Reflective Practice in the Civil Society:

The Contribution of Critically Systemic Thinking

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary notion of professional competence is not grounded in an adequate notion of civil society. Professional practice tends to put citizens in a situation of incompetence, even when it is supposed to serve them. In a civil society, this is not an acceptable state of affairs. In a civil society, the ultimate source of legitimacy lies with the citizen; hence a reflective professional practice that is grounded in an adequate concept of civil society should give citizens a meaningful, and competent, role to play. Reflective practice, then, depends on competent citizenship.

There is a need for a simultaneous revision of the contemporary concepts of professional competence and of citizenship. Professional practice and the practice of citizenship need to be understood in such a way that professionals and citizens can meet as equals, though not necessarily as equally skilled individuals. Methodologically speaking, this is possible if we can show that there exists a common core of competencies that both sides can contribute to reflective practice.

This essay finds such a core competence in the new concept of critically systemic thinking. The author introduces some of its basic ideas and explains why they might become the source of a new critical competence for citizens as well as for professionals.

Key words: reflective practice; professional competence; professionalism; critical thinking; civil society; citizenship; systemic thinking; critical systems heuristics; boundary critique.

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INTRODUCTION

If I wanted to know what kind of society I was living in,
I would begin by asking – Where does legitimacy lie?

John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation* (1997, p. 32)

By a civil society I understand a society in which the basic source of legitimacy lies with the individual citizen. A civil society is a democracy in which ordinary people can effectively participate in decisions on matters of collective or public concern.

This is not exactly an accurate description of the current state of affairs, I am afraid. As John Ralston Saul (1997) argues in his book *The Unconscious Civilisation,* contemporary Western society is only superficially based on the individual and on democracy. It is much more a corporatist society, in which legitimacy lies with special interest groups and decisions are made through constant negotiations among them. "Serious, important decisions are made not through democratic discussion or participation", he writes, "but through negotiation between the relevant groups based upon expertise, interest and the ability to exercise power. I would argue that the Western individual, from the top to the bottom of what is now defined as the elite, acts first as a group member. As a result, they, we, exist primarily as a function, not as a citizen, not as an individual." (Saul, 1997, p. 34)

My concern in this paper is that reflective practice and civil society are inseparable. That is to say, unless Saul's diagnosis is entirely mistaken, reflective practice is in peril. All the more, it should concern us that the contemporary notion of good professional practice or of professional competence is hardly grounded in civil society. Professional practice tends to put citizens in a situation of incompetence, even when it is supposed to serve them. For example, issues of applied science that may affect the well-being of many citizens, such as assessing health risks or determining acceptable levels of environmental pollution, are widely regarded as lying in the exclusive competence of science and expertise. It is probably safe to say that to this day, the majority of professionals continue to see active participation of lay people as a threat to sound professional practice rather than as a basis and support for it. The current controversy about genetically modified food illustrates the issue: the public discussion of a 1998 referendum in Switzerland about a possible ban on field experiments with genetically modified crops revealed that most professionals in the field attributed the wide-spread concerns of consumers to their being uninformed lay people who did not understand enough to have an opinion of their own and whose views were incompatible with scientific knowledge and risk assessment. The concerns of people were an expression of incompetence rather than of the existence of different valid ways to see the problem. There is no systematic place for civil society in this concept of professionalism; rather, its place is relegated to the "irrational", because merely subjective, process of political decision-making once the "rational" analysis has been completed.

But how can professional practice be rational if it is defined in such a way that the majority of those concerned cannot participate in a competent, rational fashion? In a world in which professional predominance in decision-making processes reaches further and affects more aspects of our lives than ever before, a fundamental conflict between a thus-defined professionalism and civil society seems inevitable. In view of this conflict, the call for reflective practice does not seem to carry far enough. It does not sufficiently question the concept of rationality that underpins its

notion of professionalism. Because it makes it impossible for the ordinary citizen to play a competent part, this concept runs counter to the central idea of civil society.

As against this prevalent perspective, I would argue that an adequate concept of reflective practice cannot do without civil society. I would suggest that reflective practice entails more than what it has come to mean in the literature around Donald Schön's (1983) seminal work on *the Reflective Practitioner*. Beyond the intuitive dimension of tacit knowledge and artistry that is in the centre of Schön's *reflection-in-action,* an adequate concept of reflective practice today should include the ethical dimension of the consequences that professional action may impose on others in the name of rationality and expertise. Reflective practice then is as much a concept of practical philosophy (ethics) as it is one of epistemology (theory of knowledge); it intends *self-questioning practice* in the ethical sense of a practice that systematically questions its own value implications and lays them open to the critique of all those who may be concerned. Only in a strong civil society can we expect a majority of people, including professional people, to live up to such a concept and to act first as responsible citizens, not as group members.

Self-questioning practice indeed requires conditions that only a strong civil society can effectively promote and sustain. For instance, it requires a sense of autonomy and a corresponding minimal independence of individual agents from group sanctions; that is, it depends on a system of inviolable civil rights that allows individuals to follow their conscience rather than merely submitting to group pressures toward conformity. Equally important, it requires a sense of active, responsible citizenship; a sense of responsibility toward all those who may be affected by one's actions, rather than merely toward the groups of which one is a member and in whose names and interests one may be expected to function. Almost by definition, a reflective practitioner is not just functioning as a group member, including membership in professional groups, but is acting as a member of civil society as a whole. Reflective practice risks being blind if it shuts its eyes to this issue of responsible citizenship.

We must thus turn our eyes to the old idea of civil society. In the next section of this essay I argue that if we want to give new life to the idea of civil society, we need first to revise our contemporary notion of citizenship. I propose that we need to focus less on civil *rights* and more on civil *competencies*. In subsequent sections I will then propose one such competence, critically systemic thinking, and will examine its implications for reflective professional practice.

