Stafford Beer: the man who could have run the world

Rosemary Bechler

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Stafford Beer achieved the hardest of all pedagogic tasks: he changed the way people think. His protean influence stretches from generations of inspired students, through Salvador Allende's Chile, to the collective brain of **openDemocracy.** *A huge, life-affirming figure has passed, but his work will long survive, says our international editor.*

Stafford Beer, philosopher, scientist, poet, painter, founder of Management Cybernetics and world leader in operational research, who has died at the age of 75, was much larger than life. His handsome photograph in the *Guardian* obituary is entitled 'Subversive Showman'. If he fitted neatly into neither the British establishment, nor the academic nor indeed the business world, it was partly because of the sheer impact of the man – but also because of what he had to say.

His self-appointed task was to bring an often unwelcome message to whoever would listen, including the twenty-two governments who hired him as a consultant over the years, about the need for 'effective organisation' in companies, social services, great institutions, whole countries, and international communities, if they were not to be left behind by technological advance, threats to economic survival, and loss of faith in established authority – by, in short, complexity and change.

Some people 'got it': they joined the band of friends and followers from around the world, and were rewarded by Stafford's patient and loyal interest in their own efforts to apply what they had learnt. They were inspired by his various favourite dicta, such as 'Don't bite my finger: look where it's pointing', or 'You accuse me of using big words that you find hard to understand. But you need big words for big ideas. And you *should* find it hard to understand.'

Many more, who were nevertheless profoundly influenced by his work, found these admonitions unfashionable and irritating, and his many books unreadable. They often failed to see the indefatigable energy which he devoted to trying to make himself better understood: Stafford's ideas

in Latin, in thirteen languages, in poetry, in a summary for business schools, as applied to car engines, hospitals, prisoners or stars.

Understanding a dynamic system

Even in recent years, when the prophetic vision was accompanied by a bardic white beard and much frustration at the shrinking amount of time he had left to do what he wanted, those of us lucky enough to meet him will never forget the feeling that you had been put on alert by a life-force far larger than your own.

There are two of us in this office. Rob Passmore, currently wrestling with our marketing plan, simply says: 'He altered people's lives. He changed my life. I think about what he had to say on systems, every day.' Rob's encounter took place in the mid-1990s at Swansea University, having opted for a third-year course in Managerial Cybernetics. 'The first thing you registered was that he was absolutely different to any other lecturer you had ever met. He simply wasn't harnessed to the system.' His interests ranged across disciplines, cultures and faiths. With the class swiftly divided over his 'showmanship', Rob was one of those who liked the twinkle in Stafford's eye as he helped himself to another tot from the half-litre bottle of 'apple juice', which everyone knew was the white wine spritzer favoured by Lord Byron.

They repaired to the pub to talk about the day's ideas after every lecture, and were frequently invited out for sessions (perhaps including Stafford's own special brand of yoga and Sanskrit readings) at the small stone cottage in Ceredigion, mid-Wales, which was his retreat once he renounced worldly possessions in the mid-1970s. Stafford, who was tremendously proud when his many visiting chairs, presidencies and honorary degrees were capped by the rare award to him of a DSc from the University of Sunderland in 2000, nevertheless cut his own path. He made his way determinedly down the academic food chain to an undergraduate level where he felt able to work, untrammelled by the closed mind-sets of the higher reaches of the British academic system. Rob for one, considered himself lucky.

'What some people never forgave him for was that he was right. The Viable System Model he was teaching was the most effective model of any and every system that I've ever come across. In his most profound work, *The Brain of the Firm and the Heart of Enterprise*, he takes as his subject no less complex and dynamic a system than the human body itself, to show how that system, in order to be viable, must stand up in its own right: what kind of processes it needs for effective decision-making, development and implementation, and what kind of measurement.'

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'Of course, Beer's idea of a "system" was not that of common parlance, as in a "sales system" set up to operate like a machine in any eventuality. Beer's "system" is completely dynamic. Take the circulation of the blood, for example. You cannot map how that works in a static way, by showing someone a picture of his or her veins. What you have to understand is the circulatory system as a system of control. Beer's thinking revolved around that.'

'But there again, his notion of "control" was not quite the same as anyone else's. It wasn't authoritarian. The system exists anyway, whether it works or not. And the trick is to make yourself conscious of its workings, by seeing how things change, each time they come past you. Hence his abiding interest in appropriate feed-back loops, and his constant emphasis on the advantage to be derived from a system that gives the greatest possible autonomy of action to every level of its organisation, not just the top.'

