 under the title "Toward a Science of Synthesis: The Heritage of General System Theory" offers perhaps as thorough a presentation of the founding as could be made by someone who wasn't there (please find enclosed my review of that thesis).

As one who paid some attention to "GST" from 1967 to 1996, I have recollections which are probably different than anyone else's. The movement developed from the rambling organicism of von Bertalanffy through the formal organization of the SGSR by Boulding-Rapaport-Girard-Miller into a philosophical adjunct to established sciences (having distinguished affiliations such as with cybernetician W. Ross Ashby and anthropologist Margaret Mead); thence into a second paradigmatic generation in which G.W. Weinberg published the definitive An Introduction to General Systems Thinking (1975), but then lapsed into "hypermathematiasis" and "computerism" from which it finally tumbled back into "systems analysis" (e.g., the IIGSS) — thus becoming after all the antithesis of the founders' ideals. There have been some attempts since 1990 to re-inspire the systems movement with "ecology" and "second order cybernetics" and "chaos" and "complexity" and "semiotics," but little has been gained. The excitement of the 1970s when universities established departments of "systems" and many specialties tried to partake of holism is difficult to remember nowadays. Apart from the usual problems with maverick devotees, the movement had to fail for at least three reasons: a failure to develop a credible, organized, teachable core of theory or of science; a failure to establish successful and learnable practice; and the fact that true systemicity is not politically correct in a world of greedy cultures where people don't want to see anything whole but rather prefer to chop everything to bits and sell the bits.

A few years ago when I was still hoping that the IIGSS could become a new center for systemic thinking, I built upon a small genealogy of the general systems movement which had been drawn in 1996 by Eric Schwarz and upon the genealogy of philosophy which Will Durant used in his book The Story of Philosophy to sketch a "Genealogy of Systemic Thought" which can be found on the IIGSS website. That sketch was not faithful to any timeline and was very incomplete, but by browsing in it you can see how I supposed that systemic thinking has a long history and is coupled inextricably with "The Conversation" throughout history. My own current version of the Genealogy has more than 1000 nodes and more than 2000 interconnections and is somewhat faithful to a timeline. At a safe distance it looks as shown on the enclosed abstract page where specialties are seen arranged in columns and color-coded as:

Arts	turquoise
Symbolic Systems	yellow
Social Sciences	orange
Ecology	lime
Biology & Medicine	green
General Systems	white
Cybernetics	red
Informatics	pink
Systems Analysis & OR	tan
Engineering	violet
Physical Sciences	black
Philosophy	gray

... (distributed throughout)

A closer look at the portion devoted to the general systems movement is also attached, and so is a full magnification of the nodes and influences around the founding period for GST. It turns out that a lot of people who had nothing to do with GST were better systemists than most of those who have professed their systems credentials, and the whole of the current Genealogy shows this. (My preliminary review of some of what I have learned from making it is enclosed.)

I don't know whether anything I have said is responsive to your inquiries. It surely should raise some questions. ISSS records may contain some of the historical data which you want, but those records are probably not in good order for distribution and no one person except Len Troncale would have much knowledge of them. The American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) has a website and might be another source, but you have to find the right person if you want useful answers. As for the IIGSS, it concerns itself primarily with mathematical "systems analysis" and beating the stock market nowadays, so it really doesn't have much to offer; that's one reason I gave up on it after an intensive period (2000-2002) when I tried to bestir it to do otherwise.

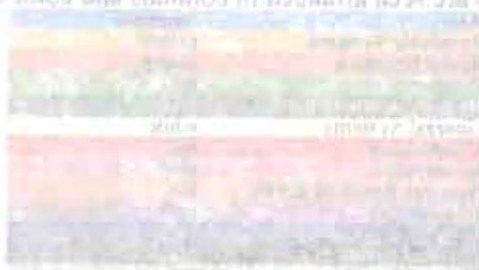
My own theories of "development" — spun off from years of professional practice and teaching in project management — have long since convinced me that "deliberate development" and "natural development" proceed quite differently from one another but relate as necessary complements during any period of substantial change where human purposefulness is involved. I believe that the life history of GST illustrates this, though less coherently and neatly than, say, a project to develop a new machine. The messiness of the systems movement is complicated by the fact that a lot of people in it never did know what they were doing or what they were talking about. In the silliest cases (such as the IIGSS), people whose first language was not English simply mistook the meanings of words and supposed, e.g., that "general systems" = "systems analysis." Von Bertalanffy started such nonsense by using the phrase "general system theory" where he should have said "a general theory of systems" or "a theory of systems in general." Since no one ever put things into sensible order, I guess it doesn't matter what project they weren't faithful to. Maybe when the space aliens sift the ashes of what passes for American civilization they will appreciate things better and have a good laugh.