REVIVING THE IDEA OF CIVIL SOCIETY

From Civil Rights …

Our contemporary notion of citizenship is dominated by the concept of civil rights. Since the British sociologist Thomas H. Marshall (1950) published his influential study on *Citizenship and Social Class,* it has become customary to associate citizenship with three basic kinds of citizen rights: *civil rights* strictly speaking (civil liberties), *political rights* (rights of political participation), and *social and economic rights* (the right to social security and welfare). For a thorough account of Marshall's work on the development of modern citizenship rights and theory, see Barbalet (1988).

But is this notion of citizenship still satisfactory? The ongoing process of modernisation, with its continual expansion of the spheres of scientific and bureaucratic rationality to ever more areas of life, has changed the meaning and relevance of classical citizen rights. This process of the "rationalisation" of society, as the German sociologist Max Weber (e.g., 1970) could still designate it, appears to undermine the role of citizenship. It tends to render people incompetent in matters that affect their daily lives. Conventional citizen rights do not enable citizens sufficiently to control this process, nor its repercussions upon their daily life worlds.

For example, important issues such as environmental protection, industrial democracy, and the democratic control of science and technology were not contained in Marshall's concept of civil rights and still are not really a part of our contemporary concept of citizenship. The core problem appears to be the complexity of these issues. Granting citizens rights of participation is not sufficient to ensure effective participatory chances; if the issues are beyond most people's knowledge and understanding, how can they argue their concerns in a competent manner? Do we have to accept a growing gap between citizen rights and the actual capability of citizens to participate?

… to Civil Competencies

A different concept of citizenship may be required today; one that would give a central part to civil *competencies* rather than to rights only. The recent rediscovery of the concept of civil society (see, e.g., Cohen, 1983; Keane, 1988; Walzer, 1991; Seligman, 1992; Kumar, 1993; or Hall, 1995, just to mention a few sources from a rapidly growing body of literature) suggests that the role of the citizen is seen to be in need of changing. Unless Max Weber (1970) should have been entirely wrong in his diagnosis of the continual expansion of bureaucratic and scientific rationality; and unless Saul (1997) should be similarly mistaken in observing that contemporary Western society is becoming ever more a corporatist society, we must indeed make every possible effort to strengthen the citizen's role as a countervailing power and ultimate source of legitimacy. Otherwise both the "corporatisation" of the democratic nation state from within and the growing influence of the global corporate system from without, threaten to undermine the effectiveness and democratic credibility of institutions such as parliamentary democracy, government, bureaucracy, and the judicial system.

It may be an expression of the ongoing loss of credibility of traditional democratic institutions that a new, increasingly differentiated and decentralised kind of political culture (or perhaps, at times, subculture) appears to be emerging in many societies. In this new political culture, a growing number of citizens may be expected to gain a new awareness of their role as citizens and to develop new skills in evaluating and influencing the activities or omissions of the institutionalised political system. For instance, citizens everywhere are learning (1) to make better use of the public media, including the new possibilities of information access and exchange through world-wide communication networks; (2) to organise themselves outside the mainstream of the established political system, e.g., in the so-called New Social Movements; (3) to make the most of the available means of legal action and, at times, civil disobedience; (4) to engage themselves in participatory forms of inquiry and planning such as citizens' action groups, citizen reports (e.g., Dienel, 1989), hybrid fora of scientists and citizens (e.g., Gibbons et al, 1994), stakeholder evaluation (Bryk, 1983), or participatory action research (e.g., Fals-Borda & Rahman,

1991; Whyte, 1992; Reason, 1994); and finally, of most interest here, (5) to increase their critical skills vis-à-vis the rationality claims raised by vested interests or by the experts in their services (e.g., Ulrich, 1996a, b, 2000).

This is not to deny that there also exist important counter-tendencies toward increasing political abstinence, especially by young people; but the symptoms of a deinstitutionalisation and decentralisation of political processes appear more significant to me. The phenomenon of political abstinence within the old political system is probably itself a symptomatic expression of the shift of the political to new political arenas, it need not necessarily mean a general loss of political interest. Citizens turn away from the institutionalised political system (which, they feel, does not give them a sufficiently competent and meaningful role) rather than from the *res publica* as such. Take, for example, the observation that when environmental issues are at stake, citizens in many societies now increasingly dare to "think for themselves", quite according to Kant's (1784) motto of the Enlightenment: *sapere aude!* – Dare to know! Who else but active citizens can ultimately be expected to be in charge of controlling the increasingly threatening repercussions of the rationalisation process – the expanding influence of science, bureaucracy, and the corporate world – upon the social life world?

Civil rights are an essential issue in this process of recovering civil society, but they clearly are not a sufficient answer to the question of how we can strengthen the citizen's role. If the aim is to revive civil society, *effective* participation in the governance of collective affairs becomes a central theme of citizenship. So does, consequently, the question of how we can enable ordinary citizens as well as professionals to play an active and competent role. What kind of core competencies can we hope to make accessible to a majority of people, if not to all, regardless of their different states of knowledge and skills?

CRITICALLY SYSTEMIC THINKING: TOWARD A NEW COMPETENCE IN CITIZENSHIP

I propose that systemic thinking may become the source of a common reflective competence of professionals and citizens. The core concept that systemic thinking can offer us to this end is the critical employment of *boundary judgements*, a concept that has already proven both its critical significance and heuristic power in an emancipatory systems methodology known as *Critical Systems Heuristics* (see Ulrich, 1983a, pp. 225-314; 1987, pp.277-282; 1993, pp. 594-605; 1996a, pp. 19-44).

The Problem of Boundary Judgements

The concept of boundary judgements says that the meaning of a proposition depends on how we bound the relevant *reference system,* that is, the context that matters when it comes to assessing the merits and defects of the proposition.

