

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Accommodation and critique: A necessary tension

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Abstract

A dilemma in critical systems thinking is how to balance a desire for critique to inspire far-reaching transformations in society with the requirement for people to reach accommodations to enable on-the-ground change. Both critique and accommodation are necessary to realise transformations, yet they are often in tension. If critique is undertaken by lone researchers and prioritised over accommodation, then the lack of stakeholder buy-in can lead to a failure of implementation. Conversely, if accommodation is prioritised over critique, then implementation is more likely, but it may be less than transformative due to the need to keep more conservative stakeholders engaged. A strategy to address this problem is offered by Gillian Rose. This paper discusses how her strategy can inform critical systems thinking. It then ends with more general reflections on the value of the work of Gillian Rose for systemic intervention.

KEYWORDS

accommodation, broken middle, critical systems thinking, critique, interpretive systemology

1 | INTRODUCTION

Critical systems thinking (CST) first arose in the mid to late 1980s in response to critiques of earlier systems approaches for naiveté about power relations and a belief that one methodology or paradigm offers everything we need for systemic intervention¹ (Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Flood & Romm, 1996). The focus on both power relations and methodology led to some early CST proposals for an

emancipatory systems approach that also embraced methodological pluralism: mixing methodologies and/or

¹If we believe that only one methodology or paradigm is valid or legitimate, then it becomes unacceptable to draw from multiple methodologies (Flood, 1989; Jackson, 1987a) and mix methods drawn from different paradigms (Midgley, 2000) during systemic interventions. From the stance of a practitioner who wants a broad, flexible and effective systems practice, isolating yourself from all but a small minority of resources is highly problematic.

methods from across paradigms (e.g., Flood & Jackson, 1991b).

While there was some initial resistance to CST in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Checkland, 1992; Midgley, 1989a; Tsoukas, 1993a, 1993b), by the turn of the century, it had become well established, mostly because it offered a coherent rationale for the practice of mixing methods that accorded with the pragmatic and creative ways that most systems practitioners beyond academia actually use methodological resources (Midgley, 2000). Also, with the rise in interest since the 1970s in how to tackle ‘wicked’ policy problems (Levin et al., 2012; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Sydelko et al., 2017, 2021, 2024), characterised by high levels of complexity, stakeholder conflict and power relations, the focus of CST on better understanding and working with power, conflict and marginalisation (e.g., Brocklesby & Cummings, 1996; Flood, 1990; Flood & Ulrich, 1990; Jackson, 1985; Midgley, 1991, 1992a, 1994a; Oliga, 1990, 1996; Ulrich, 1983) was welcomed.

A cornerstone of the legacy of CST is its emphasis on the relationship between social theory (especially concerning power relations), systems thinking and systems practice (Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Jackson, 1991, 2000, 2019). Indeed, the term ‘critical’ was originally adopted as a reference to the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School, and particularly the ideas of Habermas (1972, 1979, 1984a, 1984b). However, many of the assumptions upon which the social theory of Habermas and the Frankfurt School rest (e.g., the need for universal moral principles and the idea that power relations can be eliminated through free and fair debate about the nature of a good society) have been challenged in the wake of post-structuralist and post-modern writings,² especially about universalism being an illusion—morality has come to be seen as relative to context.³ Also, some post-structuralists

have pointed out that the effects of power are inescapable because everything that is advanced as true or right in conversation or debate has had its truth or rightness established through previous power relations, often shrouded in the mists of time (e.g., Derrida, 1976, 1978; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1984; Lyotard, 1979).

In the systems community, the term ‘post-structuralist’ has only been used occasionally, but challenges to CST using similar ideas have been mounted (e.g., Brocklesby & Cummings, 1996; Flood, 1990; Midgley, 1994b, 2004; Probert, 1994; Taket & White, 1994, 1997; Valero-Silva, 1994, 1996, 1998; Vega, 1999; Woolston, 1992).

One of the most sophisticated and philosophically well-grounded challenges has come from a group of Venezuelan systems thinkers who call themselves interpretive systemologists (e.g., Fuenmayor, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1997; Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991).⁴ The latter have argued that CST, while advocating a critical and emancipatory stance for both its theory and practice, is actually conservative (with a small ‘c’) because it accepts the seeking of accommodations: that is, agreements, in the absence of consensus, between people with different perspectives on next steps forward to deal with a problematic situation. Interpretive systemologists say that accommodations inevitably fall short of radical change and end up reconciling people with existing social structures. This is because the essence of an accommodation (according to Checkland, 1981, who introduced the term into the systems lexicon) is a modest step forward that most people can live with (Fuenmayor, 1997). Thus, accommodations remain within the prevailing status quo. As the interpretive systemologists want a fundamental transformation of society, they reject accommodation in favour of perpetual critique.

Building on Jackson's (1992) reply to the interpretive systemologists, the argument of this paper is that both critique and accommodation are equally necessary in systems practice. The case for this is made by introducing a new social theorist to the systems community, Gillian Rose, and the paper discusses the implications of her thought for CST. Rose's (1981, 1984, 1992, 1996) work is of unique value in this regard, in that her philosophy further develops the

²Post-structuralism and post-modernism are used as interchangeable terms by some authors, while others choose to use just one of them. In our case, we will use the original language of the different authors we are discussing. Because some have used ‘post-structuralism’ and some have used ‘post-modernism’, it may therefore *appear* that we are using the terms interchangeably, but we recognise that they carry different emphases. Post-structuralism emphasises the need to problematize the idea that there are deep structures in society (e.g., institutional systems or antagonistic class relations) that generate most of the phenomena we experience. In contrast, post-modernism emphasises the end of certainties about truth, morality and grand narratives of human progress (Midgley, 1994b, 2004). In the last quarter of the 20th century, both sets of ideas became popular at the same time. There is certainly a connection between them, because theories of deep structure are included amongst the truths that the post-modernists want to undermine.

³Acknowledging that morality is relative to context does not mean that it becomes meaningless, and it does not suggest the need to abandon decision making on morality and values (Midgley, 2000). It simply means that there are no easy rules that equally apply to all contexts, so

reflection and/or deliberation with others is required to explore what could and should be done in each difficult situation. Matthews (2004) persuasively argues that the change from universalism to contextualism is the most significant paradigm shift that has taken place in systems thinking and systems science.

⁴The interpretive systemologists were all based at the Universidad de Los Andes in Venezuela in the late 20th century, and they maintained a continuing dialogue with many CST authors (mainly funded by a British Council staff exchange programme between the Universidad de Los Andes and the University of Hull), but in the 21st century, they dispersed to several other Latin American countries.

critical project of the Frankfurt School, which was so influential for early CST (e.g., Flood, 1990; Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Gregory, 1992; Jackson, 1985, 1991; Midgley, 1990a, 1992b, 1992c; Oliga, 1988, 1996; Ulrich, 1983, 1988). At the same time, her critique of post-structuralist social theory resolves many of the philosophical challenges posed to CST by those who advocate critique at the expense of accommodation. As far as we are aware, only one previous writer (Jones, 1994) has brought the work of Rose (1991) in contact with systems thinking, but this was mainly to define three different types of post-modernism. Our own use of her ideas goes well beyond this.

We will argue in this paper that, if critique is to lead to continued and sustainable social improvements, then accommodation is essential. This does not imply the abandonment of critique: critique and accommodation need to be maintained in a necessary tension, with both having a vital role to play in sustainable systems change.

Below, we start our argument by explaining how early authors of CST learned from the heritage of critical theory. We then engage with interpretive systemology's critique of CST, and we show how Rose's work not only resolves the issues raised but does so in a manner that is complimentary to, and continuous with, both the traditions of CST and interpretive systemology. Using Rose's ideas, we offer a robust defence of CST, while at the same time rescuing interpretive systemology from viewing accommodation and critique as logically opposed methodological principles. This is important because, as we shall see, when critique is welcomed and accommodation is refused, it results in the paralysis of action for improvement.

Moreover, we maintain that Rose's (1981) approach, and especially the novel way she draws on the work of Hegel (1807, 1812, 1821, 1837), can serve to refresh critical traditions within systems thinking and practice that may be ensnared by other problematic dualisms (accommodation and critique being just one). Central to her philosophy is the idea of the 'broken middle': the equivocal space between the two parts of a conceptual dualism (Rose, 1992). As we will see, working within this space to navigate, rather than unify, such dualisms is essential.

However, let us start the argument with a deeper look at how critical theory came to be synthesized with systems thinking in early work on CST.

2 | SYSTEMS THINKING AND CRITICAL THEORY

Jackson (1991), Midgley (2000, 2003a, 2006a, 2023) and Cabrera et al. (2023) explain that there have been three

distinct yet overlapping 'waves' of systems thinking since the 1950s.⁵ The first wave is sometimes described in the literature as 'hard' systems thinking, and it was concerned with the search for objectivity, prediction, control and expert prescriptions for change (Checkland, 1981; Jackson, 1991). The second wave is often called 'soft' systems thinking, and it emphasised the exploration of multiple perspectives, the search for intersubjective agreements and the use of participatory practice (Checkland & Scholes, 1990; Jackson, 1991). In contrast, the third wave is often called CST, and the focus shifted to a better understanding of power relations and the integrative use of methods and methodologies from both previous waves of systems thinking, as well as other sources⁶ (Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Flood & Romm, 1996).⁷

With regard to second-wave, participatory practice, it was argued by early third wave thinkers (e.g., Jackson, 1982, 1985; Mingers, 1980, 1984; Thomas & Lockett, 1979) that too much was being assumed about the willingness and ability of all participants to enter into free and fair dialogue, given that engagements between stakeholders who have different class interests or are in some other form of power

strengths and weaknesses of the wave metaphor are discussed by Midgley (2006a), Cabrera et al. (2023) and Jackson et al. (2025).

