

THE CULTURAL THREAT TO DEMOCRACY: silo-system thinking in government and society

The future of democracy worldwide is imperilled by the same silo-thinking that originally gave birth to it. Democracy emerged from Western humanistic philosophy, advancing the voices and interests of all individuals within a society. That focus on individualism has in recent years taken an unexpected and extreme turn, arguing for the absolute freedom, independence and sovereignty of individuals and a denial of society, which morphs corruptly into the self-serving ideologies, egotisms and dishonesties of libertarianism, autocracy and authoritarianism.

The success of this extreme silo-thinking in many societies around the world represents a serious challenge to a more communitarian view of what democracy means. At present, both in the UK and the US, this challenge is not being met. This paper hopes to offer a frame that might enable politicians and other policy-makers to present a more persuasive case for the survival of democracy, in the interests of all stakeholders in society.

Systemic thinking

We all think systemically, indeed we cannot *not* think systemically. Underlying all of our cognition is the body of worldview assumptions, beliefs and principles that we share within our respective culture. Every culture has its own evolved core understanding of how the world works, of its natural laws, dynamics and principles, and of the social and spiritual values that follow from that understanding. Each cultural understanding manifests in a unique shared cognitive system that then broadly coheres and characterises all rational discussion, planning and decision-making within the culture.

Although cultures are highly complex and house within themselves many different beliefs and sub-cultures, within the larger perspective all will tend to generally

share the same core worldview. One can say that this is what identifies a culture as a culture, and what differentiates each culture from all others.

All cultural systems, whatever their underlying worldview, are designed to provide a shared cognitive frame for understanding and managing all possible processes of cause and effect that might arise within any kind of local issue, situation or behaviour. This offers all members of a culture coherent guidelines for thinking and decision-making based on a shared belief as to how the world best works.

The suggestion is that that is what a cultural system is. All sub-systems within a major culture will tend to broadly share the same overall logic and rationale, deriving from its underlying core worldview. And the corollary to that is that all major cultures, each with its own worldview, will of course differ from one another radically and profoundly in terms of their own respective logics and rationales. It is not a matter of one culture is 'right' and another is 'wrong', cultures are by definition different from one another. Any well-established culture is by virtue of its long-term survival and prosperity 'successful', viable and evidentially 'true', at least insofar that it 'works' for those in power (notwithstanding the enormous human cost at personal levels that is probably experienced by many within every culture).

Different worldviews will therefore of course give rise to systems characterised by different significances, priorities and interpretations, and will identify different coherences between behaviours and interests, and will arrive at different purposes and desired outcomes.

So in a very broad sense a culture such as Japan that sees the world as holistic, balanced and interdependent will think and behave within cognitive whole-systems that are very different to a culture such as the West that sees the world as silo, reductive and individualistic. And despite all Western cultures sharing so much in terms of their common silo-system worldview, they nevertheless vary all the way from the American and Anglo-Saxon competitive individualism to the far more co-operatively and co-creatively inclined and communitarian societies of the Scandinavian countries and Germany. Yet they are all similarly steeped in silo-thinking; we are all of us in the West highly and expensively trained in, and expert in, silo-thinking, and as a consequence intrinsically resistant to, indeed often baffled by and disbelieving of, other cultural systems of thinking.

Silo systems

The history of the Western culture demonstrates the power and effectiveness of silo-system thinking. Reductive analysis in science, together with the mastery of the natural physical world, plus the focus on the individuality, independence and personal ambition of humans, characterised the Renaissance in its breaking out from the cognitive restriction of a divinely ordered and mandated world. Western science, technology and philosophy proved to be a powerhouse, creating huge wealth and the (often brutal) domination of many other cultures. By eliminating from consideration or simply deprioritising elements and interests that were deemed only incidental or of limited significance, by analysing only reductive linear causes and effects, and by ruthlessly focusing on physical and financial domination and progress, the West leapt ahead of other cultures that engaged with their society and environment in a more ordered, balanced and holistic way. Western concepts and behaviours were by definition alien to these other cultures, and they paid a heavy price.