As a rule, our assessment of the merits and defects of a proposition depends on both observations of fact and judgements of value. What *facts* we observe (e.g., regarding the consequences and possible side effects of a proposed action), and equally what *values* we judge

appropriate (e.g., regarding purposes and people to be served), in turn depends on our reference system. The moment we change our *boundary judgements* as to what belongs to the system of concern and what falls outside its boundaries, the relevant facts and values change, too. For example, if we expand the system boundaries, new facts come into the picture. Conversely, new facts can make us change our boundary judgements; for example, if we learn of previously unknown long-term effects of a proposed action, we may want to extend the time horizon we consider. Changing boundary judgements in turn may compel us to adjust our value judgements, which then may make the facts look different, and so on. Thus boundary judgements strongly influence the way we "see" a situation (Figure 1).
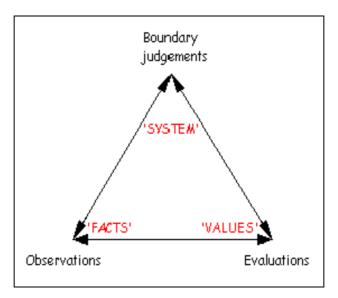

Fig. 1. The interdependence of boundary judgements, observations, and evaluations.
The facts we observe, and the way we evaluate them, depend on how we bound the system of concern. Different value judgements can make us change boundary judgements, which in turn makes the facts look different. Knowledge of new facts can equally make us change boundary judgements, which in turn makes previous evaluations look different, etc.

It is a case of the eternal triangle: whenever we change one of the three angles, the other two will equally change. Reference systems, facts, and values run what the French call a *ménage à trois.*

As everybody knows, mutual understanding can be difficult under such circumstances. Differing boundary judgements make it difficult for people to communicate. Unfortunately, many people do not appreciate the role that their boundary judgements play. As the concept is unknown to them, they suspect the reason of mutual disagreement is that the other parties got their facts wrong or rely on dubious ethical principles. So they quarrel about statistics and ideologies. Because I am right, the others must be wrong. Because I am rational, the others must be irrational. Because I am compelling, the others must be idiots.

That may sometimes be true, but more often the crucial difference lies in differing reference systems. So long as the involved parties do not see that they talk about different reference systems, they will not really understand each other. In fact it is quite rational that they don't. How could they reasonably see the same facts and rely on the same value judgements, since they are talking of different issues?

Instead of disputing the other parties' facts and values, it might then be more fruitful to uncover the different systems of concern. Once we begin to appreciate one another's reference systems, we can usually understand much better why our opinions differ. Perhaps we can even agree about the reference system on which we want to talk; but even if we cannot, we can at least appreciate one another's different rationalities. We need not agree in order to understand why we don't.

Implications for Reflective Practice

Once we see through the eternal triangle of reference systems, facts, and values, we find that mutual understanding becomes rationally possible. Not only in the ideal world in which we might achieve the kind of communicative conditions that Jurgen Habermas (1984-87) in his *Theory of Communicative Action* has shown to be presupposed in rational consensus, but also under real-world conditions of conflicting needs and interests!

Mutual understanding means genuine communication, though not necessarily consensus. Only in Habermas' ideal world, consensus is an adequate criterion of mutual understanding. We can appreciate the underlying ethical ideal: everyone concerned should be able to agree. In this view, mutual understanding (or consensus) is rational to the extent that it is "generalisable", which means that all those concerned, whether involved in the discourse or not, can on principle be moved to agree of their own free will. This is conceivable only if those involved are required to renounce any merely subjective validity claims; that is, their arguments must not rely on any statements of fact or value whose content and range of validity are particular. However, the concept of boundary judgements makes it clear why a thus-defined rationality is bound to remain a mere programme: it is impractical for the simple reason that boundary judgements are inevitable. Yet the huge body of literature around Habermas' discourse theory of rational action has thus far hardly considered the role of boundary judgements. I would suggest that we should do precisely this, both for theoretical purposes and for improving everyday communicative practice. Instead of dreaming the dream of perfect rationality, let us try to improve the existing real-world conditions of communication.

A similar observation could be made about the literature around Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) concept of *reflective practice;* it has not yet considered the systems-theoretical problem of boundary judgements at all. Handling reference systems consciously, by learning to deal critically with the underpinning boundary judgements, might be a starting point. Once we understand the role of boundary judgements and know how to deal with them in an open and reflective way, we can grant one another the right to having different rationalities; we can begin to understand, and agree upon, the sources of dissent. Thus we can learn to understand one another even though we cannot agree, as our needs and interests are genuinely different. This, it seems to me, is a definitive gain in communicative rationality. It fosters a communicative rationality that aims at truly reflective practice – a practice that would be grounded in the notion of civil society. Rather than aiming at theoretically sufficient reflection and justification on the part of those involved only, reflective practice in a civil society should aim at practically sufficient critical competencies on the part of everyone affected by, or concerned in, a decision. Only thus can all those concerned speak for themselves rather than depending on the goodwill and the competencies of those

involved. We will come back to this emancipatory implication of the concept of boundary judgements.

The concept of a critical handling of boundary judgements – of *systematic boundary critique,* that is (Ulrich, 1995, 1996a, b, 1998; Midgley et al., 1998) – suggests yet another basic observation concerning the need for a new understanding of reflective practice in civil society. Professionals as well as ordinary people often tend to claim too much, as they do not systematically reflect on the extent to which their claims are limited by the assumed system of concern. Either they do not "see" the boundary judgements in question, or they do not find it necessary to disclose them, as hardly anyone will challenge them to do so. In this regard, too, the idea of a critical handling of boundary judgements opens up new chances for reflective practice.

As a last point concerning the importance of boundary judgements, let us consider the relationship between the citizen and the expert. Professional expertise does not protect against the need for making boundary judgements; on the contrary, it depends on them just like everyday knowledge. Nor does it provide an objective basis for defining boundary judgements. It's exactly the other way round: boundary judgements stand for the inevitable selectivity and thus partiality of our propositions. It follows that experts cannot justify their boundary judgements (as against those of ordinary citizens) by referring to an advantage of theoretical knowledge and expertise. When it comes to the problem of boundary judgements, experts have no natural advantage of competence over lay people.

The implications of all this for promoting civil society appear significant indeed. In spite of the usual asymmetry of knowledge and skills between ordinary citizens and professional people there exists, at a deeper layer, a fundamental symmetry between them. At this deeper layer, professional people are in a situation that is no different from that of lay people. Their professional judgements depend no less on boundary judgements than everyday judgements. Citizens and experts here meet as equals.

