

Shifting agrifood systems: a comment

Michael M. Bell

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Call me a grouch. But as much as I admire the energy, creativity, and insight of the work represented in this special issue, I am irritated by a word common to all these papers: *system*, and its plural form, *systems*. Somewhere along the line, agrifood studies (or agrofood studies, as we used to call it in the US before we finally started reading, and became captivated by, the excellent European literature) became the study of agrifood “systems.” I have been part of this linguistic tide myself, along with my irreplaceable colleague at Madison, the late Fred Buttel. Back in 2003, we renamed our local weekly seminar on the topic SociETAS, for Sociology of Environment, Technology, and Agrifood Systems. Societas is Latin for fellowship, community, and society—clever, we thought, certainly in comparison with the old name STARE, for Sociology of Technology, Agriculture, Resources, and Environment. We also liked having an S-word on the end to complete our acronym, I must admit. But we were also trying to update our seminar with the current lingo.

And if this special issue is any measure, the word system is very much in vogue in agrifood research. It not only appears in the name of the issue but also in

every paper: 19 times in Valerie Imbruce’s contribution, 21 times in Chris Rosin’s, 24 times in Sandy Brown’s and Christy Getz’s, 26 times in Sophie Dubisson-Quellier’s and Claire Lamine’s, 43 times in Amy Trubeck’s and Sarah Bowen’s, and a whopping 76 times in Pierre Stassart’s and Daniel Jamar’s. The editors use the word system 18 times in their short introduction.¹ Wow.

As I said, I have been part of this tide. But recently I have been thinking a lot about the word “system” and what we try to do with it in studies of environment, food, and agriculture (Bell 2005; Bland and Bell 2007; Bland and Bell, *forthcoming*). At the risk of being a Canute, I would like to step out of the tide and interrogate the word, asking us to reflect on whether we really need it or want it.

There was a time, not too long ago, really, when the social sciences were choking on the word “system,” and pretty much decided in the end to spit it out. I am referring to the debates in the 1960s and 1970s over functionalism, widely voiced in sociology, anthropology, and political science, and to a lesser degree in geography. The work of Talcott Parsons occasioned special heat in sociology, the social science where I received most of my training. Parsons’ notion of a “social system,” with his neat

M. M. Bell (✉)
Department of Rural Sociology and Gaylord Nelson
Institute for Environmental Studies, University of
Wisconsin-Madison, 340C Agricultural Hall,
1450 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706-1562, USA
e-mail: michaelbell@wisc.edu

¹ I am counting appearances of “system” or “systems” in the abstracts, main texts, and notes, excluding the references, and using the drafts that the editors made available to me. The counts might be somewhat different in the published versions.

little fourfold tables that one could slot all of social life into, adapting social goals into integration with underlying latent functions (to reduce all of Parsons into a clause), simply had nothing to say about overturned police cars burning in the streets, or more peaceful forms of protest, and the social movements that led to them. It was conservative and static, giving control over to the top, to the system—which is precisely what the protestors were objecting to.

Now, I do not think there is some kind of hidden conservative agenda in the rise of studies of “agri-food systems,” nor an effort to resurrect the ghost of Parsons. Rather, I think the return of the word is part of the good-hearted appeal for more holistic understanding that the 1960s and 1970s also demanded. At the same time that functionalism was coming into question for its static, top-down conservatism, the academic and cultural mood also came to doubt the horrors of reductionism, underscored by technology’s blind assault on the environment and by a sense of social fragmentation that was isolating us from each other as much as technology was isolating us from our ecological home. The word “system” has gained enormous popularity in recent years as a way of highlighting the connectedness and consequences of a world in which, as John Muir is reputed to have once put it, “you can never do just one thing.” The world is a deeply involved place. Butterfly wings cause hurricanes. McDonald’s cheese burgers cut down rain forests and impoverish workers. A radical critique of reductionism, and of the powers that try to keep us thinking that way, moves much of the embrace of the word “system.” We seek, I think, an agrarian connectedness that restores our relationality, contra our reductionist rationalism.

I am all for recognizing the connected involvements of life. This is a venerable insight, and we need to keep reminding ourselves about it. (Indeed, the word system dates back to the ancient Greeks, who saw a need even then to issue this reminder.) But I also think we should remember both lessons of the 1960s and 1970s debate, contradictory as they may appear to be. Holism has its problems too.