'Once I'd finished the course, I read all the

books, and I've got signed copies of all of them, because I just knew that this was one man, a great soul, who could not only change, but actually run the world...'

Chile: from theory to practice

The nearest Stafford Beer came to the latter was the period in the early 1970s he spent as an independent consultant to Chile's president, Salvador Allende. From 1970, Stafford was working on a national communications system, a new cybernetics-based control system to be applied to the entire social economy of Chile.

It is still moving (not least because of the inclusion of a marvellously evocative story describing Allende's encounter with System 5 of Stafford's VSM) to read the third Richard Goodman Lecture he wrote for delivery in February 1973, in which he describes the planned NOW and FUTURES systems which would provide Allende's government with an instrument for investigating the systemic consequences of alternative courses of action.

Stafford is himself on an exponential learning curve, and his excitement is palpable. He is clearly aware that the regime is under attack from all sides, but so proud of the experiment that is underway in Chile, and of the 'lessons for humanity' which he believes to be unfolding there. The death of the president and all his close colleagues only months later (which he learned from an *Evening Standard* newsboard) left Stafford (see letters in the *Guardian*) with an abiding hatred for the role of the United States in the world: and, for him as for so many others, the strong sense of a destiny unfulfilled.

A syntegrity of minds

So I first heard of him as the man who had worked to include Chilean trade unionists in the decision-making processes for the Chilean economy. I was part of a small left-wing organisation that, as we hurtled towards the demise of the socialist state system, had become increasingly interested in democracy, but was seemingly unable to practise what it preached. Luckily, our leader had read Stafford's books, and realised that this was also an organisational problem. She was rewarded by Stafford and his partner and co-worker, Allenna Leonard, taking a thorough interest in our fragile structures, and adopting us as a guinea-pig to try out Stafford's latest participatory method for enabling large groups to solve their own problems: Team Syntegrity.

A syntegration is a non-hierarchical, participatory form of conference, inspired by Stafford's realisation that all the good ideas at a conference come from the corridors and the bars. It is based on the mathematical qualities of an icosahedron (which we all began by making, with cocktail sticks and jelly babies), and takes three-and-a-half days, and thirty people. In those early days in 1990, it took a little longer, while enthusiasts sorted out the computer algorithm. But the people who participated felt that what they understood there, they might never have learnt in two or three years of the most conscientious decision-making. The agreements we secured were beyond the normal kind of 'consensus', as Stafford promised us they would be. They were based on a much more thorough-going understanding of each other's point of view, and some core insights which soon emerged from very different types of small-group conversation to 'reverberate' throughout the whole event.

As Rob and I mull over what we learned from Stafford, the two of us realise all over again how much pleasure was involved, and how simple some of the best ideas are. Take Rob's favourite anecdote for explaining how you assess a

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system's 'requisite variety': Take a football pitch, and eleven people on one side. What do you need in order to stop them from scoring millions of goals? Answer: eleven people on the *other* side, which is why football is such a great game…and why the thirty people at a syntegration need to be as 'various' as members of one organisation can get, if you want to plan effectively for the future.

Or take the concept best calculated to transform any political organisation, the idea of the necessary porosity of any viable system to its outside environment…'Oh yes, VSM system four', interjects Rob, happily…. It seems obvious. But take it together with 'requisite variety', 'reverberation', 'recursion', and a few other vital processes, and nothing will ever be the same again….

Rob and I wouldn't want to give the impression that understanding Beer is easy after all. Like most good things, it's a life work. (For those who would like to dip a toe in the water, we recommend his 1992 essay, *World in Torment: A Time whose Idea Must Come*. The first one-and-a-half pages make rather extraordinary reading at this dangerous moment in world affairs.)

Nor can we honestly say that **openDemocracy** is a viable system, yet. (Rob is working on our recursions as I write.) But it is no accident that we have both ended up working here. And we will do what we can to introduce more Stafford into the proceedings.

Nor are we alone in this. Thank goodness, systems analysis is beginning to penetrate our government's corridors, as well as the high places and more creative places all over the world. (See, for example, Jake Chapman's recent DEMOS pamphlet, *System Failure: why governments must learn to think differently*.) It may be a rather immature version that has surfaced so far – one that simply fails to grasp the holistic implications of Stafford Beer's work. But his friends and followers are also pretty indefatigable. So we will have to hope that his work will continue. Because one thing is very clear, at least to Rob and myself. If it doesn't happen, the world will miss out on far more than the unforgettable company of this charming and unusual man.

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Rosemary Bechler is international editor of openDemocracy.