Critically systemic thinking thus teaches us a truly important lesson in citizenship: below the surface of expert knowledge and professional behaviour, there exists a *deep symmetry* of all claims to knowledge and rationality, whether professional or not. Rationality and democracy need not be opposites, after all! The critical kernel that we associate with systemic thinking thus unfolds into a fundamental emancipatory potential.

CRITICAL SYSTEMS HEURISTICS, OR HOW TO PRACTICE SYSTEMATIC BOUNDARY CRITIQUE

The question is, can we realise this potential? Can we translate the critical kernel of the systems idea into concrete strategies for promoting reflective practice? How do the boundary judgements in question actually look like? In my work on Critical Systems Heuristics, I have attempted to develop not only a philosophical basis but also a pragmatic operationalisation of the idea of systematic boundary critique. I can only give a basic introduction here; for a fuller account, the reader may wish to consult some of my earlier writings (see, e.g., Ulrich, 1983a, 1987, 1988a, b, 1993, 1996a, b).

We have seen that the core idea of Critical Heuristics consists in supporting a process of systematic boundary critique with respect to a proposition 's assumed system of concern, that is, the reference system on which depend our judgements of fact and value and which really matters to us when we assess the merits and defects of alternative propositions. Systematic boundary critique is possible in three different settings (see Table I):

(1)   *Self-reflective boundary questioning:* "What are my boundary judgements?"
(2)   *Dialogical boundary questioning:* "Can we agree on our boundary judgements?"
(3)   *Controversial boundary questioning:* "Don't you claim too much?"

Table I. Three kinds of boundary questioning.
Systematic boundary critique is possible through individual reflection, through dialogical search for mutual understanding, and through controversial debate on boundary judgements.

(1)   Self-reflective boundary questioning: *"What are my boundary judgements?"*
- ❑   Are they different from those of other people with whom I have to do?
- ❑   What is their normative content, that is, how selective is my reference system as compared to the whole situation concerned, and what consequences may that have for other people?
- ❑   Should I consider alternative boundary judgements, and what would be their normative content?
- ❑   What ought to be my boundary judgements so that I can justify them vis-à-vis all those concerned?

(2)   Dialogical boundary questioning: *"Can we agree on our boundary judgements?"*
- ❑   Why do our opinions or claims differ?
- ❑   What different boundary judgements make us see different facts and values?
- ❑   How do you see things if you tentatively adopt my boundary judgements, and vice-versa? Can we find common boundary judgements? If not, can we at least understand and respect why we disagree?

(3)   Controversial boundary questioning: *"Don't you claim too much?"*
- ❑   Can I challenge an opponent's claims by making visible to others the boundary judgements on which these claims depend?
- ❑   Can I argue against an opponent's allegation that I do not know or understand enough to challenge the claim in question? How can I make a cogent argument even though I am not an expert and indeed may not be as knowledgeable as the opponent with respect to the issue at hand?

I will first introduce the framework for the first two applications of boundary critique; subsequently I will explain the third.

Boundary Categories, Boundary Questions

The terminological framework that I suggest is intended for use in the applied sciences – the disciplines concerned with professional intervention in human affairs – as well as in everyday social practice. That includes such diverse fields as management, planning, public policy, social work, counselling of all kinds, program evaluation, and many others, but also non-professional everyday problem solving and decision-making. The essential common concern is guiding reflective practice.

The framework defines *twelve basic boundary problems*. To each of these corresponds a *boundary category* (see Figure 2).
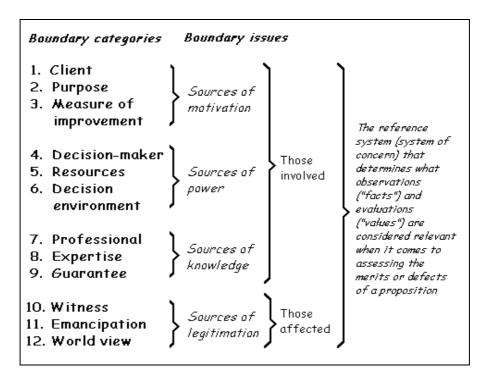

Fig. 2. Twelve critically-heuristic boundary categories.
Each category stands for a basic boundary issue in determining a proposal's system of reference. There are four groups of boundary issues, concerning issues of motivation, of power, of knowledge, and of legitimation. The first category of each group refers to a social role of those involved in, or those affected by, the definition of the system of concern; the second refers to a role-specific concern, and the third to a key problem in dealing with the clash of individual concerns that is characteristic of social reality. Each category requires boundary judgements in respect of both what is and what ought to be the case. Together these boundary judgements define the system of concern to which refer statements of fact or judgements of value.

Similarly to the categories of Kant's Critical Philosophy, the boundary categories of Critical Heuristics refer to a fundamental issue in the theory of knowledge: We cannot make statements of fact or of value without previously assuming – consciously or not – what belongs to the context to be considered and what falls outside the relevant context. In Kantian language, the boundary categories could be said to stand for *relatively a priori* judgements. *A priori* they are in that they come logically and temporally prior to analysing or describing an issue; *relative* they are in that they are not prior to all possible experience and evaluation in general, as Kant claimed for his *a priori* categories of theoretical and practical reason, but only to the way we see and evaluate a specific situation. Before we can meaningfully identify and judge relevant facts and values, we have to delimit the situation of interest – not only in space and time but also in respect of our intentions. This is why our boundary categories consider different sources of human intentionality: Whose interests are at stake? What different notions of improvement are there? What worldviews may be in conflict? What counts as relevant knowledge and expertise? And so on. The twelve boundary categories do not provide any answers to such questions; like Kant's categories, they merely draw our attention to the need for making some kinds of judgements before we can assert

any facts or values. In other words, before we can meaningfully talk about the merits of a proposition – concerning, for example, its validity, its importance, and its normative implications – we have to give empirical and normative content to these twelve abstract boundary categories.