⁶While Jackson (1987b, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2019, 2024) emphasises the integrative use of multiple *systems* methodologies drawn from different paradigms, Midgley (1988, 1989b, 1990b, 1995), Midgley and Floyd (1990), Boyd et al. (2007) and Midgley and Rajagopalan (2021) cast their net much wider and advocate drawing in methods and methodologies from other traditions too, including the social and natural sciences as well as arts-based practices. This is partly because there are many systemic approaches (not necessarily labelled as such) that have been developed beyond the boundaries of the systems community. However, it is also because systemicity primarily resides in the practitioner's exploration of the context and the design of an intervention to appropriately respond to it, rather in the methods, so suitable methods that might not have been designed with systems thinking in mind can still be harnessed into a systemic intervention. All methods have different affordances, which may make them more or less useful in any given systemic intervention, but whatever a method affords practitioners in terms of systemic potential, in the hands of someone who does not actually think systemically, that potential is unlikely to be realised, or may only be realised in a very limited manner (e.g., see Checkland's, 1993, critique of unsystemic interpretations of soft systems methodology).

⁷This very brief historical narrative inevitably glosses over the messiness of the actual development of systems ideas, as there have been innovations that do not neatly fit into the waves. Nevertheless, all that is needed for the purposes of this paper is an overview of the major paradigmatic trends, so the ideas to be discussed can be located in a wider landscape.

⁵Jackson (1991) described these as three successive paradigms, and Midgley (2000) later overlaid the wave metaphor onto them. The

dynamic⁸ are often shaped by implicit and sometimes hard-to-detect elements of disadvantage, privilege and coercion (Jackson, 1985: 144).

Linked to this, Flood and Ulrich (1990) and Jackson (2006) called the change in systems thinking paradigms from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ an “epistemological break” (Flood & Ulrich, 1990: 8), representing a move from positivism to interpretivism. Yet they claimed that both paradigms are inadequate: they are similarly naïve when it comes to issues of power. The positivists leave power in the hands of managers and expert modellers, who can exercise it over others without thinking through the consequences, while the interpretivists fail to see asymmetries of power and naively assume that everybody is willing to share decision-making power in non-coercive dialogue. Flood and Ulrich (1990) therefore advocate a form of critical theory that would pay heed to the concerns raised by Jackson (1985) and the other early third wave systems thinkers referenced above. In particular, it was necessary to account for the structural features of society (especially inequalities that are integral to the functioning of capitalism) that shape and are shaped by the exercise of power, thus creating distortions of the ‘free’ exchange of ideas (also see Thomas & Lockett, 1979, Ulrich, 1983, and Jackson, 1985, 1991).

Central to the critique of second wave systems thinking for its inadequate view of power was a focus on the idea that people with different perspectives in organisations need to seek ‘accommodations’ (Checkland & Scholes, 1990: 29), or agreements on next steps forward in the absence of consensus, to make progress in problematic situations (Jackson, 1982). Fuenmayor (1991d, 1997) raises questions about how accommodations come about in projects using second wave approaches, like soft systems methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1981; Checkland & Scholes, 1990), given that there is rarely a level playing field in dialogue between stakeholders: some may be able to negatively affect the lives of others, so open, unhindered communication cannot be taken for granted, even if nobody explicitly complains about coercion. Also, Fuenmayor points out that there are many taken-for-granted assumptions about contemporary organisations that stem from historical power relations. Generations ago, these power relations established the cultural norms and laws that govern how organisations should pursue their business.

Linked to this, the absence of an *emancipatory* theory and practice in the second wave of systems thinking, which would be necessary to address power relations, was raised by Mingers (1980, 1984) and Jackson (1982, 1985). This absence raises questions about what theories of power, authority, legitimacy, representation and coercion should be deployed to understand the construction of accommodations. It is theories of these things that are the central concern of critical theorists in the Frankfurt School (e.g., Adorno, 1951; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944; Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1979; Marcuse, 1964), so this tradition seemed like an obvious place for third wave systems thinkers to turn for inspiration (e.g., Flood, 1990; Gregory, 1992; Jackson, 1985, 1991; Midgley, 1992b, 1992c; Oliga, 1988, 1996; Ulrich, 1983, 1988).

Use of the term ‘critical’ was influenced by the Frankfurt School’s project to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1972: 244). It is about being critical of an unjust political status quo. Use of the term ‘system’, in contrast, is reliant on Kant’s (1784, 1787, 1788) definition as “the totality of relevant conditions on which theoretical or practical judgements depend, including basic metaphysical, ethical, political and ideological *a priori* judgements” (Ulrich, 1983: 21). While acknowledging that it is not possible to have a ‘God’s eye view’ of any given problem situation, the intent was nevertheless to work towards a more comprehensive perspective by reflecting upon the limitations imposed by taken-for-granted boundary judgements, and the exploration of alternative possible boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The marriage between the critical and systems ideas, originally proposed by Ulrich (1983, 1988), has been central to much of the work in CST over the past 40 years (see the review by Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2021).

The intellectual project of Habermas (1972, 1979, 1984a, 1984b), like that of earlier critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, sought to illuminate the existence of, and overturn, the neo-positivist and instrumental paradigms—‘instrumental’ in the sense of pursuing taken-for-granted ends, which are often established by wealthy and powerful elites in the service of narrowly defined interests.⁹ Through most of the 20th century, these neo-positivist and instrumental paradigms had dominated the social sciences, including the production of political theories (Oliga, 1996). The challenge to these paradigms represented a move away from the then-popular idea of the disinterested observer viewing its subject or phenomenon from a distance towards reflection

⁸In the early-to-mid 1980s, the primary focus of CST analyses of power relations was class, but in later years, many other social identity distinctions were explored (e.g., Adisa & Bond, 2024; Barros-Castro et al., 2015; Battle-Fisher, 2024; Borg, 2024; Boyd et al., 2004; Cohen & Midgley, 1994; Gregory et al., 2020; Lewis, 2016; Midgley & Floyd, 1988, 1990; Midgley & Milne, 1995; Midgley et al., 1996; Midgley et al., 2007; Rodriguez, 2019; Shen & Midgley, 2015; Stephens, 2014; Stephens et al., 2018a, 2018b; Vachkova, 2021; Vachkova et al., 2025; Walsh, 1995; Walsh et al., 2018).

⁹Reinhold (1994) makes the point that instrumentality is frequently focused on *efficiency*, as this can be enhanced without questioning the ends being served.

upon potential biases and self-interests in analyses (a theme that Lilley et al., 2022, argue still needs to be at the forefront of systems practice¹⁰). There is a clear connection here with the concerns of critical systems thinkers wanting to better account for power relations and the non-neutral role of the researcher-practitioner.¹¹

Despite this, the influence of the Frankfurt School's critical theory receded when a second generation of third wave systems thinkers arrived on the scene (e.g., Flood & Romm, 1996; Gregory, 1996a, 1996b; Midgley, 1996a, 1996b, 2000, 2001, 2016). Midgley (2000: 204) tells us that this second generation built upon the strengths, yet sought to correct the weaknesses, of earlier versions of CST.¹² While the influence of Habermas waned, later work in CST (e.g., Boyd et al., 2004, 2007; Midgley, 1997, 2000, 2006b, 2015, 2018, 2023; Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2021; Midgley & Shen, 2007; Ufua et al., 2018; Ulrich, 2012) sought to integrate two competing narratives in early CST: a case for methodological pluralism, or choosing between and mixing methods (e.g., Flood, 1989, 1990; Jackson, 1987a, 1987b, 1990, 1991; Jackson & Keys, 1984; Midgley, 1989b, 1990b, 1992b), and being critical of boundary judgements (Ulrich, 1983, 1987, 1988, 1994). The approach to boundary judgements later came to be known as 'boundary critique' (Foote et al., 2007; Midgley et al., 1998; Midgley & Pinzón, 2011).

3 | THE CRITIQUE OF SECOND AND THIRD WAVE SYSTEMS THINKING IN INTERPRETIVE SYSTEMOLOGY

Concurrent with the development of the early work in CST, which responded to the perceived shortcomings of first- and second-wave systems thinking, came the launch of interpretive systemology. This was proposed by thinkers such as Fuenmayor (1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d), Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991) and López-Garay (1991). It then continued in the works of authors like Ochoa-Arias (1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004), López-Garay (1999), López-Garay and Suarez (1999) and Suarez (1999).