The birth of democracy

One of the fruits of silo-thinking was the idea of democracy. Although ancient Athens is famously regarded as the birthplace of democracy, the electorate comprised only about 30 percent of the adult population (albeit poverty was no bar), but the practice of democratic government lasted only a couple of centuries. In the early thirteenth century England's first representative parliament was created by Magna Carta. Elected parliaments existed for several centuries thereafter, but could hardly be labelled true democracies. Electoral rights only became universal in England for (most) men in 1869, extending only to (most) women in 1928. So a universally enfranchised democracy in England is in fact very young and, as we shall see, potentially still fragile.

The battle for democracy in England was hard-fought, but was driven by the growing independence, wealth and power of a wider population, and by the growing concept of what an individual is. It was rooted in the increasing veneration of individual rights, of the growing recognition of individuals as people worthy of engagement with. With the inexorable logic of silo-thinking, this led reductively down to an increasing focus on the individual's needs within society.

The celebration of the independence and individuality of man (almost always men!) forced a reckoning that they had a right to share in their government. And the concept of democracy grew in meaning to describe those rights of self-government by all of the people, and by definition for the benefit of those same people. In many ways democracy is one of the crowning glories of silo-thinking (although inevitably far from perfect in its execution). Most Western democracies evolved similarly and more or less within the same very recent time span. Nowadays most countries across the world also claim to be democratic, despite it being rooted in Western silo-thinking (although with all too many of them it is a fig-leaf barely hiding authoritarianism and autocracy).

Systems thinking

Western silo-thinking has been extraordinarily successful over the past six centuries, but it is becoming frayed at the edges, most noticeably in the areas of organisational management. In 1776 Adam Smith reported that ten pin workers working as what we would now describe as a linear production team could produce many times more pins than individuals working alone. Since then organisational management has depended and thrived on techniques of silo-thinking to develop ever more efficient production lines, and has increased productivity (and affordability and profitability) phenomenally. However, silo-management depends on predictability, stability and controllability. Working from the top down, silo-thinking defines the desired outcome and identifies how all of the component parts of that outcome can be most efficiently and reductively sub-divided into their 'deepest' independent causes. Small individual teams are then mandated according to a pre-planned design, the theory being that if correctly planned and designed each individual production line will independently arrive predictably and controllably at the appropriate time when it will combine with other planned production lines, and so on until the end-product emerges from all of those multiple production lines, each executed with precision according to the pre-planned design.

Silo-production has been responsible for extraordinary successes in many areas of management, and across almost all production processes. The core problem, however, is when there is an interruption in a production line that undermines the schedule, such as a break in continuity of supplies or, more drastically, a change in the planned design such as a key alteration to the end-product. Because production lines all operate independently of one another, unpredictability or

change in just one process can sabotage the whole, success depending on the timely success of every single process within the planned whole. In silo-systems there is little opportunity for flexibility or adaptability, either at the workplace, due to the strict rules of the design and schedule, or at leadership level, as one change to the planned production line upstream will almost always negatively impact many downstream plans, demanding re-design of the whole project from the top down. And the human cost of that inflexibility becomes increasingly apparent. In our present world of constant change and demands for adaptation, at all levels of production lines throughout the organisation, strict silo-management becomes ever more complex.

In the nineteen fifties the rigidities of silo production lines and their implicit vulnerability to sudden change became increasingly evident, and inspired the development of systems dynamics, lead principally by Jay Forrester at MIT in the US. Although labelled as 'systems' they might more correctly be described as *whole*-systems.

