

# **A PROPOSAL FOR MODIFYING THE IMPACTS OF SYSTEMICS ON HUMAN CONTEXTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

People frequently acknowledge the others just to control, possess or suppress them when they put into practice systems thinking ideas. Individuals, including systems practitioners, quite often carry out interventions that entail a subtle form of violence insofar as these interventions convey a reduction of the alterity of the other to the same, to the I. This violence is frequently promoted by a will to possess and control. This will can be found in the work of many systems thinkers, and it has been noticed by a few but important group of systemists. By acknowledging and reflectively scrutinizing this generalized will to control and possess we can significantly change the impact of systemics on society. The will to control quite often engenders a denial of the rationality of the others, subsuming them under the hegemony of the I. The author argues in favor of systems approaches that strive towards alterity, towards that which transcends the systems thinker's ideas and categories. This entails challenging the way in which concepts such as totality have been traditionally understood within the systems thinking field. Based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas the author proposes an alternative set of philosophical underpinnings that have supported his systems practice within human contexts during the last years, and that can significantly change the impacts of systemics on society. The author illustrates his ideas by making reference to several recent systemic interventions.

Keywords: systems thinking, Levinas, philosophy, violence, respect, alterity.

## **ETHICS AND THE ALTERITY OF THE OTHER**

Emmanuel Levinas argues that Western philosophy “has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the Other<sup>1</sup> to the same” (1998, p.43). He stands against this ontological imperialism of Western philosophy which quite often acknowledges the Other just to possess or suppress it. This ontological imperialism fights against alterity<sup>2</sup> by incorporating it within the expanding circles of the same. Within this context the Other is only other in a limited sense (Davis, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘Other’ implies a particular way of conceiving the personal Other (Bernstein, 1991) whose meaning, I hope, will be gradually explained through this text.

<sup>2</sup> Alterity is that which transcends our ideas and categories.

## A Proposal for Modifying the Impacts of Systemics on Human Contexts

I claim that the aforementioned ontological imperialism has been present within systems thinking, sometimes in subtle and surreptitious ways. This becomes clearer if we acknowledge that systems approaches have not always been reflective on their ontological, epistemological and ethical underpinnings. Those few systems approaches that reflect on their philosophical underpinnings have usually focused on their ontological and epistemological underpinnings (for instance, see Checkland, 1981; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Flood and Romm, 1996; Jackson, 2000; Sterman, 2000). Quite frequently they have focused their attention on discussing their ontological and epistemological foundations, completely ignoring or giving less importance to their ethical underpinnings. In this short paper I argue in favour of systems approaches where ethics is central, where the ethical is not put in repose in favour of the ontological or the epistemological<sup>3</sup>. Why do I have such preference? Because by putting in repose the ethical considerations the Other is in high risk of being devalued or suppressed, something which fails to do justice to the Other, which allows or even deploys violence against the Other. Systems approaches that focused merely on epistemology and/or ontology have a higher probability of allowing for a violent suppression of the Other in comparison to systems approaches that give primacy to ethical reflections.

I am not arguing in favour of devaluing the epistemological or the ontological. I am arguing in favour of valuing the ethical as well. To achieve this aim I claim that systems approaches should give primacy to the relation between the Same and the Other. This relation is the space where knowledge and ethics are involved.

Levinas (1999) points out that our responsibility for the Other rises in the encounter with the “face of the other”. Here “face” does not mean a human face. The “face” to which Levinas points is not a human face. It is rather a transcendental concept that makes reference to the infinite responsibility that the I should assume for the Other. Levinas’ “face” is a revelation. The face is an authority: The “absolute nakedness of a face, the absolute defenceless face, without covering, clothing or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my *violence*, and opposes it in an absolute way” (Levinas, 1987, 21). The face of the Other entails an encounter with what Levinas’ calls infinity, which means “the alterity of a thought which thought cannot contain” (Bernasconi, 1992, p.695). The infinite is beyond knowledge. It is an alterity irreducible to interiority and totality (Levinas, 1999). Infinity refers to the otherwise than being, being’s other. Infinity, transcendence, alterity, and ethics are concepts used by Levinas (1998, 1999) to name the other than Being.

