

# Still in Torment: (Re)Designing Freedom



**John Beckford**

**WOSC 2024**

**Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford**

**11/09/2024**

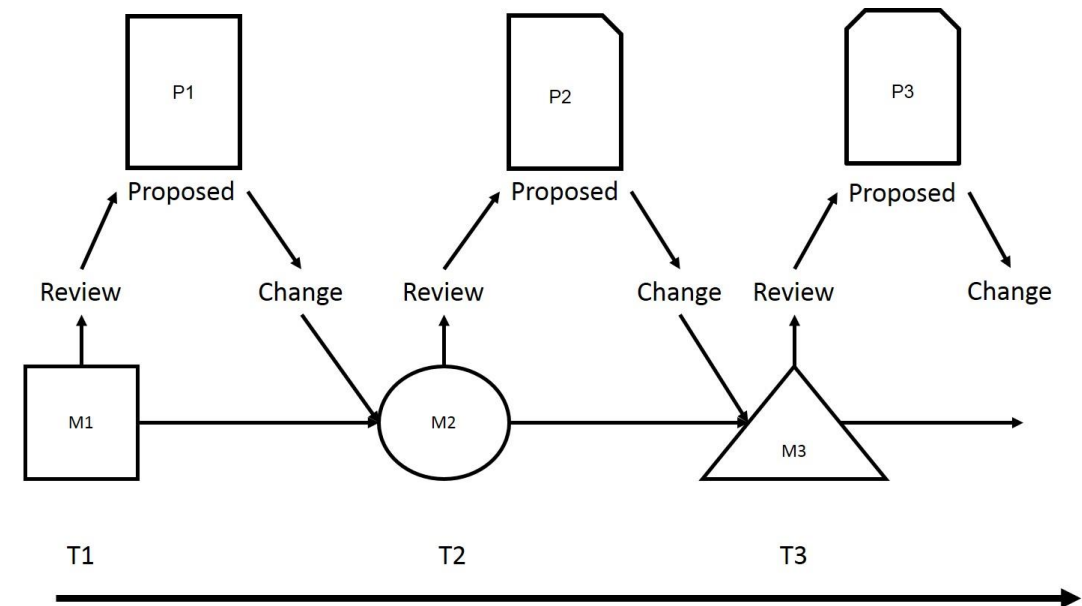
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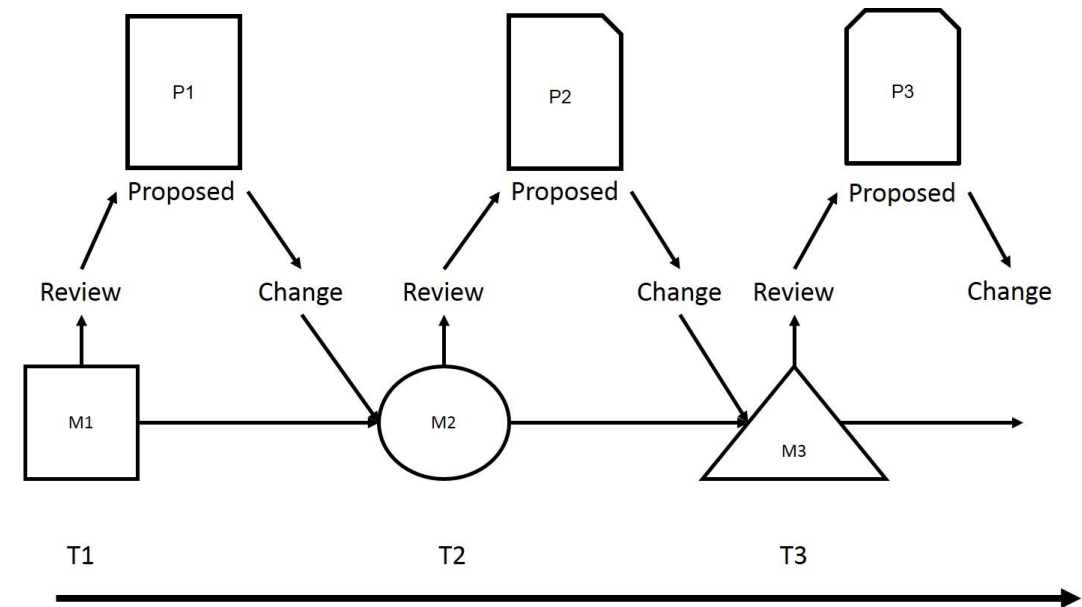
- Cybernetician, Management Scientist and Partner, Beckford Consulting
- Visiting Professor, UCL (UKCRIC, CEGE) and Loughborough (CIM)
- Past President of the Cybernetics Society
- PhD, Management Systems and Sciences, Hull (1993)
- Fellow: Cybernetics Society, Royal Society for the Arts, Institute of Engineering and Technology
- Member: Institute of Management Services
- Author:
  - Solving Productivity (in development)
  - Quality (5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Routledge 2022)
  - The Intelligent Nation (Routledge, 2021)
  - The Intelligent Organisation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Routledge, 2020)
- Chair and Non-Executive Director, CoreHaus Ltd and Rise Mutual (Social Enterprises)
- Trustee: The Under 17 Car Club Charitable Trust
- Current activities:
  - Church of England, CoreHaus, RISE, Network Rail, UoW/NHS (Diagnosis and Productivity)