Whole-systems

What evolved was an understanding of how to map elements of a process and issue more broadly, across time but also, crucially, across silos, embracing the probability of sudden change, and finding ways to map, accommodate and control multiply-related elements. Whereas silo-systems tend to have narrowly and rigidly defined beginnings and ends, whole-systems are open-ended, highly flexible, adaptable and responsive to multiple feedback-loops; they also engage more sympathetically and comprehensively with the needs of all stakeholders. (Having said that, in no way is this to suggest abandonment of the skills of silo-thinking; those skills are of course still relevant and powerful, it is just that they have to develop and expand to also embrace the further skills of whole-system thinking.)

Whole-system planning is now practised throughout business, industry and finance, accelerated by the development of software systems that have been essential in the application of system-thinking and practice over the last few decades. Indeed, modern corporate life is almost wholly dependent on whole-system thinking for its successful operational functioning. Consequently, there are millions of workers throughout the world practising whole-system thinking, not only in the area of designing processes and techniques but also in their execution.

One area is Lean, a whole-system process first developed in Japan by Taiichi Ohno in the nineteen fifties. Lean is now practised throughout industry, and has been responsible for huge advances in efficiency and reductions in cost. And yet Lean is notorious for the fact that once the consultants have left, behaviours often slide back to where they were. And certainly it is rarely practised in the West according to its founding principles. These posited the objective of continuous development, not only of processes but also of the whole organisation, including all of those employed within it. Taking whole-system thinking seriously is clearly a little more difficult than it may seem. In particular, corporate leaders are still largely defiant in their commitment to silo-thinking, despite their organisations' operations being largely built around whole-system thinking. It seems that while whole-system thinking is practised widely at the operational and technical level, it still fails to persuade strategically.

The threat to democracy

This reluctance to engage with whole-system thinking is in fact understandable. We have all in the West been highly educated in silo-thinking, our whole culture celebrates it, it has been wildly successful for centuries, and it is difficult to contradict it, especially in matters financial when profit is so powerfully the end-criterion of so many organisations (and individuals). The inescapable problem, however, is that strict silo-thinking no longer works effectively, efficiently or fairly in the modern world, rapidly changing and fraught with complexity as it is. The great appeal of silo-thinking (at least to those in the West) is that compared to whole-thinking it is relatively 'simple', familiar, straightforward and 'logical', even though it is now so obviously failing in so many different areas. Persuading leaders to engage with the discipline and implications of whole-system thinking is possibly the most difficult task we face.

There are, however, further obstacles to overcome. Outside of organisations and business (and it is they who are probably most experienced in whole-system thinking), in the wider populace there are continuing influences embedding silo-thinking even deeper within our cognition and behaviour. Almost all non-Western cultures diminish the concept of 'the individual' compared to the West. Silo-thinking has intrinsically and progressively enhanced and elevated the significance of the individual, particularly over the last two hundred years as attention focused increasingly on the emotional feeling side of life. This

progressed to the psychoanalytical obsession with digging deep into the individual persona, and to the celebration of existentialism, idolising the very personal private experience of an independent and sovereign life. Post-structural philosophies took this to the extreme, arguing that each of us lives within our own insular and exclusive reality, with our own determination of what is subjectively true, with an explicit denial of any possibility of outside objectivity or reality. And one outcome of that is our modern society of social media, narcissism, 'celebrities' and fake truths, along with increasing problems of addiction, mental illness, cynicism, conspiracy theories and paranoid over-sensitivities, particularly among the young.

Meanwhile, alongside this has been a hardening of silo-thinking, particularly in older generations, in respect of the development of libertarianism, with its focus on a seductive and deceitful demand for individual freedom and sovereignty. What this means in practice is that libertarians overtly call for the removal of all governmental restrictions on business, allowing them free rein to behave in whatever way is deemed optimally profitable. This attitude is mirrored in the increasing numbers of authoritarian and autocratic rulers around the world, leading not to increased freedom and sovereignty for the masses but to the protection of those in power or with wealth, to continue living a mandate of extreme self-interest.

