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The Future is Rational Only in Hindsight

How the disciplines of systems science helped to shape our world

by Scott Johnston

“I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity. However, I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side.”

– Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Rohnert Park, CA -

This past July, I attended the 100th annual meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, the well-known interdisciplinary community dedicated to all things systemic, to hear their story and learn how it came to be that they played such a critical role in shaping and influencing the state of world we live in today.

On the short airtram ride from downtown San Francisco to the Sonoma State campus, I scanned the historical archives, looking for a beginning point for my story. As it turns out, the conference held fifty years ago in 2006, when the community last gathered at Sonoma State, is widely recognized as a cusp point in its history.

The 50th annual conference, titled “Complexity, Democracy and Sustainability”, led by then-president Debora Hammond, was permeated by a belief that the time had come to step into the world for so long envisioned in books, papers and presentations of possibility. The gathering culminated with a spirited determination among the members to help shape the future by “living into being” a more sustainable and just world. Ripples turned to waves as ISSS members stewarded their body of work into the everyday actions and processes of the world around them, helping to navigate through the collapse and catastrophe of the first quarter of the century and escape to a new era of peace, openness and cooperation

as humanity learned anew its role in stewarding the health of the planet.

It was at this conference that the ISSS did a 50-year backcasting exercise, in which they imagined the world in 2056 and created a sort of history of the future. It was not prescriptive, nor did it have great detail. They were not seeking agreement or mandates, or to create a strategic planning process. They were looking for patterns and relationships, playing with possibilities and creating momentum for the future they imagined.

Generally speaking, three phases that they saw emerging over the 50-year period can be described as:

The Crumbling, Tumbling Years

decay and continued failure of the existing 2006 systems, values, and ways of working that became so prevalent in the latter part of the 20th century.

The Embedding Years

Members of ISSS joined with the many small initiatives and regional re-creating, infusing a quality of complexity science into these new initiatives and providing them with innovative tools and a way of thinking/working together.

A New Synthesis: Local AND Global

No longer an either or world but one becoming more and more mature in how to be with each other, using feedback to steer and perturb the system toward a vital, healthy world for all Earth species.

This group of future historians was clear that they could *not*, from the vantage point of 2006, see Sir Holmes’ simplicity on the other side of the complexity humanity had tangled itself in. Rather, efforts at this time



In 2006, the ISSS used boxes made out of a material known as “cardboard” to capture their ideas and aspirations for their future. Boxes such as these continue to be an integral part of ISSS collective memory.

focused on creating a path for which the transition to a broadly held systems perspective could unfold. After the 2006 conference concluded, ISSS members went out of their way to infuse rigorous systems thinking in all their endeavors and conversations, no matter how prominent or trivial they may have seemed at the time. In their view, this would be crucial not only to the success of the projects, but also in firmly rooting the systems perspective in the everyday workings of their communities.

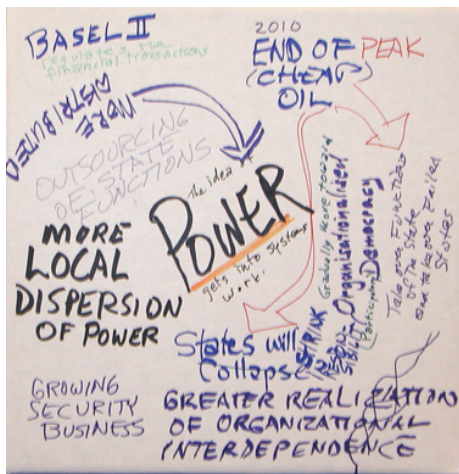
About the Author

It is a pervasive belief that Scott Johnston is, in fact, a myth; a journalistic avatar speaking not on behalf of Time Magazine, but rather on behalf of the collective memory of the Social Systems Design Team at the 2006 meeting of the ISSS. Neither Johnston nor Time, Inc. could be reached for comment.

Historical records indicate that a vast majority of ISSS members took active roles in community projects and initiatives between 2006 and 2012. Academics helped each other get out of their ivory towers and into community affairs, bringing critical tools and research with them. Coinciding with the surge in community participation was the emergence and growth of local chapters of the ISSS, most of which are still active today.

“Systems View” Gains Prevalence

Not surprisingly, the group speculated that the political and organizational hierarchies built up over the course of the previous century would continue to crumble and that attempts to “control” the processes that upheld these structures would actually hasten



“We’re entering into an era of collapse and destruction. The question is, what will we create? What will we give rise to?”

their decline. They foresaw new structures and organizational models based on a growing understanding of complexity and systems, filling in where the decay happened. Indeed, some of the conference goers I spoke with claimed that the catch-phrase “holarchy not hierarchy,” popularized in the second decade of the century, was actually coined at the 2006 annual meeting. With more holistic approaches, the group predicted, would come a broader understanding and acceptance of responsibility and accountability for actions at both the individual and community levels.

A Worldwide Infrastructure

ISSS ’06 foresaw that global corporations would come to recognize their main role was to create a worldwide infrastructure that would enable local and regional businesses to provide the primary economic backbone within the vast majority of communities.

Decline of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism would peak around 2015, according to the documentation from the 2006 meeting, before receding amidst increasing conversation and collaboration among various spiritual and cultural worldviews. Likewise, scientific and spiritual views increasingly saw each as complimentary of the other. In so doing, one could say they found the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

The arts and media impact would be instrumental in helping different worldviews and experiences come together. At no time would this be more important than during the first quarter of the century, as ecological and social crises were set to explode. Dialogue and deliberation processes become



“At some point, we made a major breakthrough in spiritual systems science ... from a bi-polar fundamentalist path to multi polar spiritual path. Back in 2006, we were an empty vessel.”

much more sophisticated in their creativity and attention to aesthetics.

Currency Events

Long gone are the days of a single dominant currency or market. In the early part of the century, across local, regional and global communities, the economic models and currencies we now take for granted were taking root. ISSS members would be at the

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT?!	
Predictions for the first quarter of the 21st century...	And the history as we know it...
> The US prison population would grow over the first two decades of the century until it exceeded the number of people employed by the private sector.	> By most accounts, prison population peaked in 2013, at about 75% of private sector employment.
> Religious fundamentalism would reach a peak around 2015, before finding a “new center” that would bring newfound appreciation and acceptance of multi-culturism and diverse spiritual beliefs.	> There is no clear consensus on the strength and influence of the various fundamentalist worldviews, but most agree it has been diminishing over the past twenty years.
> Pets would be granted full rights of inheritance.	> Only California, Oregon, Minnesota, Vermont and Louisiana have enacted some form of pet inheritance rights, though eight additional states are currently considering similar laws.