It is uncommon in the systems literature to find interpretive systemology listed as a third wave approach.¹³ However, not only is interpretive systemology third wave in terms of the time of its emergence (concurrent with the book on CST edited by Flood & Jackson, 1991a), but we believe that it is notable for providing a 'second front' in the challenge to the philosophical framework underpinning the initial work on CST, heavily influenced by Habermas (1972). Like the 'first front' of critique in the second generation of third wave thinkers, such as Gregory (1992) and Midgley (2000), interpretive systemology raises the problem of the universality of truth and morality. Habermas (and following him, Ulrich, 1983) insists that participants in dialogue should be arguing for the universality of their moral claims, while Fuenmayor (1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1997) and Midgley (2000) both question whether any moral claim can ever be truly universal—valid for every circumstance for all time.¹⁴

Fuenmayor's (1991d, 1997) challenge to universality stems from his utilisation of the works of philosophers such as Heidegger (1954) and Foucault (1980), with a combination of phenomenological method (i.e., focused on human experience) and transcendental critique (examining what it is that gives rise to that experience). Fuenmayor's (1997) deployment of the ideas of these philosophers marks a shift away from the pervasive influence of the Frankfurt School's understanding of critique, and towards one more informed by what we may generally call 'post-modernism' or 'post-structuralism' (although we should acknowledge that Fuenmayor does not use those terms). At the risk of over-generalising, this is characterised by a belief that knowledge and value

¹⁰Today, we have a better understanding of what this reflection should involve (Lilley, 2020; Lilley et al., 2022), informed by both late-20th century systems science (e.g., Maturana, 1988; Rosen, 1985, 2012) and contemporary neuroscience (e.g., Barrett, 2006; Clark, 2024; Seth, 2021).

¹¹See Midgley (1989b, 1990b) and Romm (2001) for discussions of the inevitably non-neutral role of researchers and other systems practitioners.

¹²Arguably, Midgley's (1996b) paper marks the transition from the first to the second generation of CST writers, as he wrote a systematic critique of the early ideas and proposed replacements for each one.

¹³For instance, in his four-volume set of edited readings covering 100 years of systems thinking, systems science, cybernetics and complexity, Midgley (2003b) groups interpretive systemology with second-wave approaches like soft systems methodology (SSM) (e.g., Checkland, 1981) and interactive planning (e.g., Ackoff, 1981). This grouping was influenced by the word 'interpretive' in 'interpretive systemology', as it is commonly argued that the second wave of systems thinking adopted an interpretivist philosophy (e.g., Jackson, 2006). As far as we are aware, prior to this paper, only Flood and Jackson (1991a) and Smith (2022) have written about aligning interpretive systemology with the third wave. Nevertheless, in a personal communication with the second author, Fuenmayor (1992), who coined the term 'interpretive systemology', agreed that this is more appropriate than viewing it as part of the second wave.

¹⁴Ulrich's (1983) idea of universality is perhaps more sophisticated than Habermas's because Ulrich argues that a moral claim can be said to be universal if we can make a credible claim that all other people making the same boundary judgement on what to account for would agree with it. This certainly softens the idea of universality by making it relative to boundary judgements, but Midgley (2000) prefers to abandon the idea of universality on the grounds that it is vanishingly unlikely that everybody in the world would be willing to make the same boundary judgement, so it is a moot point to say that they would agree on a moral principle if their boundary judgements were the same.

systems are socially conditioned and historically contingent (e.g., see Foucault, 1970, 1972; Heidegger, 1954; Lyotard, 1979; Nietzsche, 1887). Knowledge and values are then framed as the product of existing and/or historical power relations, with rationality and morality being particularly common targets for criticism. Thus, rational arguments and moral injunctions come to be seen as little more than justifications for perpetuating particular ideologies. If all accepted knowledge and morality is merely the result of exercises of power, and the legitimacy of this is rejected through critique, we are left with absolute relativism—there is no form of knowledge or morality that has more solid foundations than any other.

Indeed, Fuenmayor (1997) contends that, in contemporary society, this relativism has rendered meaningless any form of holistic or metaphysical thinking regarding the totality of social systems. Instead, there is an emphasis on particularity and difference as opposed to universal, progressive meta-narratives, like those that the Enlightenment and/or Marxism once offered. Fuenmayor (1997) does not like this situation, even though he is critical of universalism, so he grasps for an alternative, deeper form of inquiry: interpretive systemology. A key aspect of interpretive systemology (Fuenmayor, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d) is the unveiling of different possible historical grounds of dominant social understandings in society by focusing on the ways in which the complex social order is produced and reproduced (also see Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2001, who compare CST and interpretive systemology).

Fuenmayor (1997) views the principle and practice of 'accommodation' in Checkland's (1981, 1985) SSM as intervention within a worldview that Heidegger (1954) calls *enframing*: this is when all things, including nature and human beings, are viewed as resources to be used in a purely instrumental manner (also see Jackson, 1993). Fuenmayor says that accommodations are arrived at through instrumental reason employed in service of what Habermas (1972) calls the 'technical interest' (i.e., an interest in *how* things can be achieved rather than *why* or *if* they should be achieved) that is internal to a liberal free-market hegemony associated with West European, post-Enlightenment thinking. Fuenmayor (1997) argues that this instrumentality, which marginalises consideration of *why* things should be done and thereby neuters moral inquiry, makes systems thinking meaningless. This is because, for Fuenmayor, systems thinking is essentially about considering different possible ideas about what gives rise to phenomena, and there is no point in looking at different perspectives on systemic arising if we are not concerned with deep questions about why things are as they are and the desirability of changing them. Despite all the talk in SSM of exploring different possible worldviews, the fact that the move from thinking to action involves stakeholders reaching accommodations means that, ultimately,

any radical proposal for change will be compromised or neutralised by the worldview of enframing: those wanting such change will come up against, and will have to yield to, more powerful stakeholders who take for granted enframing (treating people and nature as means to be used rather than ends in themselves) and instrumentality (looking at how, rather than if or why, things should be done).

While this critique is primarily aimed at Checkland's notion of accommodation, the works of early critical systems thinkers (e.g., Jackson, 1991, and Ulrich, 1983) are swept in too, because (following Habermas, 1979) they talk about the power of practical reason (discussion of values and the reasons why things should or should not be done) to counter purely instrumental thinking. Again, because the purpose of practical reason is to inform decision making on actions to be taken, the necessity of accommodations is inevitably assumed—in the movement from discussion to action, accommodations must be agreed, otherwise no action could be taken in the absence of consensus, and consensus is rare in complex situations where people bring different perspectives to bear.

Consequently, Fuenmayor (1997: 244–245) believes that none of the above authors are really attempting to transform the present epochal order of capitalist enframing. Rather, they instead unwittingly perpetuate that order, accommodating conflicting interests within it during their systems practice. Thus, the methodological principle of *accommodation* is placed in logical opposition to a more desirable *critique as emancipation* on the grounds that the former inevitably leaves the prevailing social order intact, while the latter seeks to overthrow any given order and gain liberation from it (Fuenmayor, 1997: 244–245).

For Fuenmayor (1997: 244), then, the call for accommodation in systems methodology slips into becoming a conservative approach to accommodating everybody into a given order so that the stability of that order can be maintained. This is because, in Fuenmayor's view, the *final purpose* of all current forms of systems thinking (other than interpretive systemology, we assume) is to accommodate people who want to see change within an epochal order (capitalist enframing) that remains largely invisible in the context of organisational life. Fuenmayor (1997: 244) views this as contrary to the deep revolutionary will that originally animated the systems project of modernity. The basis of this was the *transformation* of an epochal order via enlightenment propelled by a deep *critique* of that order (Fuenmayor, 1997: 244–245).

4 | CRITICISMS OF INTERPRETIVE SYSTEMOLOGY

Of course, interpretive systemology has been criticised in turn, particularly by three people from the first

generation of CST: Jackson (1992: 329–334), Mingers (1992: 335–342) and Flood (1992: 319–327).¹⁵

Jackson (1992) argues that the philosophical foundations of interpretive systemology paralyse action. This is because, if those espousing interpretive systemology sought to intervene critically within a problem situation in which multiple perspectives prevent the formation of a consensus, their only non-coercive option would be to move towards accommodations, but this is disallowed by their philosophy and methodology.

Jackson (1992) also believes that the paralysis stems from a misunderstanding of the notion of ‘truth’: Interpretive systemology regards the pursuit of truth as a never-ending quest that is engaged in outside the context of any given problem situation, and because of this, the moment at which action needs to be taken is never reached. Instead, Jackson (1992) argues that truth is to be found and/or achieved *within the specific contexts* of problem situations. Thus, the need for action provides boundaries for what we might call ‘good enough’ truth seeking.

This is a bit like Ulrich's (1983) observation that critique without system boundaries would not have any limit: every phenomenon we are aware of interacts with other phenomena, so a boundaryless inquiry will, in principle, never end. While in practice changes to social contexts do eventually prevent infinite exploration, the possibility of critique flowing into action is lost.

We can now move onto the work of our second critic of interpretive systemology, Mingers (1992), who argues that Fuenmayor's (1991a, 1991b, 1991c) philosophy is essentially phenomenological, concerned with our consciousness of lived experience, and because consciousness exists within individuals, interpretive systemology fails to recognise the socially relational or *intersubjective* nature of selfhood in its approach to the principle of critique.

Also, while Mingers (1992) accepts Fuenmayor's point that the advocates of SSM have mostly been managerialist (i.e., instrumentally pursuing the interests of managers within a capitalist society, rather than seeking to change that society), and they have almost always taken a view internal to the organisation, it does not mean that this necessarily must be the case in future. Mingers (1992: 337–341) argues that it would be quite feasible to develop activity models of an organisation and its relationships with the power structures of society in a very similar way to the case studies presented by Fuenmayor et al. (1991), so SSM *could* be used in an emancipatory manner. Also

see Córdoba and Midgley (2008), Vachkova (2021) and Vachkova et al. (2025), who provide methods to extend SSM for use in societal critiques.