And an inevitable casualty of this is democracy. Supported by an ideology of success to the successful, and a celebration of the pursuit of personal wealth and profit by any means, there is an implicit contempt for others in society who will experience the consequences of unbridled corporate, economic and political power. Democracy to libertarians is an awkward hindrance, and every effort is made to thwart its influence, from electoral corruption to the skilful undermining of laws and to the illicit influence of government. The rule of law suddenly becomes malleable, indeed even optional.

By seducing with the icons of freedom, independence, sovereignty and empowerment libertarians appeal to the paranoias, anxieties, angers and fantasies of many of those in the electorate who will in fact suffer most from their depredations. Alarming, surveys of attitudes to democracy are consistently reporting high percentages of sceptics. Trump's followers have readily demonstrated their willingness to ignore democratic process, even resorting to brute force. The Conservative party in the UK have had little compunction in undermining a fair democracy by attempting to prorogue Parliament, by

unilaterally re-drawing constituency boundaries, and demanding ID cards to counter an entirely fictional threat of election fraud. The warning lights are flashing.

The reason that libertarianism is so damaging to society is that while ideologically celebrating the independence of the individual, it in practice actively undermines the voices, interests and influences of most other stakeholders. Stakeholder opposition is seen as an unwanted intrusion on 'absolute' freedom, and is derided as at least 'socialism' and at worst 'communism'. Democrats, on the other hand, implicitly work on behalf of the interests of *all* stakeholders and *all* interests. The problem is that unbridled libertarianism will only ever diminish society's well-being, however 'successful' it might be for certain individuals or privileged parties. In the long-term its crude over-simplifications, disregard of consequences and ultimate reliance on brute force will simply not work for the many. In today's deeply inter-connected and inter-dependent world of vast complexity and rapid change, with its attendant need for constant systemic evolution and innovation, only a whole-system approach to problems will succeed, with a focus on all stakeholder needs. Without collaborative and co-creative solutions there is likely to be only deeper frustration and failure, greater disparities in wealth and power, and ever-growing hostilities within a fracturing society.

For many in humanity the slice of the pie is getting smaller and smaller, by the conscious design of libertarians and autocrats, but no one will escape the dramas that hang over our heads. As long as performance continues to be at the expense of multiple stakeholders (including the Earth), there can surely be no progress, only exploitation and disenfranchisement leading to eventual disaster.

Many of the ills of modern society, whether in such areas as housing, poverty, education, health, crime, social care and employment, and maybe most importantly in the environment, both local and global, can be laid at the doors of an extreme silo-system thinking. (And government responses to the overwhelming arguments on climate change demonstrate the persistent strength of self-interest, profit and silo-thinking around the world.) Despite the recent lurch of so many governments towards libertarian ideologies, with their contempt for the norms not only of democracy but also of national and international law, the solution to the exhaustion and redundancy of silo-thinking surely has to lie in whole-system thinking, within a big-picture perspective of the whole, and with a dedication to an idea of democracy that serves the interests and benefit of all.

Rescuing democracy

Shifting the worldview and systemic thinking of a whole culture is a tall order. Ultimately it involves a somewhat daunting growth in consciousness and will, throughout every part of society, and throughout the majority of the culture's population. That is inevitably a slow and necessarily evolutionary process. Nevertheless, it is best kick-started and accelerated by government. Laws have the ability to change a nation's behaviour overnight (and, interestingly, have always themselves been intrinsically whole-system). Simple examples such as the no-smoking rule in public premises, and charging for the use of plastic bags in supermarkets, both demonstrated sudden (and largely painless) changes to cultural norms. It is down to lawmakers to identify and design changes in law that will be truly in the best interests of a genuinely democratic society. Those laws will almost inevitably honour whole-system thinking, just as many of the laws currently being proposed and enacted in the UK derive from extreme silo-system thinking. We may have to wait until silo-thinking erupts catastrophically and undeniably in disaster, most probably within the environment, forcing the embrace of whole-system thinking as the only realistic solution. In the meantime, however, we can (optimistically) work on identifying and designing potential new laws and processes that might radically change our world for better, satisfying the needs of all stakeholders.

