A Critical Analysis of Husserlian Phenomenology in IS Research and IS Development: The Case of Soft Systems Methodology

Stephen K. Probert[1]

[1]Department of Information Systems, Cranfield University, RMCS Shrivenham, Swindon, SN6 8LA, U.K.
s.k.probert@.cranfield.ac.uk

Abstract. Husserlian phenomenology has been used to provide (or perhaps "evoke") the rationale for the use of soft systems approaches in both information systems (IS) research and IS development. The purpose of this brief paper is to encourage a debate about the feasibility and coherence of such projects. A (fairly) typical "interpretive" IS methodology (Soft Systems Methodology) is critically analysed using Adorno's epistemological research as critical theory reference material [5]. It is concluded that the Adorno's arguments against phenomenology apply in full force to IS research and IS development methods (and / or methodologies). Some practical guidelines, for avoiding the problems discussed, will be provided. Finally, some suggestions for further research are given.

1 Introduction

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is now often used for both IS research and IS development [1], [2], [3], [4]. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) developed *phenomenology*, which supposedly provides the foundation of SSM's *epistemology*.[1] Consequently, the arguments put forward in this work will be based (in part) on Adorno's [5] critical analysis of Husserl's phenomenological works [6], [7], [8], [9]. An examination of the reasoning behind the relevant aspects of the SSM advocates' stated (epistemic) position will also be undertaken. The SSM advocates' motivations for adopting the position that they hold will be characterised as the result of a perceived need to attain epistemic certitude. Further considerations concerning Husserl's search for certitude will inform the pragmatic recommendations, which will be discussed at this point. The practical conclusion drawn will be that, whilst not attempting to sanction "sloppy" systems analysis, epistemic certitude is not attainable

---

[1] "Soft systems methodology implies ... a model of social reality such as is found in the ... (phenomenological) tradition deriving sociologically from Weber and philosophically from Husserl." [1] (p. 19).

- therefore the demand for it can only be counter-productive – when undertaking IS research and (*a fortiori*) IS development.

2 Imaginary Altitude

Essentially, SSM advocates hold that statements about the real (i.e. objective) states of affairs in the social world are unwarranted and untenable. Consequently, discourse about mental states is *elevated* to a position of high (or higher) epistemic significance and statements about the real world are denigrated as having a low - or even insignificant – epistemic status [10], [11]. It is precisely this *elevation* (of discourse about mental / ideal states of affairs) which constitutes the common ground between the SSM advocates and Husserl; this (generic) approach is criticised by Adorno for what he characterises as its *imaginary altitude*. *Prima facie* the (crude) positivists' position is that sense-data puts us in immediate contact with external reality (although considerable variations on this theme can be found in the writings of the so-called positivists). At any rate, it is this (a somewhat "straw man") version of positivist thought that both Husserl and the SSM advocates take umbrage at. The SSM advocates have often proffered the view that, as ideal "mental constructs", *human activity systems* (i.e., in their view, *information systems)* have properties, characteristics, etc. which may be examined; whereas – on the contrary – *human activity systems* as real world occurrences are strictly-speaking unknowable and therefore they cannot be modelled. In this respect Husserl's arguments and those of the SSM advocates (for subjective idealism) are strikingly similar. Adorno argues that the motivation for idealism lies within the belief that unless a thought (or a judgement) about some aspect of experience admits the possibility of being *certain* (whether true or false) then that thought is epistemically worthless, "The thesis of the perceptibility of the purely possible as a doctrine of essential insight, or as Husserl originally called it, categorial intuition, has become the motto of all philosophical approaches which evoke phenomenology. The fact that the new method should guarantee ideal states of affairs the same immediacy and infallibility as sense-data in the received ["positivist"] view, explains the influence which Husserl exercised over those who could no longer be satisfied with neo-Kantian systems and yet were unwilling to blindly hand themselves over to irrationalism." [5] (p. 200).