# Still in Torment?

- Background in productivity improvement
- “The perpetually failing problem solving engine”
  - Need to manage organisations in (something like) real time



- Background in productivity improvement
- “The perpetually failing problem solving engine”
  - Need to manage organisations in (something like) real time
- Discovered cybernetics in 1987...
  - “A technology take 50 years to mature”
    - The Kondratieff Wave
  - Technology (organised knowledge) of cybernetics should be mature?



- Chile: from organisation to nation
  - Developed and applied key cybernetic ideas at the level of the state
  - Highlighted the potential for technology
  - The fragility of democracy
- ‘Designing Freedom’ considered the role of ‘science in the service of man’
  - Articulated philosophical principles for thinking about the world and the role of cybernetics
- ‘The Real Threat to “All We Hold Most Dear” ‘
  - “if government ever gets its act together on information we are all in trouble”
    - Buckminster Fuller
- ‘World in Torment’ explored ‘chronic societal triage’
  - An entropic process that drives concentration of resources
  - Roots in work of Pareto

- Contemporary societal, political, economic and planetary challenges:
  - War, Starvation, Climate Change
  - Poverty, Inequality, Discrimination
  - Centralised or Centralising Governmental Power
  - (Inter)National Oligopolies:
    - Blocs, Trade Agreements, EU, International Courts
    - Centralising ‘Competence’
  - Organisational Oligopoly, Oligarchs
    - Noted this week that Musk is tipped to become the first trillionaire
  - Technology
    - Infinite computing power coupled to centralising systems
      - Windows, Android, Apple, Co-Pilot, Recall
- Exploiting challenges to consolidate power in the hands of a few

# Dominant Model of Organisation

- Bureaucracy – Flailing and Failing
  - Core assumption
    - There is a problem to be solved and there is a solution
  - Inexorable Growth
    - The solution always involves more bureaucracy, more centralisation, more removal of power from individuals
- Realisation
  - Bureaucracy requires more and more resources to sustain itself
    - Triage pumps resources to the highly organised, low energy system
    - ‘The system’ is perverted to serve its own ends (pathological autopoiesis) or those of its masters
    - Delusions of efficiency are pursued at the expense of effectiveness (fulfilment of purpose)
  - Bureaucracy enables abnegation by individuals to the power of ‘the system’, to the presumption of ‘authority’ by others
    - Power Corrupts..... Lord Acton 1887
  - Clarity of purpose for the individual AND the organisation is corrupted, lost
  - Technology is exploited to capture, suppress, control and manipulate
    - Science but in whose service?
    - Freedom is designed out NOT designed in, perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not!
  - Freedom is lost, democracy (for all its flaws) withers
    - Greece 2011, Brexit 2016, France 2024