For my part, I have written a number of drafts of a treatise on "Systemology," but having no audience I have never followed through with it. The high water mark of the three dozen papers which I wrote about "systems" was "Re-Framing Systemic Paradigms for the Art of Learning" (1993-96); a copy is enclosed for your amusement or for use as kindling on a chilly autumn evening. (Please remove staple before burning.) During the last decade my only effort to write was done at the request of Peter Harries-Jones of Toronto for the SEED journal. It was called "What's Going On With the Topology of Recursion?" and can be found at www.library.utoronto.ca/sec/SEED/Vol4-1/McNeil.htm. If ever there were to be a science of systemicity, it would first need a core of competent theory and then ongoing proof in good practice. The first and best application of relevant systemology would be in education. We should live so long as to see such a thing happen.

Yours truly,

Don McNeil

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Notes by Name

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Topic

NAME	SUBJECT	DATES
Linnæus, Carolus	SistTaxonomy	1707-1778
Linnaeus, Harold	Socio-Technical Systems	?
Lister, Joseph	Antisepsis	1817-1912
Listring	Topology	?
Locke, John	Political Pragmatism	1632-1704
Loeb, Jacques	Materialist Biology	?
Lofting, Chris	Integration-Differentiation-Re	1948-?
Lombard, Peter	Christian Pedagogy	c. 1100-1160
Longacker, George Lakoff A.R.W.	Cognitive Linguistics	?
Lopez-Garay, Ramon Fuenmayor	Interpretive Systemology	?
Lorentz, Hendrick	Time Dilation	?
Lorenz, Edward	Chaotic Systems	?
Lorenz, Renard	Ethology	?
Lovelace, Ada	Programming	?
Lovelock, James E.	Geophysiology (Gaia Hypothesis)	?
Lowen, Walter	Development of Gestation & Per	?
Loyola, Ignacius	Jesuit Discipline	1491-1556
Lucretius	Positivism	94-54 BC
Luhmann, Niklas	Autopoietic Social Systems	?
Lump, Randolph F.	Penitentiary Catholicity	1841-?
Lyell, Charles	Gradual Geological Evolution	1797-1875
MacKay, Donald	Semantic Information Theory	?
Math, Ernst	Epistemic Positivism	1836-1916

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SUBJECT	NAME	DATES
Systemics of Benefit	Warren Ziegler	?
Systems Accounting	G.A. Swenson	?
Systems Analysis		?
Systems Analysis	Arthur D. Hall & Van Court Mar	?
Systems Anthropology	Margaret Mead	1901-1978
Systems Biology	?	?
Systems Cybernetics	W. Ross Ashby	?
Systems Development	John Warfield	?
Systems Dynamics	Donella Meadows	?
Systems Dynamics	Jay W. Forrester	?
Systems Ecology	Howard T. Odum	?
Systems Economics	Alfred Russel	?
Systems Economics	Kenneth Boulding	?
Systems Engineering	Harold Chestnut & Andrew P. Sa	?
Systems Holistics	Jeffrey Stamps	?
Systems Philosophy	Archie Balm	?
Systems Philosophy	Mario Bunge	?
Systems Philosophy	Thomas Cowan	?
Systems Planning	Hasan Uzbekhan	1926-?
Systems Psychology	F. Kenneth Berrian	?
Systems Semiotics	Luis Rocha, Howard Pattee	?
Systems Sociology	Walter Buckley	?
Systems Trends	Kenneth E.F. Watt	?

Connections

2440

FROM-TO	THEMES
Sebeok->Hoffmeyer	semiotics
Sebeok->Marshall	semiotics
Second Order Cybernetics->Brier	
Second Order Cybernetics->Uapleby	cybernetics
Self-Reference & Autonomy->Luhmann	
Self-Organization->Arthur	self-organization
Self-Organization->Bak	self-organization
Self-Organization->Langton	self-organization
Self-Organization->Louis Kauffman	self-organization
Self-Organization->Stuart Kauffman	self-organization
Self-Organization->Swenson	
Self-Reference & Autonomy->Fleiss	
Self-Reference->Ryan	selfness
Senge->Clemson	
Senge->Uapleby	cybernetics
Shakespeare->Hilton	
Shakespeare->Modern English	
Shannon Medicine->Practical Medicine	
Shannon->Boulding	technical "information"
Shannon->Brillouin	
Shannon->Control Systems Engineering	
Shannon->First Order Cybernetics	
Shannon->Generalized Information Theory	