The "altitude" supposedly gained by taking such a view (i.e. the idealism adhered to by both the SSM advocates and Husserl) is achieved by, as it were, "rising above" the real world into an ideal world (or worlds) – in a search for greater epistemic security. Of course, the "price to be paid" is in the removal ("elevation") of oneself from the real world within which one may be attempting to act. However, and in agreement with Adorno, it is not being suggested here that an alternative position of naïve positivism should be adopted, as "[C]ategorial intuition is the paradoxical apex of his [Husserl's] thought. It is the indifference into which the positivistic motif of intuitability and the rationalistic one of being-in-itself of ideal-states-of-affairs should be sublated. The movement of Husserlian thought could not tarry at this apex. Categorial intuition is no newly discovered principle of philosophizing. It proves to be a sheer dialectical moment of transition: imaginary altitude." [5] (p. 201). However, it might be argued that the

SSM advocates in fact hold the position that thought is not *so* detached from the real world as my characterisation (above) would imply. Indeed, the SSM texts contain many references to an unfolding flux of ideas *and* events. However, it is also made clear – in the various SSM texts (e.g. [1], [2], [4], [10], [11]) that "perceived events" are just (precisely) *subjective perceptions*. Adorno cogently distinguishes between epistemological accounts of experience given in terms of *sense-data of* and (ephemeral) *encounters with* the real world, "In a certain way categorial intuition was devised by the doctrine of propositions in themselves … If these are truly to be more than creations of thought, then they cannot really be products of thought but must simply be encountered … by it. The paradoxical demand for a merely encountering thought arises from the claim to validity on the part of logical absolutism[2]. The doctrine of categorial intuition is the result of this on the subject side." [5] (pp. 201-202).

3 Subjective Certitude and Epistemological Rigour

The question that will now be asked is: why should so much emphasis be placed on (the possibility of) subjective certitude in such formulations of the epistemological problem of knowledge-discovery? According to Adorno, the answer is to be found in the actual circumstances in which academics find themselves, i.e. middlemen. Interestingly, this argument would appear to hold a fortiori for the likes of SSM practitioners, consultants, etc. The demand for subjective certitude – inherent in the epistemology proffered by the SSM advocates – would prima facie seem to generate immediate problems for the use of SSM's epistemology in practical endeavours. One might think that practical IS development work should – minimally – be more concerned with getting a practical working knowledge of a situation in order to take positive action – rather than getting embroiled in "epistemologically purist" issues and concerns. Of course, to take this literally would be to proceed uncritically. In order to operate in a critically aware manner, epistemological considerations will be important – but it is argued here that "epistemological purism" is not the best way to proceed. Further discussion of an appropriate epistemological framework with which to undertake critical systems analysis lies outside the scope of this paper (which is not to suggest that it is unimportant).

At any rate the source of the subjective idealism - inherent in the SSM advocates epistemological accounts – may be found in practice rather than in theory. The accounts of epistemology given in the SSM texts are supposedly based on (or supported by) the practical experiences of using systems ideas in organisations. In all such accounts (encountered by the author at any rate), the Soft Systems Practitioner does not claim to be the owner of the system. Indeed, the impression one gets is usually of the SSM practitioner being rather unceremoniously "dumped" into a conflict-ridden and potentially hostile social situation of which he or she has little prior knowledge. From a

---

[2] The term 'logical absolutism' is introduced by Adorno to connote Husserl's view of logical statements as being in no way dependent on events occurring in the real world for their truth-values; this is an important aspect of Husserl's conception of eidetic sciences.