I do not mean its potential conservatism, though. I want to make plain that I do not intend an *ad hominem* attack on the politics of contemporary agrifood scholars. As I have discussed, the word systems is often part of a radical critique of the institutions of reductionism. As well, the word has a still-

widespread use in the Marxist sense, also dating from the 1960s, of the “system” which dominates us, and which Habermas promoted through his much discussed theory of the colonization of the life-world by the system (to get all of Habermas into a clause) and which Wallerstein has similarly promoted through “world systems theory.” As I read the agrifood literature, I hear the word systems being used in both ways: as a reminder of the connections we have lost sight of, and as a reminder of the connected-up top that oppresses those on the bottom. In either case, I believe authors seek a transformative, progressive result through the word.

No, my concern is that we miss much potential for a transformative progressivism by focusing on connectedness without an equal focus on disconnectedness. Our troubles, and our solutions, stem from both. Much that concerns us is the lack of connection where we wish connections existed, and much that concerns us is connectedness where we wish connections did not exist. In this sense, the two main uses of the word systems proceed along without the insights of the other. We argue for agrarian connectedness where we wish for holist happiness and we argue for agrarian boundedness where we fear a holist horror—the holist happiness of ecological and social harmony, say, or the holist horror of the capitalist order, say. But ecological and social harmony often comes about through severing connections we do not like, for example between fertilizer and groundwater, or between food and money. And a powerful way to crumble the power of capitalism is through widening the cracks of disconnection that already exist within it. In either case, our analytic success comes in part through the recognition of the transformative potentials of disconnection. Moreover, we can add to a desired holism by linking up bits not previously fully engaged, or undermine a disliked holism through making connections that are currently unrealized, which in either case indicates that the supposed holism was not so whole after all, and thus changeable. Here we contribute to transformation through connecting what we recognize to be disconnected.

If transformation is your goal, the important bits for scholars to study are just as much where systems are least as they are where systems are most. I fear that our current infatuation with the metaphor of system, however, is taking attention away from the former. From where the conflicts and confusions

jangle. From where the possibilities for change come. From where the wild things are.

I do not offer this thought as a wiser route to order, however—a kind of left Hobbesianism. Yes, wiser order can come of it, which would not be a bad thing, depending on the wisdom we bring to it. But if we come to lament that wisdom, we will need an eye for disorder (as there will inevitably be, if that lament even exists) to contest it. So I offer my argument as both a wiser route to order and to disorder.

I also offer my argument as a caution about what I suspect is another source of the popularity of the metaphor of system. Am I deceived when I hear in it a desire for scientific authority? Science has long gained credence through its demonstration of the incredible, the magic realism of revealing what is hidden from the everyday observer. The notion of the system takes up this wand by claiming connections that are larger than any one of us, that no one person can see without this help. Can anyone actually travel along with the pesticides and anhydrous nitrogen as they seep through the soil into the groundwater? Has anyone, aside from a dedicated ethnographer or journalist, ever been with the animal and its later rendition as meat the whole way as it went from insemination through growth to the meat packer and then to the plate? Is it possible to live long enough to shake the hand of every person, rich and poor, near and far, who was involved in getting to any one of us what we eat in a week? Aside from scavengers and grow-your-own types? Even here we cannot be sure, if a full accounting were done of scavenging and growing your own, ever giving science something else to reveal through a demonstration of connections of the system that were previously invisible from our awareness. The same could be said of related metaphors like network or chain, also popular in

these papers, and which also seek to unveil the mysterious connections behind the shadows of reality that pass before our eyes.

So I am anti-science too? Not at all! Please, please keep revealing those mysteries. Seriously. But please also be aware of how the seductive power of science's narrative can lead us to confuse rhetoric for revelation. Nor am I against the use of metaphors of connection and interaction. Far from it. Sometimes—indeed, very often—a sense of these involvements is exactly what we are missing. What I am concerned about, however, is our seeming unreflective use of words like system or network or chain, leading us to focus on the mysteries they reveal and to ignore those that they obscure: the darker mysteries of disconnection and disorder and the gift of unfinalizability that they offer.

Perhaps we are increasingly ready to accept this gift. At least I find encouragement in this special issue's framing of its work as the study of agrifood systems in the plural, already indicating the presence of disjunctures, and as the study of how they are shifting, already warming to the vitality of disjunctures. Long live that vital presence.

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