Our third critic of interpretive systemology, Flood (1992), writes a commentary that largely echoes those of Mingers (1992) and Jackson (1992) above, but he also focuses on the tension between what he calls the post-modern philosophical framework of interpretive systemology and the Marxist emancipatory social theory (Marx, 1887) that appears to creep into Fuenmayor et al.'s (1991: 507–525) case study of practice—looking at and choosing between different interpretations of the role of universities in Venezuelan society. Marxism creeps in because one of the interpretations that Fuenmayor et al. (1991) advance—and indeed it is the interpretation that they prefer over all the others that they discuss—is that universities provide a means to absorb people into academic activities who would otherwise become revolutionaries. According to Flood, this Marxism contradicts interpretive systemology at a philosophical level, because the former offers a theory of deep structures in society that is taken as an objective truth, while the latter relativises any such theory as just one way of interpreting a phenomenon of interest, such as Venezuelan universities.

Responding to Flood (1992), one might say that interpretive systemology is the dominant perspective here, because it constitutes the methodology of the study in question, and therefore treating a Marxist analysis as just one amongst many perspectives is legitimate. However, the question must be asked, how did Fuenmayor et al. (1991) come to *prefer* the Marxist perspective to others? There is actually no basis for this preference in interpretive systemology, which demonstrates that Fuenmayor et al. are indeed trapped in a contradiction between their philosophy of perpetual critique and their desire for (Marxist-style) emancipatory action.

Moreover, Flood (1992) believes that interpretive systemology overlooks the right of individuals and groups to self-representation: that is, they may freely choose to live within a civil order that the ‘detached’ interpretive systemologist may deem to be problematic, but those individuals and groups accept. They are not given a voice by the approach because of its never-ending pursuit of truth outside actual problematic situations. Essentially, interpretive-systemological analyses are purely academic exercises, and the people whose lives are impacted by the issues being analysed are not actually viewed as participants in the research, so remain voiceless.¹⁶

¹⁵Midgley (2000), a second-generation CST writer, also critiques interpretive systemology, but this work focuses on interpretive systemology's onto-epistemology (and the lack of a theory of language), which is less relevant to the focus of this paper than the writings of Jackson (1992), Mingers (1992) and Flood (1992).

¹⁶We suggest that Flood (1992) was right about stakeholders not having a voice in early 1990s interpretive systemology, but subsequently Ochoa-Arias (1996, 2004) evolved the approach to be more inclusive, so social analyses came to be generated in partnerships with groups of citizens.

5 | OUR OWN REFLECTIONS

Having presented these critiques of interpretive systemology, we can now begin to express our own perspective. Building on Jackson's (1992) argument that the philosophical foundations and methodology of interpretive systemology frustrate its emancipatory and enlightening intent, we argue that this comes down to a narrow understanding of 'critique' that is fundamental to its approach. Any interpretive variety surrounding the term 'critique' is muted, and it is instead afforded a transcendental status, which gives it a 'hard' methodological priority over an equally 'hard' and narrow understanding of the term 'accommodation'. In this sense, interpretive systemology suffers from a double irony: on the one hand, it fails to be truly interpretive because it does not allow for interpretive variety in understanding either 'critique' or 'accommodation', and on the other, it overlooks that its own philosophical foundations actually have the potential to rectify this failing. The latter may not be immediately obvious, so it will require some more explanation.

To recap for a moment, the research programme of interpretive systemology (e.g., Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991) seeks to comprehend the holistic interpretive sense, or the social sense, of phenomena by viewing those phenomena from different perspectives. It is "devoted to finding meanings to social practice" to open new possibilities that are "brought forth by interpretive discussion", replete with political consequences (Fuenmayor, 1991d: 241). However, it closes off any interpretive variety surrounding methodological concepts such as 'accommodation' and 'critique'.

At the same time, the 'onto-epistemology' of interpretive systemology is premised on a principle of essential recursion between (amongst other things) subject and object: that is, the subject produces the world of objects through perception at the same time as being created by the world of objects—a contradiction or paradox that Fuenmayor says cannot be avoided, and we just have to accept that both ways of seeing subjects and objects are valid and have an essentially recursive (unavoidable and mutually co-constructing) relationship with one another. It is this essential recursion that gives rise to our experience of social phenomena as both interpreted (constructed in consciousness) and real (e.g., Fuenmayor, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). These social phenomena serve as "the institutional preconditions for practical discourse among the general public ..., and the institutional preconditions for practical discourse are, in turn, part of the field of study of interpretive systemology" (Fuenmayor, 1991d: 241–242). However, the hard, transcendental conception of critique overlooks the possibility of a *recursive relationship of critique with accommodation* when considering any possibility of the institutional preconditions of practical discourse.

6 | THE CRITICAL THEORY OF GILLIAN ROSE

To further develop the above line of critique, we will now introduce the work of Gillian Rose. For more detail on her work and its relevance for systems thinking, see Smith (2022). We will begin by very briefly characterising Rose's (1996) criticism of post-modern and post-structuralist philosophy. This is the kind of philosophy that Fuenmayor (1997) utilises when he places the methodological principles of accommodation and critique in a logical opposition to one another. We will then demonstrate how this logical opposition can be understood in a different way via Rose's (1981) account of how the Kantian conception of transcendental critique has shaped conceptual dualisms and methodological priorities in the discipline of sociology. For instance, a fundamental mistake made by many sociologists and critical theorists, according to Rose (1981), is to separate subjective experience and objective reality from their recursive relationship with each other, and then grant validity to the investigation of only one, making the other invisible. Typically, neo-positivists say that the purpose of science is to investigate objective reality (for instance, Popper, 1959, 1972, argues that anything subjective *gets in the way of* objectivity), while interpretivists say that we should investigate subjective and intersubjective experience, without talking about what is 'real', because the former is all we can actually know (Checkland, 1981; von Glasersfeld, 1985). Given the importance to Fuenmayor (1991a, 1991b, 1991c) of the recursive relationship between subject and object, we suggest that Rose's (1981) analysis is entirely compatible with, and indeed corrective to, interpretive systemology. It also offers a robust defence of CST and can bring new insights to it.

Instead of the Kantian conception of transcendental critique, Rose (1981) offers a form of *speculative critique* (to be explained shortly), which she takes from her own highly individual reading of the work of Hegel (1807, 1821). This is offered as a form of critique, which, amongst other things, seeks to work with problematic dualisms, such as accommodation and critique, by placing them within a recursive relationship, similar to the onto-epistemology of interpretive systemology. Another example of a problematic dualism is offered by Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991), who talk about a great contradiction between a cause and an effect lying at the heart of modernity: the rise of the tide of reason during the Enlightenment, which promised human autonomy and emancipation through the rational consideration of good social ends and the means to achieve them, has actually brought into being a world dominated by technologies, inequalities and exploitative societal institutions that have escaped our control and now constrain the autonomy and emancipation that we sought. Modernity's

antidote to this is then the further deployment of reason to imagine better social ends and means (e.g., Habermas, 1984a, 1984b). Can more of the same produce different outcomes? The tension between the two ideas here (the promise of autonomy through reason and the constraint of that autonomy by social systems) resides in what Rose (1992, 1993, 1996) describes as a 'broken middle', which is a space that emerges in the recursive relationship between two contradictory but interdependent ideas. This space provides room for movement between them. Rose also talks about the broken middle between the subjective/intersubjective critiques undertaken by people and the objective reality of institutional structures and uses of language that seek to accommodate difference within a social system via jurisprudence.

7 | CONCERNS WITH POST-MODERN CRITIQUE: MOURNING CRITICAL REASON

Rose (1996: 21) highlights some of the dangers that poorly thought-through interpretations of post-modern or post-structuralist thought may pose to inquiries in the social sciences: essentially, prioritising critique over accommodation can result in any proposal for accommodation being greeted with scepticism because it is seen as just another exercise of power. Exercises of power are viewed as both *ubiquitous* (taking a multitude of forms, pervading all claims to knowledge and appropriate action) and *illegitimate*. This is the case, even though Foucault (1980), for example, was careful to argue against viewing power in a purely negative light (also see Oliga, 1990, for a discussion, in the systems literature, of the limitations of regarding the exercise of power as wholly illegitimate). Unfortunately, the fact that some major post-structuralists, like Foucault, have a more sophisticated understanding of phenomena like power, has not stopped some other post-structuralist writers from over-simplifying and adopting 'degraded' perspectives.

Rose (1996) believes that, in the wake of post-structuralism, it has become commonplace to argue that all social institutions, especially those deploying specialist knowledge, are 'powers', in the implicitly negative sense of the term: that is, constraining and/or destructively impacting individuals and communities. This is the case whether the powers take the form of government, industry or the professions (such as medicine, law and architecture). Indeed, even critical traditions in the disciplines of philosophy and sociology are viewed as instruments of power. As a result, because of this monolithic and implicitly negative view of power, we are left in a position of wanting reparation for being totally dominated. This is

deeply unsatisfactory, for it removes all subtlety in distinguishing between exercises of power that might be viewed positively instead of negatively, or might be seen as positive or negative in different ways, and to different degrees. A monolithic, negative understanding of power disqualifies any possible investigation into the dynamics of how power is configured and reconfigured in particular situations to create improvements, which is absolutely necessary if we want to distinguish locally relevant sources of injustice, and also, most importantly, what constitutes *justice as a positive state of affairs*.

