Systems + Futures Thinking + Theory = A Generative Dialogue

60 minute dialogue session
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A dialogue is offered to Anticipation to delve and discern the interplay and influence of systems thinking, its theory and methods in futures practices. A generative dialogue is a conversation style wherein all participants are enjoined to contribute to a shared discourse, where the potential for co-creating new insights and positions is encouraged in facilitation. The intention of the dialogue is to envision a possible research agenda through identifying opportunities for development of relevant systemic (social, ecological, sociotechnical) integrations and influences in anticipation work. A central purpose is to construct a shared understanding and (following the conference) a visual mapping of our conception of relationships between concepts across the fields.

Anticipation 2019 provides for a rich variety of trans/disciplines and informed views among participants to discuss the relevance of systems theory and methods to the emerging anticipation discourses. In foresight and futures studies we often see the inclusion of systems thinking as an adjunct to foresight, as if it were a methodology that aided our understanding of socio-technological evolution. Yet systems thinking provides a foundational discipline, with its roots as a generalized approach to integrating sciences. In many ways anticipatory studies has reached a similar nexus of transdisciplinary integration.

Systems and cybernetics theories have profound overlaps and co-evolutionary development with futures thinking. As with design, these fields provoke normative concerns for appropriate technology and human uses, ethical societal evolution, socially responsible design, and governance. Many first-generation systems thinkers were considered futurists, and their methodologies bridged the evolution of social systems into normative future expressions of those systems. Kenneth (and Elise) Boulding, Hasan Özbekhan, Erich Jantsch, Russ Ackoff, Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan continue to enlighten futures thinking 50 years on. Our participatory methodologies owe debts to Emery and Trist's Search Conference and Jungk's Futures Workshop.

Yet later generation systems thinking has not sustained the relationship between futures as substantively, and both discourse fields have integrated but not significantly progressed each other. And as systems fields have also diverged into systems sciences, complexity, and cybernetics, these all have different views and methodological stances to consider. Yet obvious convergences in critical systems topics, such as world systems (Wallerstein) and social systems (Luhmann, Christakis) are not commonly referenced in futures work, for example in world-building theory. Futures concepts are not commonly cited in systems studies. Anticipation theory has not found its way to the systems sciences literature (where *anticipatory systems* has a completely different function than systemic temporality). Happily, we see some integration occurring in the pragmatic disciplines – design/systemic design, planning, architecture. Yet there is nothing like a shared canon of corresponding concepts.

Crossover theory and methods, at a meaningful level of uptake, are not apparent in our various conferences. Re-integrating these knowledges is critical to the fields of systemic design and anticipation.

Systems thinkers have always expressed powerful social visions for human futures. This ethical tradition of systems thinking is often overlooked when we focus on methodologies and concepts, but we might reintroduce this legacy in the discussion of the relationship of systems to futures thinking and co-creation. In this session we call on participants to engage insight into questions such as:

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- What foundational systems concepts have the most potential for impact in futures work?
- How do systems theories contribute to an ethical and inclusive practice in anticipatory studies today?
- How do systemic critiques of the evolution of technology trends, cultures, and political economy inform futures studies?
- What emerging disciplines in systems (e.g. systemic design, systems change) and in foresight (e.g. worldbuilding, future literacy) ought to be connected across disciplines?
- How might systems methods address the inherent complexity of multi-stakeholder futures?
- Does the framework of critical systems theory and similar socially critical systems perspectives suggest a similar model for critical futures?

Approach:

An Art of Hosting approach engages participants to share ideas in an open circle and collaborate in small group dialogue, with visual mapping of small group conversation in World Cafés.

- Start – Peter Jones facilitates, introduces the process and speaks to the key questions, allowing some latecomers to arrive before starting. Participants start in a circle of chairs, with brief introductions.
- Opening dialogue: Triggering questions to inspire contributions: What are in your view is a major contribution of systems theory or principles to future studies?
- We define categories of interest for break-out groups. Small groups are hosted by a volunteer scribe.
- Group composition of contributions in summarizing discussions.
- Final dialogue to discover and generate key trend patterns, research agenda issues, and points of significant convergence.

Conference themes relevant to the session

The inquiry touches on many of the conference themes, whether directly or indirectly:

- What does it mean to care for the future (cultures of anticipatory care)?
- Where do we focus design and analytical efforts to foster anticipatory care?
- What systemic relations are found among prospectives, interventions, collaborations?
- How do we work with multiple stakeholders across lifeworlds, temporal worldviews?
- How might we integrate systemic views and strategic futures?
- Relations between prospects, interventions, collaborations.
- Discovering, engaging, and respecting variety in multi-stakeholder planning
- Relationship between systems and futures literacy, relevant to governance
- Systemic design, temporal structuring, and strategic futures.
- How do risk and interdependencies influence one another?
- How anticipatory networks are social systems with myriad connections
- Linking political economy, financial services, governance and distributed policy making.