Unlike Kant's categories, the boundary categories of Critical Systems Heuristics are not derived from Aristotelian formal logic but rather from sociological considerations; they address the *social actors* whose views and intentions are (or are to be) constitutive of the system of concern. I can introduce them only briefly here; the reader will find accounts of the systematic derivation and definition of the categories in the original literature (see esp. Ulrich, 1983a, pp. 231-258, and 1996a, pp. 19-22).

The boundary categories are arranged in four groups of three categories each. The first category of each group refers to a *social role* (rather than an individual person) who is or should be involved in defining the system of concern. For instance, in the first group, this is the *"client"* – the group of those who benefit or who ought to benefit. The second category addresses *role-specific concerns* that are or should be included. Again taking the example of the first group, this is the client's *"purpose"* – the interests or concerns that are motivating a proposal. The third category relates to *key problems* that are crucial for understanding the previous two boundary judgements. For instance, with respect to the first group of boundary categories, we cannot understand the purposes that really are constitutive of the relevant system of concern unless we can define the trade-offs between competing purposes. That is to say, we need to be able to determine to what extent the client is willing to sacrifice one purpose in favour of another. Defining an unequivocal *"measure of improvement"* means to clarify this key problem of the first group.

The four groups of categories are intended to address the following sources of human intentionality. The first group asks for the *sources of motivation* underpinning the way we define the system of concern; the second group is to examine the *sources of power;* the third is to identify the *sources of knowledge and expertise;* and the fourth group, finally, asks for the *sources of legitimation.*

Another way to introduce – and use – the twelve boundary problems is by way of a checklist of *boundary questions* (see Table II).

This way of introducing the boundary judgements offers us a systematic guide for boundary critique. It also allows us to formulate the boundary problems both in the descriptive ("is") and in the normative ("ought") mode. I find it important to answer the boundary questions in both ways, so that differences between "is" and "ought" assumptions are identified and can drive the process of unfolding the selectivity of the system of concern further.

Table II. Checklist of critically heuristic boundary questions.

For systematic boundary critique, each question needs to be answered both in the "is" and in the "ought" mode. Differences between "is" and "ought" answers point to unresolved boundary issues. There are no definitive answers, in that boundary judgements may always be reconsidered. By means of systematic alteration of boundary judgements, it is possible to unfold the partiality (selectivity) of an assumed system of concern from multiple perspectives, so that both its empirical content (assumptions of fact) and its normative content (value assumptions) can be identified and can be evaluated without any illusion of objectivity.

SOURCES OF MOTIVATION

(1) Who is (ought to be) the **client**? That is, whose interests are (should be) served?

(2) What is (ought to be) the **purpose**? That is, what are (should be) the consequences?

(3) What is (ought to be) the **measure of improvement**? That is, how can (should) we determine that the consequences, taken together, constitute an improvement?

SOURCES OF POWER

(4) Who is (ought to be) the **decision-maker**? That is, who is (should be) in a position to change the measure of improvement?

(5) What **resources** are (ought to be) controlled by the decision-maker? That is, what conditions of success can (should) those involved control?

(6) What conditions are (ought to be) part of the **decision environment**? That is, what conditions can (should) the decision-maker *not* control (e.g. from the viewpoint of those not involved)?

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

(7) Who is (ought to be) considered a **professional**? That is, who is (should be) involved as an expert, e.g. as a researcher, planner or consultant?

(8) What **expertise** is (ought to be) consulted? That is, what counts (should count) as relevant knowledge?

(9) What or who is (ought to be) assumed to be the **guarantor of success**? That is, where do (should) those involved seek some guarantee that improvement will be achieved – for example, consensus among experts, the involvement of stakeholders, the experience and intuition of those involved, political support?

SOURCES OF LEGITIMATION

(10) Who is (ought to be) **witness** to the interests of those affected but not involved? That is, who is (should be) treated as a legitimate stakeholder, and who argues (should argue) the case of those stakeholders who cannot speak for themselves, including future generations and non-human nature?

(11) What secures (ought to secure) the **emancipation** of those affected from the premises and promises of those involved? That is, where does (should) legitimacy lie?

(12) What **worldview** is (ought to be) determining? That is, what different visions of "improvement" are (should be) considered, and how are they (should they be) reconciled?

The Emancipatory Employment of Boundary Judgements

We have earlier distinguished three settings for applying the boundary categories or questions, namely, self-reflective, dialogical, and controversial boundary questioning (cf. Table I). The first two applications, self-reflective and dialogical boundary questioning, can help us see and understand boundary judgements, but they may not compel all those involved in a decision-making process to disclose their boundary judgements. Lest this last goal should depend entirely on their goodwill, we may also use the idea of boundary critique *against* those who are not willing to handle their boundary judgements so self-critically. This third application is thus of an emancipatory nature; it gives those who may be affected by a decision but have no say in it, a means to challenge boundary judgements that are taken for granted.

The emancipatory employment of boundary judgements aims to make visible the operation of power, deception, dogmatism or other non-argumentative means behind rationality claims. It accomplishes this purpose by creating a situation in which a party's unreflecting or even consciously covert use of boundary judgements becomes apparent. The idea is that whenever a party is not willing to disclose its real motives or interests, its claims tend to rely on boundary judgements that are taken for granted rather than being disclosed and critically discussed. If we give people a means to challenge such boundary judgements, we give them a powerful tool of lifting the veil of objectivity and superior rationality that covers the boundary judgements at work. When the optional character of underpinning boundary judgements becomes obvious, the mask of objectivity slips. For this to happen, it is quite sufficient to advance some equally subjective alternative boundary judgement. Everyone concerned can then see (a) that boundary judgements are at work that have been taken for granted, and (b) how the claim in question may look different if we assume different boundary judgements. The other side must now defend its boundary judgements that it has previously taken for granted; but it is of course unable to prove why they should be the only ones possible.