- Weakness in philosophical education coupled to social media limit the ability of individuals to reason about their position?
  - Evaluating power of recall more than of reasoning
    - We do this in professional education too!
  - “The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly is to fill the world with fools”
    - Spenser
- Thought Police?
  - Social Media and TV
    - Huxley’s SOMA
    - Orwell’s Big Brother



# Pursuit of Viability: When we Listen

- World is seeking viability
  - Sustainability, triple bottom line, circular economy, Gaia Hypothesis
- “We can’t solve a problem with the same thinking that created it”
  - (Or a variation thereon) Einstein
    - But we appear to be doing so through the very bureaucratic structures that got us here

# Viability is Emergent

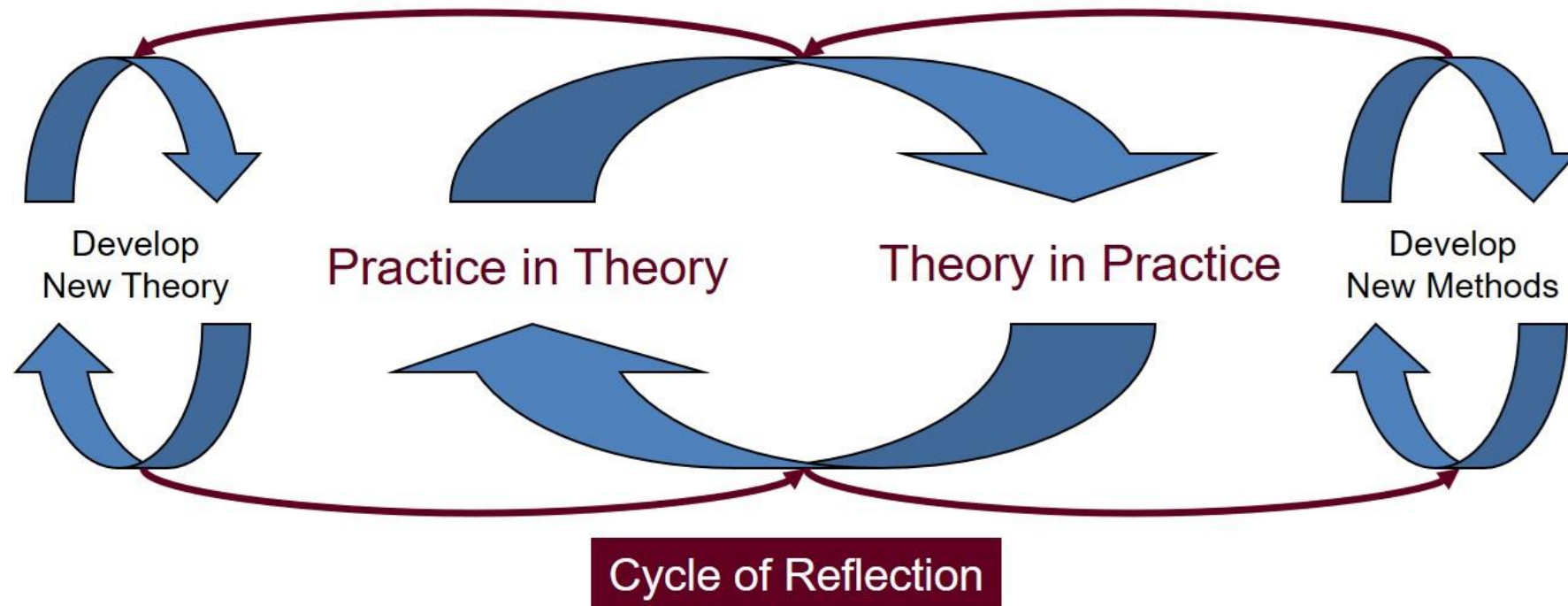
- Viability AND the VSM are about changing the way we think about ourselves and our organisation(s)
- An emergent informational hierarchy, not a Weberian one based on position, tradition or charisma
- Adaptation
  - Anticipate and prepare or prevent
  - Respond to and create the conditions for the survival of the system
- The system is emergent
  - Behavioural, Processual, Informational