This is what Rose (1996) takes to be our contemporary predicament: thinking about power as plural and multiform, yet also uniformly oppressive, incessant and all-pervasive, so the plurality and multiform *appearance* of power is only a superficial manifestation of the inescapable 'iron cage' of a society that is actually *constituted* by power relations. At the same time, *opposition* to power is conceived as equally pluralistic and multiform, but 'opposition' is nevertheless viewed as *part of* the mechanism by which power dynamics constitute society. Because it is so totalizing, this view of power undermines semi-autonomous institutions, such as science and law, which come to be seen as both generators and manifestations of negative forms of power, no different from any other institutions (e.g., those of the State or business) that citizens might have an interest in reforming. Thus, the potential for science and law to offer recourse to citizens contesting genuinely oppressive activities is lost. The plural yet totalised conception of power, for Rose (1996), leaves individuals and collectives more, not less, exposed to negative impacts of the State and private enterprise, as these impacts are indistinguishable from the operations of power of institutions (like law and science) that have the potential to liberate people. Thus, operations of power that really should be viewed as illegitimate become less distinguishable, and the potential for liberation from those operations attracts scepticism.

Rose (1996: 70) believes that the ubiquitous, all-pervasive reading of power is a characteristic of post-modernism that risks a process of *aberrated mourning*: a melancholia associated with lamenting the loss of faith in the kind of critical reason espoused during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment has now been charged with producing the traumas of modernity, including the European wars of the 20th century, the holocaust, nuclear weapons, colonial and post-colonial experiences, and the Cold War (e.g., Bauman, 1989; Scott, 2004). At the same time, this melancholia maintains a refusal to let go, which leads Rose (1996: 7) to characterise post-structuralism as a form of "despairing rationalism without reason". When it comes to intervention for improvement, the despair produces an ethical and political sclerosis.

This sclerotic manifestation of post-structuralism can be seen in the attitude of interpretive systemology towards accommodation and critique. For instance, as we have seen, Fuenmayor (1997) views accommodation as intervention within *enframing*, in that it is merely instrumental reason within a liberal, free-market hegemony. Fuenmayor (1997) contends that this makes systemic thought meaningless, because enframing is inescapable. The neutering of systems thinking is sclerotic because it involves denying any value to accommodations, thus disabling most actions for change that are necessarily reliant on agreements to cooperate between people with different perspectives.

Subsequently, Fuenmayor (1997) places *critique as emancipation* in logical opposition to accommodation, and defines it as overthrowing a given order, and gaining liberation from it. This is the purpose of interpretive systemology, which Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991: 15–16) say:

“is critical because it aims to uncover the constitution of power in a social world dominated by the combined and mutually reinforcing interaction of instrumental reason and economic growth. It is emancipatory because the uncovering of the ontological and epistemological “trap” (Vickers, 1970) is the precondition for liberation”.

Vickers (1970) offers a metaphor of a lobster caught in a trap. Human beings are similarly caught in a trap, where our understanding of the world is constructed by the social and ideological forces that surround us. If we fail to realise this, we cannot escape, because we will take our understanding of the world to be an unquestionable reality. However, if we come to see how our trap has been constructed, escape becomes possible. Nevertheless, there is no place to be free from social construction, as we are inherently social beings: when we escape from one trap, we just find that we have crawled into another. Thus, the best we can do is realise that this is the case, so we remain constantly vigilant and never succumb to the illusion that we are free of all traps. As we move from one trap to another, we employ our critical faculties to find out about the shape of the latest trap we are in. Maintaining this critical attitude is what Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991) say is emancipatory.

Therefore, the focus of concern of interpretive systemology is not merely on the internal power structures of institutions and organisations. Instead, it is on the role they play in the totalising structures of domination at a societal level—the creation of our present trap. At the same time, Fuenmayor (1991d: 241) contends that

the aim of intervention is to explore interpretive variety and thereby open new possibilities for political thinking. One way to read the dual focus on totalising structures and the opening of new political possibilities is to see them as contradictory: overthrowing one negatively valorised, totalising structure would inevitably involve succumbing to another, so politics would appear to be pointless. However, Midgley and Ochoa-Arias (2001), who have engaged in extensive dialogues with Fuenmayor, reconcile this seeming contradiction by explaining that the intervention undertaken by interpretive systemologists is *only into our knowledge* of those totalising structures. Subsequent political engagements may follow, but they are not considered part of an interpretive-systemological intervention. Intervention into our knowledge remains focused on the never-ending quest to reveal totalising structures.¹⁷

For Rose (1993: 5), this way of seeing intervention, which assumes the inescapability of totalising structures, leaves us with just one desire: redress for the false claim of reason to universality and disinterestedness. This claim has been revealed as false in the wake of the traumas of 20th century modernity, such as the holocaust and nuclear war, which were abhorrent outcomes from the deployment of reason. These traumas have never been properly processed in society, so we experience the melancholia of *aberrated mourning* (mourning that is interrupted or postponed), and remain caught between an over-confident, modernist understanding of human reason that we know has created profound human and ecological tragedies, and a nihilistic post-modernism that renders a different form of tragedy (domination by negatively valorised power relationships) inescapable (Rose, 1993).

We can use these ideas to reflect on interpretive systemology. Fuenmayor (1997: 247), with reference to Foucault (1984), calls for a search for a new “critical ontology of ourselves”—that is, a newly emerging understanding of who and what we are, given the demise of the Enlightenment (which allowed us to see humanity as a species capable of reason) and the growing dominance of neo-liberal enframing, which reduces human beings to

¹⁷While the quest for knowledge of totalizing structures is *theoretically* endless, in practice, of course, projects using interpretive systemology are bounded in time. Nevertheless, it is notable that the idea of the never-ending quest has motivated what is, as far as we are aware, the longest single systems thinking project yet undertaken. This is a 25-year reflection on community organisation in Venezuela, undertaken by Ochoa-Arias (1998, 2000, 2004) in partnership with local residents' associations, using interpretive systemology. Midgley and Ochoa-Arias (2025) are currently working on a retrospective analysis of this project to demonstrate the value of historical inquiry to systems thinking and community operational research.

consumers, and treats the whole of nature (including human beings) as resources for consumption (also see Jackson, 1993). One aspect of this critical ontology of ourselves is considering the institutional preconditions for practical (ethical) discourse: the political institutions necessary to enable dialogue on what constitutes ethical action. We suggest that this search for a new critical ontology of ourselves, despite its seeming ambition, manifests ethical and political sclerosis: by seeking critical emancipation from conditions of enframing, which renders systemic thought meaningless, interpretive systemology is unable to consider the institutional preconditions for practical discourse (such as legal frameworks) because the latter actually requires the systemic thought that enframing has supposedly neutered! Indeed, while the methodology of interpretive systemology advocates the exploration of interpretive variety (different perspectives on phenomena) and its translation into processes of enlightenment that are rich in political consequences, this kind of post-modern approach makes it problematic to investigate the failures of modern regimes of law (unintended, negative outcomes of ideas and acts). This is because critical reflection and judgement lost its legitimacy when the self-validating ground fell away from reason, and when all reflection and judgement came to be seen as the exercise or perpetuation of negatively perceived power relations. Importantly, for Rose (1993: 6), this kind of post-modernism that paralyses judgement and action legitimises the further erosion of political will that has already been set in train by neo-liberalism. So, the very neo-liberal enframing that interpretive systemology criticises is the beneficiary of an approach that views enframing as so totalizing that systemic thought itself becomes meaningless.

Rose (1993: 8–9) has a different diagnosis of the problems with theoretical and practical (ethical) reason, as well as the traumas of modernity (e.g., the holocaust, nuclear weapons, colonialism—and we might add climate change to Rose's list). This may take our thinking in a different direction to interpretive systemology, preserve the importance of critique and at the same time rescue the notion of accommodation from the accusation of conservatism.

Rose (1993) argues that we need to integrate our abstract thinking about universal ethics into the always difficult but enriched actuality of our relationships with others and ourselves. There is a need for a dialectical process that relates together ideas about ethics that we think of as universal and the experience of embodied human relations, such that either one can transform our understanding of the other at any moment. It is this kind of exercise of reason, whether disturbing or joyful, that is full of surprises (Rose, 1993: 8–9). Thus, for

Rose (1996: 11), the reassessment of reason, gradually rediscovering its own moveable boundaries in relation to both claims to ethical universality and particular human relations, can allow us to complete our mourning of the holocaust, nuclear war and other atrocities that have resulted from the use of an instrumental reason that has become detached from empathy with the human beings who suffer when they are viewed as disposable resources. It is the revaluing of empathy when working dialectically between ideas about universal ethics and embodied human relations that can allow the completion of our mourning. Completed or *inaugurated mourning* (Rose, 1996: 70) also acknowledges the creative involvement of action in the configurations of power and law: in the title of her book, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Rose's use of the word 'becomes' suggests the gradual process involved, and the connotation of 'enhancing' the law to prevent new traumas as we emerge from our mourning.

Rose (1996: 70–71) argues that inaugurated mourning needs the relation to law that is presented in Hegel's (1807) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in that it requires a constant negotiation and renegotiation of individual and communal actions, with attention paid to often-unintended consequences, alongside the continual evaluation and re-evaluation of laws and institutions in light of their local, regional and global effects (Rose, 1996: 70–74). Inaugurated mourning is difficult, in that it involves *work*: it is the ability to know and be known, and such mourning does not shy away from the horrors, the trauma or the challenges of modernity. Instead, it gives voice to suffering, creating spaces for stories to be told and heard, along with a space where pain is acknowledged.