For example, in the controversy about genetically modified crops, even a lay person can in this way effectively question the risk assessment procedures that experts use in support of field releases of such crops. Once one has understood that even the most rigorously scientific character of these procedures does not make the results independent of previous boundary judgements, it is a compelling next step to express one's concern in terms of a related boundary question. Say your concern is whether the established scientific risk assessment procedures consider the long-term interests of the planetary ecology and of future generations as much as the short and middle-term interests of the agrochemical industry and research organisations. You might then apply the client category: "I think the concerns of future generations should also be considered in the assessment of the risks involved. I cannot see that they are among the facts and values that the procedure considers. How much does it reach into the future?" (an emancipatory employment of the client question).

Experts in such situations tend to take refuge in their advantage of knowledge; they are quick to point out that a non-expert's assumptions or objections are "merely subjective" or "incompatible with the facts". Justified as that may be, it will do little to establish the objective necessity of the expert's boundary judgements. On the contrary, once it has become plain that defining the system of concern is at bottom a subjective political act, experts who insist on their superior qualification or even objectivity concerning boundary judgements, actually disqualify

themselves. The "deep symmetry" of which I have spoken thus comes to the surface and creates a situation of improved argumentative equality, by ensuring to non-experts a basic *symmetry of critical competence* (Ulrich, 1993, p. 604f).

What is more, this emancipatory use of boundary judgements represents an entirely rational and therefore cogent way of argumentation. Following Kant (1787, p. B767), I call this kind of argumentation "polemical". For Kant, an argument is *polemical* if its critical force and its rationality do not depend on any positive validity claim. It aims not at asserting knowledge but only at exposing some dogmatic assertion of knowledge. It need not, therefore, establish a theoretical claim to knowledge or a normative claim to rightness; it only needs to question a claim in an irrefutable manner. That is to say, nobody should be able to prove it objectively wrong. This is precisely what an openly subjective advancement of alternative boundary judgements for critical purposes achieves! Citizens who use boundary judgements in this way need not be afraid that they will immediately be convicted of lacking expertise or competence. No theoretical knowledge or any other kind of special expertise or competence is in fact required.

To be sure, this argumentative advantage holds only for merely critical purposes. It allows us to show that a validity claim depends on boundary judgements that have not been declared properly or which are supported by power rather than by argumentative means; but that does not free us from the obligation to submit our alternative boundary judgements to critical discussion. The polemical employment of boundary judgements is thus not an unfair debating strategy that is all attack and no vulnerability, as it might appear at first; for as soon as we raise validity claims of our own, it does not relieve us from backing our position argumentatively, by asserting facts and norms. It is directed against dogmatic or elitist pretensions, but never against sincere argumentation attempts. Its purpose is not to avoid or undermine argumentation but to make it possible and meaningful. It is to ensure some symmetry of critical competence to those who are willing to subject their views to critical discussion. Thus it may help to create a situation in which proponents and opponents of a controversial proposition, whether they are professionals or lay people, can meet as equals, though not necessarily as equally knowledgeable and skilled persons.

This is why I believe that boundary critique is basic to developing a new critical competence for citizens as well as professionals. I believe that with this core concept of critically systemic thinking, we have indeed identified a new, untapped source of civil competence.[2]

Too Theoretical for Practice? Some Guidelines and an Example

The reader who has not been exposed to Critical Heuristics before may think that all this is quite nice but so abstract and complex that it is difficult to see how ordinary citizens and professionals could ever apply it. Are we not dealing here with fundamental philosophical difficulties of the systems idea and of the theory of knowledge and rationality in general, concerning, for example, the unavailability of comprehensiveness and objectivity? Precisely! The concept of boundary judgements, although of a genuinely systems-theoretical nature, is so

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[2] For a detailed account and some examples, see Ulrich, 1983a, pp. 305-310; 1987, p. 281f; 1993, pp. 599-605; and 2001.

elementary that grasping it can hardly be reserved to systems theorists and philosophers. Boundary judgements are not an esoteric invention of mine, they are an all-pervasive everyday reality; so why should it be impossible for ordinary citizens and professionals to grasp the concept?

Some instruction and practical training will of course be required, in terms that are accessible to everyone; the main difficulty may be one of didactics rather than of principle. I trust interested teachers (e.g., in civics or in science education) will contribute to this task of developing adequate didactic tools. In my bias, boundary critique should indeed become a mandatory subject at all levels of vocational training and continued professional education; it should also be taught as a core subject of civics at school and in adult education. I imagine a basic *critically heuristic training for citizens* (Ulrich, 1983a, p. 407, and 1993, p. 608) for all young people at the secondary school (high school) level, so that no future citizen would leave school without having acquired some practice in boundary critique.

So much for the future. But how can the reader make a start here and now? Table III offers a few basic guidelines.

To illustrate the use of the guidelines, let us consider an example of current interest, the problem of job losses and other social costs caused by of corporate restructuring and mergers. The problem is of concern to many people, but few have the expertise to analyse it conclusively. So how can non-experts hope to argue their concerns in a compelling way? It sounds like squaring the circle, but I think they can – by means of boundary critique. I cannot demonstrate the process in full detail here; but in keeping with the guidelines I offer a few comments that may get the reader started. In doing so, I assume that the reader has already familiarised himself with the boundary categories and questions, according to *Guideline 1*.

A typical case might look something like this. Some business company has not been profitable for a number of years (Figure 3, reference system A). It is a major employer and taxpayer of its community (reference system B). Other stakeholders are affected by the company's fate, too, although they need not be part of the local community, among them clients, suppliers, creditors, and the regional or national economy (reference system C). Shareholder representatives demand a rapid turnaround; lenders exert pressure. A "turnaround manager" is hired; a merger and lay-offs are in the air. Employee representatives request assurances concerning the security of jobs. Community officials remind the company of its responsibility toward the community. And so on. The company's executives face a basic conflict of interests. On the one hand, there are the legitimate interests of the owners (the shareholders) in their company's survival and profitability; on the other hand, there are equally legitimate needs of the company's employees and other stakeholders. What can be the managers' reference system?

