



Book Review “Taming the Wicked”

The SIMPOL Solution: A New way to think about solving the world’s Biggest Problems,
2018, Amherst: Prometheus

Reviewed by **James Surwillo***

In *The Simpol Solution*, John Bunzl and Nick Duffell take a multi-disciplinary approach to what systems theorist Horst Rittel forty-five years ago called a “wicked problem”. Wicked problems are insoluble, contradictable, multi-causal, ill-defined issues involving many stakeholders. Even before Information Theory evolved into full-blown economic, technological and cultural disruption, Rittel suspected that networked collaboration, patience, and non-judgement about competing value systems would be the cybernetic answer towards regulating complex systems. And today, as we tend to rely more on the wisdom of crowds, innovation has less of the guarded rigor of Newton and owes more to open source ideas to simplify and untangle.

This book is not about networks, however, it is about solving a very large, very wicked problem. Although it is a book about politics, economics, and globalization (the expertise of Bunzl), any attempt to tackle a wicked problem requires a dive within, which just so happens to be the expertise of Duffell, a psychotherapist of thirty years. We begin with Einstein, whom the authors reference frequently, stating that the first step is to properly define the problem—the most difficult aspect of all wicked problems. According to the authors, there is one barrier above the rest that has impeded the world from moving forward developmentally: The pursuit of international economic competitiveness by governments, which they call Destructive Global Competition (DGC). This statement is free-trade, boardroom, and business school heresy.

The authors closely align these destructive tendencies with the rise of neoliberalism and its assumption that human well-being rises the more we compete in open markets, claiming that DGC has stolen the sovereignty from individuals and nations and left us with less agency. Governments set the rules for business, but competing against other governments to attract businesses at lower costs causes a global “chilling effect” that ends in Bangladeshi sweatshops paying workers \$2 per day. This race to the bottom is a “Tragedy of the Commons” where the collective good begins to be affected. In cases such as France in 2012 and Greece in 2015, citizens elected politicians to implement Liberal policies. However, the will of the people has been no match for the “competitiveness agenda” that is required of national governments by global markets. From the political right, we have yet to see whether protectionist populism effectively battles the forces of DGC, as in Trumpian trade wars.

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The Simpol campaign was born eighteen years ago, and has picked up steam in British and European politics since that time. So what is their mysterious solution, anyway? First, more advice from Einstein: “We can’t solve our problems with the same thinking that created them”—we need to continue defining the problem. The human animal seeks identity based on context. Throughout history that context has expanded more widely and deeply but now our identity as “nationcentric” beings seems to be losing its pragmatic benefits. Accordingly, Bunzl and Duffell examine the context of governance and politics in evolutionary terms. What stages have developed over the course of human socialization, the authors ask. The patterns identified broadly follow the work of Neo-Piagetian developmental theorists over the past fifty years.

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Jean Piaget began his analysis of cognitive development back in the 1930s and found that children have a cumulative sophistication and complexity with regard to their cognitive abilities. Piaget’s legacy left an opening for future research in psychological growth by Baldwin, Kuhn, Habermas, Gilligan, Kegan, Commons, Graves, Pirsig, Wilber, and others. Although coming from various disciplines, the central thought behind their theories suggest that increasingly complex thoughts and perspectives have been evident in cognitive function across individual human life spans as well as broadly in societies throughout history. Since resolving crises, historically, involves increasing the comprehension of the complexity involved, before we can prescribe the complexity to defeat, or better, *outcompete* DGC, we have to appreciate the level of complexity with which we are dealing. We have to climb the mountain to get a better view, in a sense, the authors propose. Usually, it involves a complexity of cooperation one notch higher than the level that could not deal with the problem in the first place, as Einstein suggested. It is said that a student once raised his hand in Einstein’s class and said, “Sir, this appears to be the same test as last year,” and Einstein replied, “Yes, but the answers are different.”

From a developmental perspective we have woven our way through cultural eras that require us to understand new phenomena and practice new truths. In the 20th century alone we incorporated the realities of quantum theory, information theory, and chaos theory into former frameworks that no longer quite fit. The authors consider the nationcentric mindset to problems in the modern or postmodern world outdated. I recall the Australian consultant Jeremy Heiman’s metaphor of the analogue game of Tetris; in this environment, pre-determined shapes fall from the sky and we retrofit them into what we believe to be their optimal location. The global world of digital technology has totally new power structures, and a game like Minecraft is more suited to a connected world where we can make things

globally, collaboratively, and immediately to build new realities from the ground up. Plugging this idea back into the Simpol model, it becomes self-evident that the global problem of DGC requires a “worldcentric” model of development.

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How did we update to a new model throughout history? First we had to kill the former structures that caused us pain. To shed our nationcentric human urges we have to accept our powerlessness: This feels a lot like the death of someone important and close. So the book’s psychotherapeutic suggestion is to use Kubler-Ross’ Five Stages of Grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. An easy avoidance option is returning to regressive nationalism, the latest fractal of repeated former stages of cultural connection that we ultimately need to transcend. Perhaps nomads did not want to learn to plant, warriors did not want monotheism, and the traditionalists did not want rationality. There are always very good reasons to remain at lower stages based on the rational presuppositions of the former world.

It is also possible to have “communal dissociation”. 250 years ago, when Captain Cook sailed to their shores, the Pacific islanders were so collectively shaken and traumatized by the appearance of unknown objects (ships) approaching that no one could perceive them, much less react. While we have moved beyond many of the limiting and deadly Marxist suppositions about culture, we must remember the wisdom in his idea that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness”. In a fast-paced world, social existence is a highly volatile state. So whereby evolutionary psychologists may see human nature as a closed system of determinism approximating the hardwiring of biology, developmental psychologists instead focus on the open system of software in the human system across time. *The Simpol Solution* conjures precisely the required level of empathy and faith based on the meta-narratives and empirical pathways available to the species.

During the Enlightenment we figured out the self-evident natural rights of mankind. Recent pursuits of cultural relativism and limited hierarchy can be re-prioritized and re-ranked to accommodate for their inevitable dead ends. Postmodernism becomes another version of the world that we must integrate, even if we no longer believe in its underpinnings. This meta-analysis appears to be the only way to further develop. Leadership guru Stephen Covey spoke of the importance of matching our “circle of influence” (what we can control) and our “circle of care” (what we see as important). Perhaps the crux of the book rests on: “Technological advances... require humans to radically re-envisage how their societies are organized”. Technology allows our circle of care to expand. It is natural that our circle of influence follows because it finally can be aligned with our deepest truths, thanks to our technological capabilities to connect on a higher plane.

Simpol, short for Simultaneous Policy, uses an exceptionally pragmatic solution to better organize global governance, to tabulate a world vote and legitimize governance at a world level, while still negotiating national sovereignties. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, we have organized as nation-states. Is that the “End of History” as Francis Fukuyama suggests, or perhaps a new collaborative and democratic solution to bridge the entire world to outcompete capitalism is needed?

The stark reality is that we may be a half-century away from the full implementation of this idea. What the movement needs is leaders invested in well-being around the world and over time. Simpol plays the long game of leadership, understanding that a small tipping point is possible consisting of highly engaged individuals. As Margaret Meade once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”.

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