Yet, this is not solitary work. Schick (2012) maintains that Rose's (1981) speculative Hegelianism leads her always towards contextualisation, as well as towards a consideration of the broad social, political and historical processes that have influenced present circumstances. This involves a being-in-the-world that is both embedded in the local community and in wider social structures. Rather than being the concerted effort of the individual, it is a communal effort, which is expressed in culture and the institutions of State and civil society. Therefore, the Rosean work of mourning, for Schick (2012), whether related to the failings of modernity in general or a specific historical trauma such as the holocaust, is an inherently political process, and one that prepares the way for more overt political action (Schick, 2012: 48–49).

Rose's (1993, 1996) account of *aberrated* versus *inaugurated* mourning illustrates how we need not be overcome by the perceived loss of critical reason that renders systems thinking meaningless in the wake of the disasters of modernity (e.g., as seen in the works of Fuenmayor &

López-Garay, 1991, and Fuenmayor, 1997). Instead, we may be called to modify our expectations of critical reason and move from a notion of *critical emancipation* to one focused on *improvement* (Midgley, 1996b, 2000). This involves reaching “towards a good enough justice” (Rose, 1995: 116) and a holistic unity that always appears broken as we navigate between the subjective experience of ethical life and the objective validity of law as mediated by structural institutions. Reaching towards *improvement* in a way that actively considers different possible boundary judgements and their associated ethical claims in intervention (as explained by Midgley, 2000, and Helfgott, 2018) may not be quite as devastatingly total as those brought about by seeking an ultimate critical emancipation. This understanding of improvement embodies the search for a *good enough* (rather than perfect) justice, where we know our institutions will be flawed in their attempts to devise rules of relevance to all local circumstances, but those institutions can still improve things by remaining open to political claims that the justice is not actually ‘good enough’, and reform is required.

Although we have been critical of the totalizing view of enframing in interpretive systemology that neuters systems thinking, we nevertheless suggest that Midgley's (2000) notion of improvement is consistent with interpretive systemology's systemic “intervention in discourse through the provision of alternative interpretations of phenomena (communicating with an audience that is largely unknown, possibly including people in future generations), with the uncertain hope of contributing to future change” (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2001: 616). This is because changing discourse through the expansion of interpretive variety is *one form* of improvement.

8 | CONCERNS WITH CONCEPTIONS OF TRANSCENDENTAL CRITIQUE

Rose's (1996) concerns with post-structuralist modes of critique are built upon her deeper unease about what she believes is a Kantian legacy of problematic and circular dualism with regards to conceptual phenomena and methodological priorities in modern sociology and critical theory.

For instance, in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose (1981) contends that modern sociology, since its formal inception in the works of Marx (1887), Durkheim (1897) and Weber (1905), has remained ensnared within a dichotomous and dualistic way of thinking. This sociology emanated from the transcendental method of Kant, but it has never managed to overcome its dualistic formulations

and approach to inquiry. For Rose (1981), this problem stems from the separation by Kant of *phenomena* (that which is known) from *noumena* (the real world beyond our perceptions, which is unknown). Noumena (real-world objects) are unknown because they are in principle unknowable: all we can know is our perceptions and interpretations, not ultimate reality itself.

At the same time, there is the separation of subjective experience from objective validity. Rose (1981: 3–4) tells us that objective validity, in Kant's thought, is established for what can be presented to us as an object within the limits and functions of our own knowledge and understanding. It is restricted to the possibility of objects of experience, of appearances. The task of justification is then to show how the inevitably subjective conditions of thought possess characteristics of objective validity, and not simply subjective validity. Hence, Kant (1787) proposes the transcendental conditions of knowledge, in the sense of the a priori rules which make possible empirical knowledge in general, and these are principles for the synthesis of perceptions into objects of experience, which is as near as we can get to objectivity (also see Fuller, 2018).

Rose (1981: 4) maintains that, in spite of the separation of objective and subjective validity, of questions of fact from questions of rightness, of an empirical from a transcendental account, Kant's (1787) critical philosophy lends itself to psychological readings: that is, a transcendental account may transform a logical question of validity into an epistemological question regarding how we may correctly acquire knowledge. Objective validity is established with reference to perception and representation. On such a reading, Rose (1981: 5) argues that the whole project of transcendental logic reduces validity to the synthesis of representations, to the description of processes of consciousness. Moreover, Rose (1981: 5) believes that a transcendental account reduces knowledge to experience, on the one hand, and to the synthesis of narratives about the appearances of objects, on the other, by making the conditions for the *possibility of experience in general* the same as the conditions for the possibility of the *objects* of experience.

For instance, moving beyond Kant to some of the early, seminal sociologists, Rose (1981: 14) claims that Durkheim emphasises validity over values (i.e., narratives about the appearances of objects over experience-grounded beliefs about what ought to be done), whereas Weber's focus is on values over validity, yet both take their theories in a quasi-transcendental direction by arguing that society and/or culture forms the basis for the validity of both facts and values. Rose (1981: 14) talks about Durkheim's analysis, in which society is said to provide the preconditions that ground

the validity of values, while Weber takes values to be the *source* of validity, which in turn shape society. As such, Rose (1981) contends that sociology was cleaved into two contradictory theoretical schools that, when viewed in isolation, become blind to the fact that they each form one half of a greater, recursive whole. In both Durkheim's structural sociology and Weber's interpretivist approach, each postulates a precondition and something that is conditioned, and yet, as their perspectives are opposites or mirror images of one another, both camps fail to see that, if the two perspectives were joined, the emphasis would be on the *mutual constitution* of (or co-arrising through feedback between) values and society (also see Fuller, 2018).

For Rose (1981), this division then creates problems throughout sociology. For instance, Brower Latz (2018), building on Rose's argument, suggests that the enduring dualistic question of sociology is whether people make society or society makes people, and this either/or framing is then reflected in divisions between agent and structure, freedom and determination, and actor and system.

Rose (1981) believes that sociology is trapped within these dualisms and dichotomies, which it attempts to conquer (e.g., Giddens, 1984). However, ultimately, sociology can never quite manage it, as the dualisms are the product of its underlying assumptions that involve continually separating sociological concepts from their recursive relation to one another. For Brower Latz (2015: 37–54), sociology subsequently faces a double danger, in that it either imposes a pre-theorised schema on society, which mutes subjective experience, or it imagines that simply pointing to subjective experience will suffice. It is in this way that Rose (1981) believes sociology to be replete with dualisms which it can never fully transcend, as it bars what Rose (1981: 1) terms “the speculative experience”, or *speculative critique*, that she finds in Hegel's thought, and which she believes allows social theory to fully transcend such dualisms by accepting recursive relationships.

Rose, throughout her work, recasts such dualisms as systemic *diremptions* (cleavages) between seemingly opposed, yet nevertheless interrelated, concepts that only display emergent possibilities when viewed in relation to one another. It is these diremptions that open the ‘broken middle’ that we can work within. Davis (2018: 11) tells us that the concept of diremption, in Rose's social philosophy, is a means to discuss the relation between two poles *in terms of both their separation and their connection*. Furthermore, it is a way of discussing the mediation between two poles in a way that *produces and reproduces their separation as opposed to their reconciliation*.

Before moving on to explain what Rose (1981) means by speculative critique, we want to first discuss the

implications of what has been described above for interpretive systemology and CST.

9 | IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETIVE SYSTEMOLOGY AND CST

We would suggest that the call for a transcendental critique, as advocated by Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991) and explained earlier, leads Fuenmayor (1991d, 1997) to elevate the principle of critique over and above that of accommodation, leading to his construction of the two principles as logically opposed with respect to social systems and holistic thought. In this sense, the transcendental method, as critiqued by Rose (1981), causes the interpretive systemologists to remove the principle of critique from its own onto-epistemological framework of essential recursion (e.g., Fuenmayor, 1991a, 1991b). Instead of seeing critique as always in a recursive relationship with accommodation, it is placed into the transcendental register, which confers upon it a methodological priority for interpretive-systemological investigations.

The transcendental division between accommodation and critique in interpretive systemology comes into bolder relief when we consider this in relation to Vickers's (1983) theory of society. He argues that a dialectic of enablement and constraint is an ontological feature of Western liberal democracy. This is characterised by a commitment to individual liberty within an institutional framework that is navigated via the rule of law.¹⁸ For example, we can see how Fuenmayor (1991d, 1997) associates critique with enablement and hence agency, and accommodation with constraint and hence the disabling of agency. *However, he fails to see that both accommodation and critique enable some things and constrain others*: in complexity theory terms, there are always enabling constraints (Juarrero, 1999: 247–248); and in the language of boundary critique, boundaries always enable one thing and constrain another at the same time (Midgley & Lindhult, 2021).

To spell it out in more detail, an accommodation enables agreed upon actions while constraining other possibilities for action that might undermine the implementation of that agreement. Similarly, a critique enables the identification of new pathways for change while simultaneously constraining commitments to the status quo by highlighting problems with it. Essentially,

¹⁸It could be tempting to associate individual liberty with enablement and the rule of law with constraint, but laws can enable as well as constrain, and one person's liberty can be another person's constraint.

Fuenmayor (1997) is wrong to see critique as solely enabling and accommodation as solely constraining.