# Viable System: Intelligent Organisation: Synthesis



# Viabile System: Intelligent Organisation: Synthesis

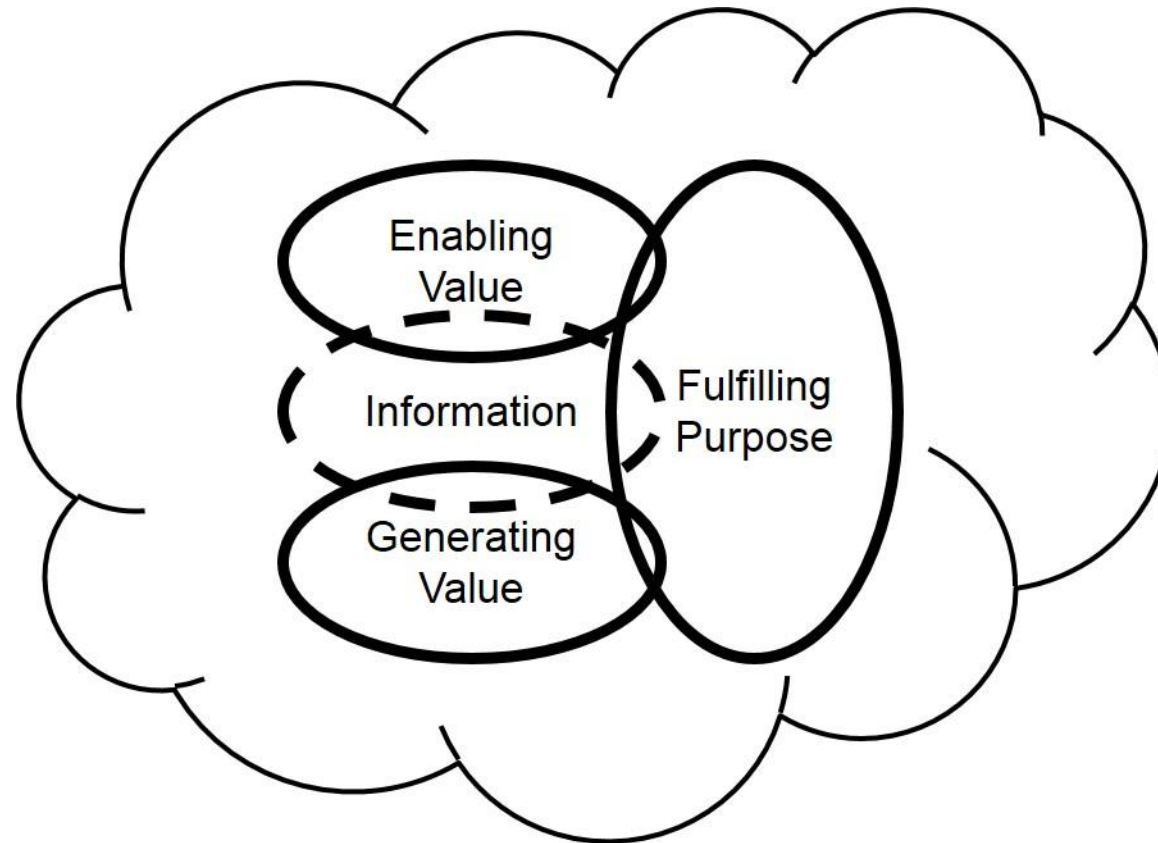
Continuous adaptation!