Guideline 2 suggests that we watch out for some crucial boundary judgement that sets the managers' position apart from that of other stakeholders or from our own. In the present case, this is not difficult to see: the management is legally accountable to the company's owners. It is thus clear that it has to serve the shareholder interest in the first place (reference system A; client category). But what does it mean to serve the shareholder interest (category of the measure of improvement)? If the company, by imposing the costs of its revitalisation upon employees and other stakeholders, acts in ways that many people disapprove of (reference system C; category of the witness), its reputation and success and consequently the "shareholder value" may suffer. Even from a purely legal and economic perspective, the management is faced with a problem of boundary judgements.

Table III. Guidelines for Boundary Critique.

Follow these guidelines in your first attempts at boundary critique.

1. *Internalise the boundary categories.* First, familiarise yourself with the organisation and intent of the twelve categories according to Figure 2 and Table II. You should be able to formulate boundary questions without a checklist – almost intuitively. Consider boundary critique to be a way of thinking rather than as a technique.

2. *Learn to hear and see boundary judgements.* To get started, listen to everyday dialogues at the workplace, on the bus or in the media. Try to hear the boundary judgements between the lines: why are these parties at cross-purposes?

3. *Appreciate the normative implications of boundary judgements.* When you manage to identify boundary judgements, make a habit of asking yourself how they (or the claims they support) may affect different groups of people in different ways.

4. *Question boundary conventions.* Once you master steps 1 to 3, start to apply the boundary categories to your professional thinking. Question what you do and say professionally by looking at the underpinning boundary judgements. Try this not only in lonely reflection but also in discussions with colleagues, clients, or students; for example, "Why do we bound problems the way we do, concerning … (a boundary category)?" When colleagues first begin to wonder about the powerful concept behind your questions, you'll know you are on your way!

5. *Question both "is" and "ought" boundaries.* For each boundary category you consider, always ask both what *is* and what *ought* to be the corresponding boundary judgement. When the two findings differ, you have food for thought!

6. *Vary your boundary judgements.* The genuine purpose of boundary critique is not boundary setting but boundary testing, that is, unfolding the empirical ("facts") and normative ("values") implications of alternative boundary judgements. To this end, vary them systematically and check how your professional assertions then look. Keep your boundary judgements fluid – do not allow them to harden.

7. *Don't talk of boundary judgements; talk about what they mean to different parties.* You need not constantly talk of "boundary judgements" and "reference systems" in order to talk *about* them; that only makes people switch off. What matters is that everyone concerned can see what they mean for all the parties – and that there are options for defining them.

8. *Read and think about boundary critique.* If you wish to gain a deeper understanding of the principle of boundary critique, keep asking yourself what it means for your personal quest for competence.[3]

In many societies it has therefore become normal practice for restructuring companies to offer generous redundancy settlements in the form of early retirements, severance pay, etc. When a majority of citizens no longer approves of company reorganisations without such measures, it becomes economically rational for employers to consider employee interests as among the facts and values that matter to the system of concern. Does and should the system of concern, then, consist of the owners plus the employees as the management's chief clients (a new reference system combining A and A'; client category)?

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[3] *Note concerning guideline 8:* In a recent paper (Ulrich, 2001), I have addressed in a direct, didactically oriented way all those professionals, researchers, and research students who are interested in this question. My forthcoming book *Reflective Practice* offers a collection of essays along the same lines. On two earlier occasions, I have explained the process of unfolding boundary judgements in some detail; see Ulrich (1988b and 1996a). For case studies see Ulrich (1983b, c); Flood & Jackson (1991); Topp (1995); Midgley et al. (1998); and Carr and Levidow (2000).
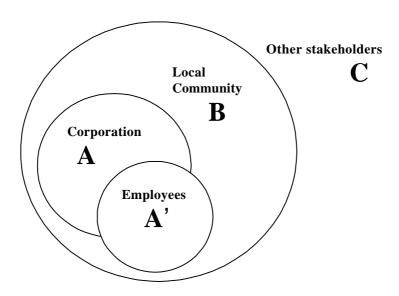
Fig. 3. Boundary judgements at work: the "turnaround" problem.

How decision-makers and professionals – e.g., business economists, theorists of business ethics, and political economists – deal with the social costs of corporate restructuring or mergers depends on what they (and the rest of us) see as their proper system of concern: A, A', B, or C or any combination of these or other reference systems?

Guideline 3 asks us to appreciate the normative implications of such a tentative boundary judgement. How would it affect other stakeholders? Let us stick to the client category: ideally, the system of concern would include all stakeholders (reference systems A, B, C and the rest of the world). But such an answer begs the question. The client question aims precisely at the fact that not everybody can be the managers' client and that no conceivable turnaround plan will ever serve everybody's needs. Any plan inevitably has redistributive effects – some people benefit, others lose; this is the normative content of the client question. To appreciate this normative content, we need to trace the plan's concrete consequences for all the parties concerned – a process that we cannot pursue any further here.

Next, *Guideline 4* invites us to challenge conventional ways of bounding problems. Let us try. In the management literature and in business ethics, the problem of whether managers should serve stakeholders as well as shareholders is discussed as the problem of "stakeholder management theory" (Freeman, 1984). As sensible as it seems to develop a counterconcept to the law's shareholder perspective, the theory has remained strangely unproductive and fuzzy. We begin to see the trap: there is no theoretical justification of boundary judgements, yet this is exactly what the theory aims to achieve. A more promising approach would try to establish a process of systematic boundary critique among all the parties concerned. That is to say, reflective practice rather than theoretical justification is the key!