critical perspective, this is significant, because Adorno's critique of Husserlian phenomenology does not depend on (the success of) a purely rational critical exercise. Rather, it depends on the reinterpretation of epistemological categories as the *products* of social conditions – particularly those where power / violence / intimidation / etc. is exercised. Jarvis explains Adorno's *metacritique* project thus, "It was in the work towards the Husserl book [5] … that the mature form of Adorno's thought began decisively to emerge. This was Adorno's most extensive attempt to date to justify in detail his belief that even those philosophical texts which were apparently most abstract necessarily contained sedimented within them the traces of the social experience which had made them possible.. In particular, it is in this study that Adorno begins to put into practice the idea of a *metacritique*. Whereas epistemological critique asks what experiences make experience possible, metacritique asks what experiences make the epistemological categories possible." [12] (p. 12). Might the social conditions (alluded to above) explain the perceived need for, or the motivation for seeking, certitude? Adorno makes the following comments about subjective idealists (in general) in the introduction to his *Against Epistemology – A Metacritique*[3][5], "The open or secret pomp and the totally unobvious need for absolute spiritual security – for why, indeed, should the playful luck of spirit be diminished by the risk of error? – are the reflex to real powerlessness and insecurity. They are the self-deafening roar through positivity of those who neither contribute to the real reproduction of life nor actually participate in its real mastery. As middlemen, they only commend and sell to the master his means of lordship, spirit objectified … into method [or methodology, for that matter]… They use their subjectivity to subtract the subject from truth and their idea of objectivity is as a residue." [5] (p. 15). The practical problems generated in IS research and IS development are unlikely to be solved by the adoption of an impractical epistemological standpoint.

4 Conclusion

It is concluded that – whatever the motivations for desiring it – epistemic certitude is not attainable - therefore the demand for it can only be counter-productive – when undertaking IS research and IS development. Our understanding of the real world in which IS research and IS development must take place may often be partial, confused and even bigoted. Essentially, critically-minded vigilance will provide some defence against the latter – as will an openness to the critical comments and suggestions of others. For the former – the epistemological problems – we had best learn to make do with whatever understanding of the problem situation can be obtained, given the time and resources available. This is *not* to sanction sloppy analysis! The alternative - only to sanction (unattainable) epistemological rigour - can only force us to withdraw our attention from the real world and into our (subjective) selves. Few practical problems

---

[3] The title of this book is somewhat misleading, as – in it - Adorno is conducting a critical analysis of subjective idealist epistemology as a (sort of) groundwork for an alternative epistemology, "Criticizing epistemology also means … retaining it." [5] (p. 27 [N.B. the three dots are included in the original text]). Some aspects of what such an alternative epistemology might look like are discussed by Guzzoni [13].

are amenable to solution solely by introspection - although this is not to deny the value and importance of critical reflection. It should be noted that Husserl's epistemological arguments, and Adorno's critique of these arguments, are both extremely difficult topics; further research is warranted here. At any rate, the uses (or abuses!) of such complex arguments to legitimate approaches to IS research or IS development are fraught with difficulties – especially when the practical consequences of these approaches have not been adequately considered. There is a need for more *critical* research here also, including *metacritical* research – as has been carried out above.

References

1. Checkland, P. B.: Systems Thinking, Systems Practice. Wiley, Chichester (1981)
2. Checkland, P. and Scholes, J.: Soft Systems Methodology in Action. Wiley, Chichester (1990)
3. Lewis, P.: Information-Systems Development. Pitman, London (1994)
4. Checkland, P. and Holwell, S.: Information, Systems, and Information Systems – Making Sense of the Field. Wiley, Chichester (1998)
5. Adorno, T. W.: Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1982)
6. Husserl, E.: Ideas. George Allen and Unwin, London (1931)
7. Husserl, E.: Logical Investigations. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (1970)
8. Husserl, E.: Phenomenological Psychology. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague (1977)
9. Husserl, E.: The Idea of Phenomenology. Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht (1990)
10. Checkland, P. B.: Towards the Coherent Expression of Systems Ideas. Journal of Applied Systems Analysis 18 (1991) 25-28
11. Checkland, P. B.: Systems and Scholarship: The Need to Do Better. Journal of the Operational Research Society 43 (1992) 1023-1030
12. Jarvis, S.: Adorno: A Critical Introduction. Polity Press, Cambridge (1998)
13. Guzzoni, U.: Reason – A Different Reason – Something Different Than Reason? Wondering about the Concept of a Different Reason in Adorno, Lyotard, and Sloterdijk. In: Pensky, M. (ed.): The Actuality of Adorno. State University of New York Press, Albany (1997) 23-42