It might therefore be of help to spell out and give greater clarity to the contrasting parameters and core beliefs of libertarian and democratic ideologies in the context of government. The two frames below map out those parameters.

The frames are based on the Value Frame®, a systemic frame used in companies and organisations to map their whole-organisation core purpose and unique value-creation capability across twelve domains. Each capability is described as at peak performance, at its very best. 'Value' is both financial and experiential (indeed money is ultimately only ever a source of experiential value, it has no other expression). Value of some kind is what we all want to bring into the world.

From extensive evidence-based experience, the twelve domains offer a truly whole-system mapping of capability. By defining the capabilities of both libertarianism and democracy in this way one can break down the respective ideologies into detailed practical explanations of what they truly stand for. A comparative study in depth of the two frames can offer real clarity of what is at

stake, and of both long-term and short-term implications. (It could also well lead to a re-drafting of definitions to align more accurately with local demands.)

Apart from providing an overall big-picture of the two ideologies, the frames can be useful in several ways. For example one can evaluate and score on a radar any existing or proposed law or policy in terms of its alignment with each of the domain definitions. So one can map how well a current UK government decision or policy aligns with and supports the libertarian frame, and in contrast map how well it aligns with and supports the democratic frame. And radar gaps invite both the exploration of blockages and the design of remedies and solutions.

The frames can also be used to assist in the design of new systemic propositions. In particular, politicians opposing libertarianism have an obligation not only to highlight the negative (and often hidden) implications and consequences of the ideology, they must also themselves design better whole-system solutions to what are seriously difficult societal and environmental problems. Democrats in the US and Labour and Liberals in the UK have all for decades been weak in confronting the Right, and have failed to present clear visions of what they themselves stand for. They have constantly been defensive, lacking the courage of their convictions, whereas the libertarians have always presented themselves confidently, aggressively and clearly.

At their simplest the two frames define and clarify the battle-lines for many governments for some years to come, and maybe help to identify core messages and policies that might connect most effectively to electorates.

Silo-thinking

libertarianism
 'egoism'
 liberation
 exclusion
 exceptionalism
 success to the successful
 ends justify means
 self not society

Whole-thinking

democracy
 'ecoism'
 fairness
 inclusion
 accountability
 equal opportunity
 rule of law
 I am because we are

Key indicators of libertarianism's progress

De-regulations; low tax levels; policing & defence success; civil stability; new business creation; business success stories; high-wealth individuals; trade; data control

Strategic principles of libertarianism

A preparedness to do whatever it takes to renounce big-State & to liberate business & personal interests, with low taxes funding necessary policing & defence

Libertarianism's positioning in the world

A strong-minded inspiration & leadership that empowers wealth-creation & freedom from government for those who can rise to the challenge

Key competencies of a libertarian society

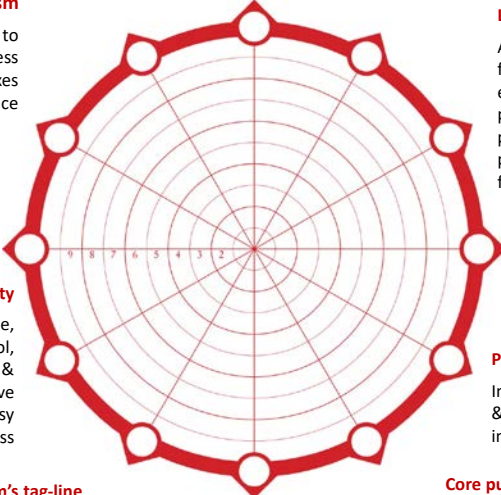
Strategic simplicity, self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, taking control, leadership of others, creativity, financial & business acumen, single-issue executive decision-making, risk-taking & the easy exercise of power, & adventurousness

Libertarianism's tag-line

'protecting individual freedoms, looking after one's own'