But of course, the theoretical question of how we should deal rationally with the social costs of corporate restructuring and mergers remains. I suggest we turn to a second discipline concerned with this issue, economics. Let's invite some friendly economist to join our discussion. Economists usually prefer a narrow definition of the system that should be of concern to corporate executives (reference system A), while their own preferred reference system is the regional or national economy (reference system C). In an increasingly global economy, our friendly economist

explains, it is vital for business companies constantly to adapt to the rapid change of competitors so that they can maintain their competitiveness; corporate restructuring, mergers and acquisitions are necessary means to this end. Economists are willing to accept the social costs that this constant process of restructuring may cause, in particular the loss of jobs, because they expect them to be compensated by economic growth, that is, by the creation of new jobs and wealth elsewhere. In a dynamic economy, they argue, jobs are continuously created and destroyed; what matters is to encourage the creation of new jobs rather than maintaining unprofitable ones. The loss of jobs is then of a transitory nature and is thus not only acceptable but completely rational.

Guideline 4 again asks us to challenge this concept of "dynamic economic growth". One need not be a professional economist to see its deficiency: it fails to question the reference system for which the argument is valid. Even though in a dynamic economy the loss of jobs may indeed be transitory, this does not imply that the costs imposed on those who lose their jobs (reference system A') or on other stakeholders such as the local community (reference system B) are equally transitory; for the reference system is not the same (reference systems A' and B versus A and C).

I must be very brief about the remaining guidelines. Once the role of boundary judgements has become apparent, it will also be possible to question any party's presumption of superior objectivity and rationality. We will thus expect (or else, challenge) our friendly economist to check the normative claims he links to the "dynamic growth" model against some empirical measures as provided, for example, by income statistics: does the model indeed create new jobs and new wealth for all, or how do income levels and disparities effectively develop? *(Guideline 5)* Finally, we will want to explore more systematically what the "is" boundary judgements mean in terms of actual or likely consequences for all the parties concerned *(Guideline 6)* and what options there are *(Guideline 7)*. In the present case, we might want to know exactly which social costs the model includes within its reference system and which others it leaves out, to whose detriment; can we expand its reference system so that these costs are internalised?

CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR DEEP PROFESSIONALISM

I would like to close by considering some implications of what I have been trying to say for our concept of professional competence in a civil society.

First of all, I think a proper concept of professional competence today should require professionals to be aware of the boundary judgements on which they rely, and to limit their claims accordingly. Claiming too much is, unfortunately, very easy; real competence must prove itself through a Socratic self-limitation of its claims.

Second, competence reveals itself through responsibility. In view of the ever-growing scope of professional intervention, an adequate concept of competence today should enable us do deal systematically with the consequences that it may impose on third parties. Ethically competent (i.e., self-questioning) practice takes more than good intentions; it requires adequate conceptual tools such as those which I have suggested in this essay.

Third, well-understood professionalism cannot do without a strong civil society. Only thus can professionals as well as ordinary people act as responsible citizens, that is, follow their conscience rather than group pressures toward conformity. Hence, a competent professional will

aim at emancipating ordinary people from the situation of incompetence and dependency in which professional action frequently puts them.

Fourth, a competent professional will make it clear at all times that what in a specific situation counts as knowledge is always a question of what we *want* to count as knowledge. This is so because what is relevant knowledge depends on how we bound the situation of concern.

Fifth, when it comes to assessing boundary judgements, no one can claim a special advantage of competence over all others concerned. It is thus not only out of concern for professional ethics and civil society, but also for strictly epistemological and methodological reasons that reflective professional practice must contribute to competent citizenship.

As a sixth and last point, let us look at professional education. Some day citizens may begin to pay more attention than at present to the boundary judgements behind professional claims that concern them. They will then want to challenge these boundary assumptions both argumentatively and through their decisions as voters, clients, and consumers. So professionals should have every interest in understanding the concept of boundary critique early on. It cannot be too early for professional education to begin to prepare future professionals now and to shape their understanding of competence accordingly. In this new understanding, professional competence has something to do with competent citizenship; far from being in opposition to it, it will depend on it.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not arguing against professionalism, only against our contemporary notion of professional competence. The contemporary notion remains too superficial. Because it ignores the role of boundary judgements, it cannot offer us adequate guidance for reflective practice. Academically trained professionals in responsible positions could tell us about that! Worse, because it ignores the deep symmetry between professional and non-professional judgement, it makes professionals claim too much and causes them to put citizens in a situation of incompetence, even when they are supposed to serve them.

My plea is in favour of *deep professionalism:* Let us understand that reflective professional practice depends as much on a functioning civil society as it depends on expertise and intuition. In consequence, we would certainly be well advised to integrate within our notions of professional education and practice the critical turn which systemic thinking, if only we take it seriously enough, compels us to take. The essential idea is the interdependence of facts, values and boundary judgements as shown in Figure 1. In order to deal adequately with this interdependence, a deeply competent professional will at all times:

o   reflect on the boundary judgements that underpin his or her propositions;
o   disclose these boundary judgements to all concerned parties;
o   limit his or her claims accordingly;
o   make it clear that for every boundary judgement, there are options;
o   examine and explain the way in which asserted facts and values may look different when boundary judgements are changed;
o   make it clear to all concerned parties that when it comes to boundary critique, they are as competent as anyone else; and consequently,
o   accept and make sure that citizens can play the critically competent role that is theirs in a functioning civil society.

Such an approach must not be misunderstood as being voluntaristic or idealistic in the sense of merely appealing to the goodwill of those who have the knowledge and the power to control a decision-making process. On the contrary, I have explained why the approach has emancipatory implications: it creates a new symmetry of critical competence between those who have the say and all other parties concerned. Even where those in control do not respect this symmetry but, for whatever reasons, prefer to ignore the concerns of other parties or simply stop any further discussion, boundary critique does not lose all its emancipatory power: critical competence can then still be used to submit suppressed concerns to higher authorities or to voice them in public.

Thus deep professionalism is doubly important for civil society: not only is it grounded on civil society, but it promotes it as well. It considerably enriches the conventional concept of reflective practice. Perhaps most important, it challenges us to educate future professionals in such a way that they will associate their quest for professional competence with the quest for competent citizenship. They might then not only gain a deeper understanding of their role in the civil society but might also be prepared to give ordinary citizens a competent role to play in society's definition and legitimisation of good professional practice. Deep professionalism means practising professionalism as an expression of competent citizenship.

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