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Don McNeil
P.O. Box 312
Wyalusing, PA 18853
570-746-1646

Phil Henshaw
680 Ft. Washington Avenue - #1A
New York, NY 10040

Dear Phil,

Thanks for your letter of October 4. I apologize for the putative systemists such as Klir, Hammond, Weinberg, et al., who do not nowadays respond to communications from ordinary mortals such as we are. G.M. Weinberg was an important teacher of mine, but nowadays he won't answer letters from me or email supplications from the IIGSS. This kind of rudeness is another reason that the systems movement got constipated. As for the Hammond thesis, I gave my copy away but you can surely purchase one from the central repository and clearinghouse for all PhD theses; its present locale can be found via the internet. I think Hammond is currently president of the ISSS, prestige without purpose.

I do not know what data would satisfy you in your appraisal of the evolutionary trajectory of General Systems. In my view, it followed the ubiquitous sigmoid of development, reached a plateau rather rapidly, became fragmented (in an unholistic way!) into mathematical, social, biological, informatical, etc., specializations, made a few futile grasps at various different ways to develop further, then became recumbent in self-inflicted senescence and dead to the world. Raw data (from Klir or Troncale?) about total ISGSR/ISSS membership which grew to thousands before declining dramatically would tell you something; the encyclopedic published works of Klir would say a lot about the quantity of relevant publications and the number of related departments/centers over time (once many, now few). The trouble is that — when it was fashionable — a lot of people claimed to “do systems” when in fact they were doing no such thing. “Systems analysis” is not “general systems” nor is “cybernetics” per se. Weinberg's An Introduction to General Systems Thinking (1975) suggested some of what the subject matter could best have been, but few noticed. The days when medical doctors and family therapists and ecologists and management consultants all wanted a stake in GST — whatever it was — came and went, perhaps just as well since there never was a coherent GST beyond some feel-good phrases mixed up with some wrong-but-appealing paradigms. I think you may be asking too much when you ask for a “consistent measure” assignable to the work of “great thinkers.” Wild men like Kenneth Boulding defied ever known standard, as did plodders like James Grier Miller and radicals like Heinz von Foerster, as individuals and as to their influences on others. I think that Thomas Kuhn got the overall pattern right in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, albeit without appreciating the underlying cybernetic phenomena, when he observed that things go on in the established order of any realm with only relatively minor deviations from norms until internal disquiet or external disturbances upset the status quo and a new order becomes established. The transition may be purposeful, i.e., from idea to realization, or contingent without human intervention. Depending upon the choice of data and the mode of abstraction used by the percipient, the trace of the transition may appear to be an erratic lurching away from the previous norm (Eric Schwarz's “alea”) or a relatively smooth sigmoid from one norm to another or perhaps some other signature, e.g., upon a torus, if more dimensions are included. At this level of discourse, I have favored the sigmoid and have used it to teach developmental theory, but the Genealogy offers different ways to appreciate how things really happened. Indeed, when you speak of “formless systems” you could as well be speaking of the Genealogy itself and of the first drop-dead criticism which it inevitably receives: it's too messy/complicated/amorphous. It represents, nonetheless, the (richly interwoven) topology of THE CONVERSATION among many thinkers great and small from prehistory through to the present, long since having gone far beyond mapping the systems movement per se, though one can still excerpt such a genealogy from within it. One of the big mistakes of the systems movement was/is to focus on morphology (structure, isomorphisms, relations, etc.) almost to the exclusion of topology (process, homeomorphisms, connectivity, etc.). For my part, I would not expect to see formal artifacts such as growth curves emerge from richly topological subject matter, but there is plenty to learn in other dimensions, and wherever a recursion in thought produces a paradigm, there develops an eddy of mentation which may stream along as a theme, meme or meta-meme which keeps THE CONVERSATION going on. I would have to say that GST as such is been dropped from THE CONVERSATION and is therefore dead. What better indication is there than that relatively recent work concerning the “unity of knowledge” such as E. O. Wilson's Consilience make no references to GST or to any of its luminaries? I won't bore you here with the rest of my laundry list of what I think went wrong with the systems movement. On the subject of evolutionary curves and trajectories enriched with amusing data, however, I can recommend to you The Evolutionary Trajectory by Richard Coren as a different take on the subject. My review of his book is enclosed.

Please note that in its data dimension (not visible on the surface of the chart) the Genealogy already contains some explanatory materials which might shed light upon questions you are asking, and it is positioned to include as much data as anyone cares to pour into it. (It is made as a chart in Visio, not coded in Basic. Visual Basic is used as an adjunct only to write macros to search and report data on topics, themes, etc.) Anyone who runs Microsoft Visio 2003 on Windows and treats me nicely could possibly explore a copy, and collaboration would certainly help the project immensely. Meanwhile, I can try to answer questions about the systems movement which do not involve citations, number of publications, membership lists or other raw data which the ISGSR/ISSS might have on file but which I never kept.

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Best regards,
Don

Harmond Thesis
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