Core principles of a libertarian society

A world of state & government interference limited largely to policing & defence, with minimal financial, fiscal, legal, social & environmental regulations, & the active encouragement of unhampered wealth-creation, power & the individual's freedom to succeed, rewarding self-responsibility



Libertarianism's essence

'self-freedom'

Needs satisfied by libertarianism

The need of individuals & groups for independence, autonomy & self-direction, freedom of opportunity & action with minimal regulation & constraint, & the encouragement of wealth-creation & self-exercise of power

Life-style aspired to by libertarianism

A 'society unchained', a life of freedom from big-State influence to create & enjoy personal wealth & power, with privileged & merited certainty that is protective & conservative of family, partisan & in-group interests, with freedom of competitive opportunity

Libertarianism's vision

To exemplify & promote the success of fully implemented & lived libertarian principles & values in a free society

Personal & social values of libertarianism

Independence & autonomy; self-reliance & self-responsibility; freedom; courage; initiative; strength; creativity

Core purpose of libertarianism

To create a conservative world with minimal constraints in which individual freedom & self-interest is paramount & celebrated

Key indicators of democracy's progress

GDP & national debt; demographics of happiness, prosperity & health; research on systemic policies & practices; business start-ups & success stories; transparency of government; open Press & public debate; social mobility; international relations

Strategic principles of democracy

Highly sophisticated & sensitive orchestration of regulations & fiscal measures to both protect society & optimise wealth-creation for the long-term benefit of all stakeholders

Democracy's positioning in the world

Focused systemic leadership that prioritises the welfare, well-being & prosperity of all members of society

Key competencies of a democratic society

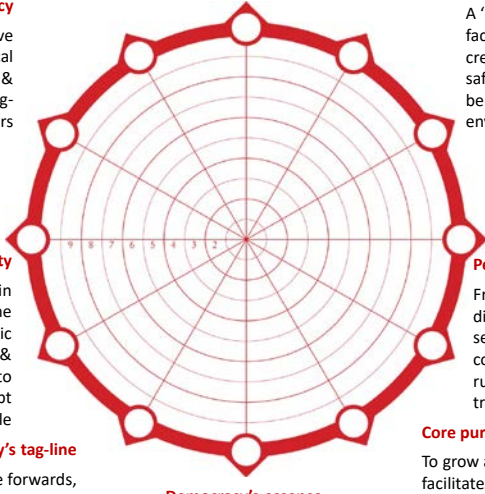
Strategic complexity, with expertise in researching, learning & collaborating in the identification of systemic social & economic solutions, plus governmental, financial & business acumen with the ability to anticipate long-term consequences & adapt appropriately in the interests of the whole

Democracy's tag-line

'taking everyone forwards, leaving no-one behind'

Core principles of a democratic society

A world in which state & government accept & exercise responsibility for the protection & support of citizens' welfare, health & safety, recognising the need for the regulation of many aspects of civic, business & economic life in the connected interests of both stakeholders & environment, optimising the wealth & sustainable well-being of the nation



Democracy's essence

'mutual freedoms'

Needs satisfied by democracy

The need of individuals & groups for basic security & welfare, for the opportunity to create value that benefits all stakeholders, to be an active participant in a healthily flourishing society, & to celebrate both the individual & the planetary whole

Life-style aspired to by democracy

A 'negotiated society', mutual support & facilitation of fairness & collaboration in the creation of wealth, well-being & a healthy, safe, connected & ordered world that benefits all stakeholders within an environmental perspective

Democracy's vision

To successfully communicate the example of building a world of hope & achievability for all

Personal & social values of democracy

Freedom of opportunity; supporting the disadvantaged, encouraging the talented; seeing both the individual & the connected whole; empathy; the equitable rule of law; creativity; accountability; truth; environmental sensitivity

Core purpose of democracy

To grow a society that encourages & facilitates the sustainable development of all of humanity, materially, intellectually, socially & spiritually