We therefore argue that Fuenmayor (1997), in his resistance to enframing (the ‘trap’ of technological reason that makes all of nature, including human beings, into a resource), overlooks the dirempted nature of modernity’s contradictions by viewing *accommodation* and *critique* as a ‘static dualism’ (Rose, 1996: 76). This is in the sense that methodological priority is given to the subjective experience of interpretive variety in a way that bars active intervention into social conditions (restricting it to the domain of knowledge) on the grounds that accommodation, when deployed as intervention, merely reinforces the status quo and therefore strangles ‘authentic’ critique¹⁹ (e.g., Fuenmayor, 1991d; Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991). The possibility of *transformative accommodation*—that is, accommodation that harnesses the energies of diverse actors for desired social change—is not considered.

If we acknowledge that accommodation can be transformative on occasion (not all accommodations entrench the status quo), then it becomes evident that the alignments of accommodation with the status quo and critique with radical change are misplaced: both accommodation and critique are necessary in a healthy society, and both have the potential to be transformative or status-quo entrenching, depending on the purposes being pursued and the assumptions about power relations being made.

Rather than dividing accommodation from critique and promoting one at the expense of the other, we can instead see them as modes of communicative action that have different consequences for the deployment of enablement and constraint. Accommodation can bring critique to a close so people can arrive at an agreed common action, while critique can problematize accommodation in the interests of finding an alternative action. So, while Fuenmayor (1991d, 1997) is, to a certain extent, right to view them as opposed, they nevertheless need to remain in a dialectical relationship with one another, kept in tension, without one being prioritised over the other to the extent that the other is abolished or assimilated.

We believe that this is a major factor underlying Jackson’s (1992) and Flood’s (1992) critiques of what they take to be interpretive systemology’s misalignment between its philosophical foundations and theory of intervention: Fuenmayor (1991d) views *intervention as suspending*

critique, so accommodations can be made that are ultimately conservative in their nature, yet accommodations are as necessary as critique to social collaboration. Flood (1992) and Jackson (1992) arrive at this commentary on interpretive systemology in a different manner to us: through their thinking about methodological pluralism. If one believes that every methodology is valid and useful for some purpose (Flood & Jackson, 1991b), then it follows that accommodation should not be ruled out, because that would also rule out major methodological traditions, like SSM (Checkland, 1981; Checkland & Poulter, 2006; Checkland & Scholes, 1990). However, it is equally possible to arrive at this commentary via the thinking of Rose (1981), as we have shown. While interpretive systemologists have demonstrated no interest in methodological pluralism—if anything, an active *disinterest* because of the negative connotations given to the idea of intervention (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2001)—we suspect that these new arguments are more likely to be welcomed because of the clear compatibility between Rose’s idea of diremptions and Fuenmayor’s essential recursions.

Nevertheless, we suggest that the interpretive-systemological reading of critique as emancipatory (Fuenmayor, 1991d, 1997; Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991) reaches (at times explicitly) towards an *idea* of justice in intervention, yet it is without the means to formulate a corresponding theory of *accommodation* (e.g., via jurisprudence), so there is no means by which those who have been emancipated via the critical intervention can create and be accommodated into a more just civil order. Thus, interpretive systemology argues for a transcendental form of critique that is emancipatory in its intent, with an implied sense of social justice (e.g., Fuenmayor & Fuenmayor, 1999), yet it is without a normative conception of the social totality, a corresponding theory of jurisprudence, and an appreciation of the role of accommodation to enable collaborative action following critiques.

10 | SPECULATIVE CRITICAL REASON AND THE BROKEN MIDDLE

We shall now discuss how Rose’s (1981) method of critique could also be viewed as complementary to both interpretive systemology and CST. We saw earlier how Rose (1992) views seemingly opposed conceptual dualisms as ‘diremptions’ (cleavages between concepts that seem opposed but are nevertheless mutually dependent on one another), which is her own individual reading of a term used by Hegel (1807). However, to better

¹⁹Although we agree with Midgley (2000) that the critique by Mingers (1992) of Fuenmayor (1991a,b,c) for an alleged onto-epistemological subjectivism misses its mark (Fuenmayor actually recognises that the subject and the object together make up the whole), when it comes to *methodology*, subjectivism does seem to be prioritised.

appreciate the term and its meaning, we need to understand what Rose (1981) characterises as 'speculative experience', better understood as *speculative critique*.

In *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Rose, 1981), the speculative form, which Rose employs throughout her work, is first expounded against the dualisms of the transcendental method. She argues that it is impossible to comprehend concepts in isolation: they must always be thought of in relation to their 'other'. So, speculative thought is a continual interplay between what initially seem like competing conceptual dualisms, such as particular and universal, legality and morality, collectivism and individualism, the State and society, and so forth. Speculative thought interrogates the ways in which the concepts in a particular pair constitute one another.

According to Rose (1981, 1992), Hegel's (1807, 1812) focus on the unity of their competing duality is accompanied by an acknowledgement of their *diremption*, or their brokenness: this is not a temporary state of affairs—the relationship between these pairs of concepts can never be fully mended. This 'brokenness' constitutes what Rose (1992) would later term a 'broken middle', and this is irreparable. Thus, there is an essential tension between individualism and collectivism, between ethics and legality, and between State and society. Rose (1992) believes this brokenness emanates from a set of conceptual differentiations that mark the onset of Western modernity, which began with the Reformation, but really became entrenched with the emergence of the Enlightenment principle of individual autonomy (also identified as significant by Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991).

Moreover, the break in the middle must be perpetuated, and individuals and institutions must work within it, if we are to remain committed, for example, to a principle of individual autonomy within an institutional framework that is negotiated via the rule of law. The danger of erasing the break and believing that two opposing concepts are one thing (or equivalent) can be illustrated through a discussion of the *diremption* of ethics and law. If we truly believed that the law was ethically perfect, then there would be a resistance to noticing that unethical practices (injustices) still occur in local circumstances that were not foreseen when the law was written: ethics and law must be negotiated in the broken middle. Likewise, if one was to believe that society and the State are equivalent, all those aspects of society that are not mandated by the State could come to threaten this belief and either be rendered invisible, or worse, illegitimate. The denial of *diremptions* is often a technique deployed in totalitarian regimes. Also see Lloyd (2011, 2018) for a discussion of the need to see *diremptions*.

Rose (1981) reads Hegel within the spirit of this speculative reason and therein finds the radical aspect of his

thinking and its challenge to the status quo. Rose's (1981) speculative account of Hegel's (1807, 1812) ideas is then posited as a resistance to the dualisms in Kantian critical thought. These dualisms between concept and intuition, consciousness and its objects, and theoretical and practical reason are not taken to be merely philosophical propositions but instead are seen as constructing social relations. Rose (1981) contends that this dualistic structure is then replaced by Hegel (1807) with a triune structure, which calls attention to the relation between the two concepts in any pair *in terms of both their identity and non-identity*. This tension between identity (or equivalence) and non-identity (difference) is what constitutes a third element between the two original concepts, and Rose (1981, 1992, 1993) repeatedly refers to it as an 'aporia'. That is, an enigma or something equivocal in nature, that leaves the two terms, and their relation to one another, open to a variety of interpretations.

Another way to think about this is hovering above and looking down upon two co-dependent concepts that are nevertheless in tension, and the third concept (situated at the elevated observation point) is the combination of and relationship between the original two, with all their equivocal possibilities for identity (reduction of one concept to the other) and non-identity (preservation of the differences) (Midgley, 1988).²⁰

Lloyd (2011: 14) argues that Rose's (1981) account of speculative identity is one that suggests the following: to say 'A is B' both affirms and rejects the identity that it states—it says at the same moment 'A is B', and 'A is not B', because A remains A and B remains B, and they are different in some respects as well as equivalent in others. So, Rose (1981: 49) argues that a speculative identity "must be understood as a result to be achieved". It requires work to, for instance, continually improve law so it better reflects ethics, in the knowledge that perfect equivalence is forever out of reach because the law cannot possibly embody the full range of contexts and contingencies that we take account of when judging whether something is ethical. This work involves a process through which the meanings of both parts of the duality (in the example in the previous sentence, law and ethics) evolve through a gradually unfolding series of contradictory experiences where disjunctions are revealed and one or both concepts in the duality are rethought to bring

²⁰In the systems literature, Midgley (1988) uses exactly this triune form to explain why systems methodology needs to explore subjectivity, objectivity and the essential tension between the two that gives rise to multiple possibilities for interpretation in the context of systems practice. However, in 1988, Midgley had not read Hegel, Rose, Fuenmayor or any other writers on *diremptions* or essential recursions—he 'reinvented the wheel' without knowing this history of ideas.

them more into alignment. Through such experiences, the historical and social background fashions the identity of each concept via the push and pull of the two concepts in question, and it is this process of meaning production through contradiction and tension, between concepts such as collectivism and individualism, autonomy and heteronomy, law and ethics, religion and the State,²¹ that Rose (1996) refers to as the *difficult work of the middle*.