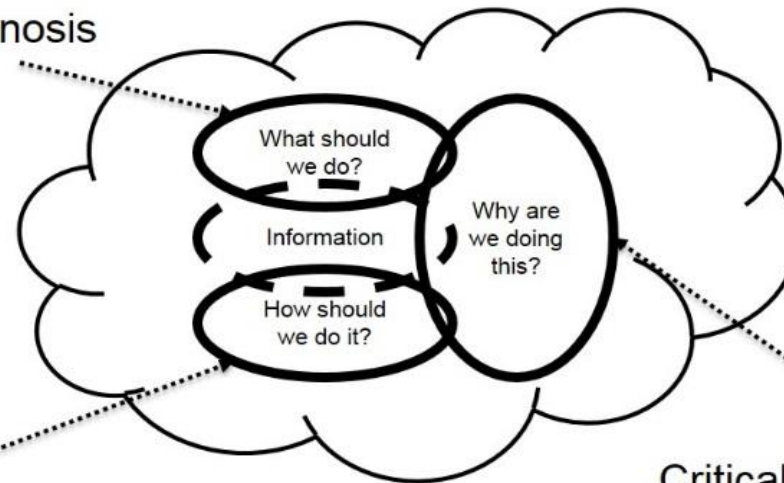
# What does cybernetics have to say?

- “Perpetually Failing Problem Solving Engine” (Beckford, 1993)
  - We need a means, mechanism that solves challenges at least at the rate of their arrival
  - We need to anticipate and prevent
  - “Managing the Mess” Ackoff
- Cybernetics argues for:
  - Clarity of purpose - for whom? To what end? Who ‘owns’ the system?
  - Distributed control to
    - allow problems to be solved as near source as possible
    - overcome latency
  - Assembly and distribution of information as the key to viability

# The Intelligent Organisation: The Trialogue



Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing  
Systems Engineering  
Systems Dynamics  
Viable Systems Diagnosis



Operational Research  
Systems Analysis  
Systems Engineering  
Systems Dynamics  
Viable Systems Diagnosis

Critical Systems Heuristics  
Soft Systems Methodology  
Beer's Syntegration  
Total Systems Intervention  
Interactive Planning

# Cyberneticians: Obscure and Obfuscate

- Hiding behind arcane and obscure language
- Interested in itself and its justification, not in addressing actual problems
- Lack of confidence? Competence?
  - Inability or unwillingness to express cybernetic ideas in the language of those who ‘own’ the problems?
  - Failure of transduction?
- Placing the ‘politics’ before the ‘science’
- The science, well applied, delivers the social outcomes



- Perhaps clients are initially uninterested in the why and how, they are interested in the impact of the thinking
- So, what is the outcome for the client?
  - Productivity
  - Performance
  - Viability
  - Empowerment
  - Customer Satisfaction
  - Cost control

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– Failure
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**“It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.”**

**The Prince, Niccolo Machiavelli**

of those

- HM Treasury: Infrastructure Investment
- Systemic Mapping of National Infrastructure
  - EIEG, IPA, National Infrastructure Commission
- Sisters of Nazareth: Global Transformation
- Network Rail: SARM: Effect of Weather on Train Performance
- NHS: Diagnosis and Process
- Pharmaceuticals, Petro-Chemicals
- Mushroom Farming:
- SAP

- 37 years....
  - Speak in the language of the listener
  - Learn to translate our language - which is mainly common sense - into theirs
  - Go to the world where they are and lead them to our world
  - Find those in power or authority willing to listen to be challenged
  - Be clear on their purpose (or that of their organisation) and yours
  - Be brave
  - Be forthright
  - Be prepared to be ignored
  - Persist

- 37 years....

- Speak in the language of the listener
- Learn
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**“Grant me the **SERENITY** to accept the things I cannot change, the **COURAGE** to change the things I can and **WISDOM** to know the difference**

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