The Other entails an irreducible alterity that challenges my comprehension and possession of the world. The Other is a mystery, never fully known or possessed. The Other is wholly Other. However, the Other is simultaneously an ego like me: “the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I”<sup>4</sup> (Derrida, 1978, p.127). When the aspiration to *comprehensive* understanding guides me

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<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on the epistemological can be noticed in some systems approaches that have almost fully focused on the development of new methodologies, a phenomenon which became usual during the 1990s.

## A Proposal for Modifying the Impacts of Systemics on Human Contexts

in my relation with the Other (something common among systems thinkers), the Other becomes in danger of being violently reduced by me if I fail to respect the Other's alterity.

### TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE OTHER

Within the scope of systems thinking and practice we may develop two types of relationships with the Other. The first type entails taking what is other and making it part of what I am (Levinas, 1998). Within this type of relationship the I does violence upon the Other by suppressing the Other's alterity. We receive nothing from the Other but what is already in us. This implies reducing the Other to a theme or object, a reduction of the Other to the same, denying the Other's alterity (see Levinas, 1998). Evidence of this type of approach can be found in many disciplines, including the systems approach. For instance, within *some* 'hard' systems approaches individuals are frequently treated *only* in algebraic terms, or they are represented only as mathematical variables. Their individuality is completely omitted. Individuals are apprehended and approached only in their generality and not in their individuality. Their alterity is obliterated. In this way the self exhibits its self-sufficiency, its self-centeredness, its egoism. The ethical relation, which a relation with someone who retains her/his alterity, is devalued and subordinated to a relationship of knowing, or a relationship of power and control. The Other is reduced to the same. Knowledge, control, possession and power display a questionable primacy over ethics.

In some cases, systems thinkers' attempts to thematize and to comprehend the others aim at a suppression or control over others. I do not pretend this to be a peculiar characteristic of systems thinkers. It is a characteristic of many individuals who work in almost all disciplines and with a large diversity of approaches. Therefore, not only system thinkers should be aware of it.

However, within systems thinking and practice a second type of relationship with the Other might prevail. In this case the I moves itself towards an alien that is part of the exteriority of the I. The movement of the I towards the Other does not intend to produce the disappearance of the distance between the same and the Other. It is an attraction towards that which transcends the I and its categories, an attraction that respects the Other's alterity. In this movement the I receives from the Other beyond his/her capacity. The I is taught by the Other, the I is open to the Other, the I learns. This second type of relationship with the Other involves developing a communication with the Other based on a non-allergic relation with alterity, that considers the Other and does justice to him/her.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I depart from Levinas' (1987, 1998) ideas and embrace some of Derrida's (1978) ideas. Levinas rejects calling the Other an alter ego because he believes that this would neutralize its absolute alterity (see Derrida, 1978).

## A Proposal for Modifying the Impacts of Systemics on Human Contexts

I argue in favour of systems approaches that contribute to calling the Same into question. By doing this I claim that systems approaches should promote ethics, and particularly social justice.

Systems approaches should promote encounters that do not negate the otherness, the fundamental strangeness of the other. These approaches should keep away from the emphasis that is frequently put on the ideas of *control, possession, and comprehension* and get closer to other notions such as *approach, caress, fecundity and proximity*.

The respect for the alterity of the Other not only demands questioning the aspiration to comprehensive understanding (a common aspiration within the systems thinking field). It also involves questioning the idea that everything can and should be conceptualized as a totality. To understand this we can follow Levinas' argument (1998) when he says that in Plato's *Republic* Socrates declares that good is different from essence. Moreover, the good transcends essence in dignity and power (Plato, 1974). Because the good transcends essence, it is not part of Being or totality. It surpasses any totality. As it has been pointed out, there is an irreducible distance between the same and the Other which should be preserved if we want to respect the Other's alterity. Therefore, one cannot situate oneself outside of the relation between the same and the Other and put them together under one gaze, so that the irreducible distance that separates them is filled.

“The totality of Being is flawless and all-encompassing: because it incorporates alterity within the empire of sameness, the Other is only other in a restricted sense. Totality has no outside, the subject receives nothing, learns nothing, that it does not or cannot possess or know.” (Davis, 1996).

I argue that by critically and permanently reflecting on the ethical underpinnings and consequences of systems approaches we can significantly change the impact of systemics on society. The aforementioned reflection should contribute to questioning ourselves about the correctness and appropriateness of our systemic interventions, as well as about our lack of interventions whenever it would have been right and possible to undertake a systemic intervention but we failed to do so.

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## **A Proposal for Modifying the Impacts of Systemics on Human Contexts**

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