This understanding of speculative identity is then applied by Rose (1981: 81) to Hegel's (1821) declaration in the *Philosophy of Right* that "what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational". For Rose (1981: 81), this formulation has been misread as a statement that correct reason and rationality, whether from God or man, is synonymous with the laws of the natural world. Using this interpretation, Hegel's (1821) philosophy could then be presented either as an endorsement of the existing social order (i.e., what is *real* is rational), or as a blueprint for radical, and possibly revolutionary, criticism (i.e., only what is *rational* is real). Yet, for Rose (1981: 81), when read as a statement of speculative identity, both the shared identity and non-shared identity of the two concepts (rational and actual) are affirmed. For instance, on the one hand, shared identity is affirmed because it is the prevailing view that what we see as rational is grounded in experience of the actual; yet, on the other hand, there can be a strong tension between the rational and the actual, such as when two actual laws conflict with each other, which appears irrational, yet is bound to happen when different pieces of legislation are written at different times, in different circumstances, mandated by different political parties—each law might have appeared perfectly rational when it was written, and the irrationality only surfaces when the contradiction is noticed in a context that the original writers of the laws failed to anticipate. For Rose (1981: 81–82), however, neither the equivalence nor non-equivalence of rationality and actuality needs to be decisive; rather, it is by reading them as having a *standard* identity (expecting an absolute equivalence or an absolute difference) instead of a *speculative* identity (holding the two in tension) that makes it decisive. Insisting on either absolute equivalence or absolute difference are errors of judgement because they miss the potential of working in the broken middle between the two concepts (also see Lloyd, 2011: 14–15).

²¹We might add systemic and reductionist thinking to this list of dirempted dualities, reflecting Bunge's (1977) insight that they are not actually opposites: every systemic analysis has limits, so can be regarded as reductionist from a different, broader perspective. And we might add that many analyses labelled as reductionist can be seen as systemic if their narrowly defined boundaries are accepted and the relationships within them are examined.

Such a simultaneous affirmation and denial of a shared identity necessitates the examination of the social and historical conditions from which any given speculative identity arises, which Rose (1981) contends is Hegel's project in works such as *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Philosophy of Right* (1821). We will continue with rationality and actuality as an illustration. A Hegelian examination involves taking 'actual' and 'rational' as empty names and, as we progress through the work involved in the examination, the content of these terms is filled in as the tensions between the two become clearer. In Hegel's (1807, 1821) interpretation, such tensions came into being with the transition from the prominence of Greece to Rome, which saw the introduction of abstract, 'rational', yet seemingly less 'actual' legal concepts, such as a 'person' defined as someone who has private property and certain entitlements. Subsequently, law came into tension with the organic whole of social institutions with which it was once imagined to be united. As history unfolded, bringing changes in social conditions, the tensions between 'actual' and 'rational' remained, with their meanings continuing to be filled in via the understandings and discourses generated in the new arena of contest.

11 | SPECULATIVE PROPOSITIONS

Rose (1981) applies her reading of Hegel (1807, 1821) to the modern liberal relation between religion and the State. She argues that such a relation is expressed in the form of speculative propositions, which are propositions that, at first glance, would appear to confirm equivalence, such as the statement that "religion and the foundation of the State are one and the same" (Rose, 1981: 51). However, Rose (1981: 52) believes that, when such propositions are read speculatively, they must also be seen as expressing the *non-identity* between the two terms, because otherwise both would not be nameable as separate things. Furthermore, *non-identity* means that the equivalence that we have claimed between the two concepts does not reflect all we need to know about their relationship with one another.

Davis (2018: 14) claims that this speculative reading regarding the identity and non-identity of religion and the State is *the* fundamental speculative proposition in Rose's (1981, 1984, 1991, 1993, 1996) project, informing her analysis of what she believes to be the central diremption of law and ethics in Western liberal democracy. There is no *predetermined* relation between these two terms, but instead the proposition is a result to be achieved through reflection on an experience of

diremption. For Rose (1981: 52), what is affirmed in the proposition (for instance that religion is the foundation of the State) is an actuality (religion is foundational), which now fails to correspond to our experience, and it is the lack of correspondence with our experience that proves both decisive and divisive.

In this case, Rose (1981: 51–52) is calling attention to our immediate experience of both religion and the State, so this experience can be subjected to a critical analysis whereby the mutual implication of the two concepts can be recognised. This is because Rose (1981: 54) maintains that our experience of religion, and how religion posits itself, presupposes an overall economic and political organisation, which may not be immediately apparent. In this way, Rose (1981: 54) shows, via the speculative proposition of the identity of religion and the State, that ethical life in the modern world is dirempted between the State (law) and religion (morality). Furthermore, Davis (2018: 15) believes the proposition illuminates the experience of their lack of identity to an extent that we can see that religion (morality) is determined by politics and economics in ways that are *concealed* by our immediate experience of religion. At the same time, we also experience how politics and the State (law) can themselves be pursued in a foundational (or even fundamentalist) manner that appears religious—the idea of politics as religion is not commonly recognised.

Thus, Rose (1981) reads Hegel's project, not as the story of the reconciliation of two concepts or ideas in tension into the undifferentiated, unified harmony of a perfect synthesis, but as a continuing conflict between ever-persisting and never-resolved contradictions, which we can nevertheless learn about (and from) through investigations of how claims to similarity and difference have played out in history. It is this learning that is the emergent synthesis, but it is never complete because diremptions cannot ultimately be healed. *Claims* to such a healing are possible, but as we have seen, these generally involve hiding the contradictions, which persist despite the words of the claimant—and in politics, the denial of contradictions is commonly a feature of totalitarian governments.

Despite the emphasis on a narrative of perennial conflict, as opposed to an emerging, harmonised totality, Rose (1981) maintains that the *Absolute* occupies a central role in Hegel's thought, and her own too. For Rose (1981), this is the key difference between Hegel and Kant: Hegel's willingness to conceive of the Absolute does not necessarily mean thinking about God, but rather it means grappling with the *possibility* of an Absolute, whatever that might be, instead of trying to deny it. In contrast, for Kant (1787), the Absolute is unknowable: it is separated from the phenomenal realm and placed into

the noumenal register. In other words, the Absolute is what it is impossible to experience directly, because 'experience' is mediated by our senses, which makes every claim about the Absolute to be a claim, really, about our *knowledge or impression* of that Absolute. Rose (1981) explains that this aspect of Kant's transcendental critique means that *we cannot know ourselves, and we therefore cannot act as free moral agents*, because our 'true selves' are noumenal. For Rose (1981), freedom is only possible if we can think about the Absolute, and it is Hegel's acceptance of the possibility of thinking about the Absolute that gives his project its sociological and philosophical relevance. As Rose (1981: 51) argues, thinking about the Absolute as something to be grappled with emphasises "the presence of ethical life, not the task of achieving it". Lloyd (2011: 16) argues that it is only by thinking of the unity and diremption of the actual and the rational, or metaphysics and ethics (as opposed to consigning one or the other part of the unity to an inaccessible realm of things-in-themselves), that enables us to speak about the actual existing world in which we are situated and to comprehend the historical reasons for illusions to which we are perennially subject.

12 | THE BROKEN MIDDLE: BETWEEN ACCOMMODATION AND CRITIQUE

In the case of both interpretive systemology and CST, Rose's (1981) account of speculative critique allows us to place the principles of *accommodation* and *critique* back into a relationship with one another as part of the original recursive onto-epistemological foundation of interpretive systemology (e.g., Fuenmayor, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c). This then allows us to stop conceiving of them as "logically opposed" (Fuenmayor, 1997: 237), and instead we can view them as *speculative categories*. We mean speculative in the manner, suggested by Rose (1981), that both affirms their *identity* (i.e., dependence on one another for meaning) and their *lack of identity* (meaningful difference). We can interrogate the identity and non-identity of accommodation and critique in terms of subjective experience and objective validity, and we can also examine how they arise out of, and reveal, diremption: while seemingly contradictory, accommodation and critique are nevertheless interrelated, working together, yet always in tension, as they interact across the *broken middle* (Rose, 1992, 1993, 1996). The space between is the *aporia*, the equivocal enigma that emerges in the gap between subjective experience and objective validity, between ethics and legality, and between theory and practice, that Rose (1981, 1984, 1992, 1993, 1996) believes

drives modern society's diremptions, giving rise to their interpretive variety.

Consequently, our task is to constantly strive for the navigation, not the unification, of both these terms, their identity and non-identity, in the context of a systemic intervention. Thus, Rose's (1981, 1984, 1992, 1993, 1996) philosophy, we argue, provides a conceptual framework from which interventions can be undertaken that are generated by a speculative and recursive relationship between accommodation *and* critique. This recursion is precisely what Fuenmayor (1991a, 1991b, 1991c) recognises, so actually this argument is compatible with interpretive systemology—if, that is, we give up the elevation of critique to an almost sacred status and the treatment of accommodation as profane. Both accommodation and critique, plus the tensions between them, need to be welcomed.

We contend that accommodation and critique are both a dirempted pair of concepts themselves, and they are also attitudes and actions that take place as we deal with the broken middle in between *ethics* and *intervention*; that is, the equivocal, aporetic space between the experience of ethical requirements (i.e., what we individually or collectively believe should be done) and the practical action that is taken by ourselves and others during and after an intervention. We can only imperfectly embody ethical requirements in our interventions for organisational, community and ecological change, because we try to do as well as we can while negotiating the practical constraints (e.g., limited time, money and the participation of other people) that we are inevitably subject to. Over-emphasis on either accommodation or critique has negative consequences for systems practice. It also risks an inability to deal with the diremption between ethics and intervention. Both problems are explained below.

First, over-emphasising accommodation, as Miners (1980, 1984), Jackson (1982, 1985), Fuenmayor (1997) and Córdoba and Midgley (2008) argue, risks the confinement of systems practice to incremental change within a status quo that is never seriously challenged. This means, when it comes to the major political assumptions of our epoch, the perpetuation of capitalist social relations (Jackson, 1985) and enframing (viewing everything in nature as a resource for human consumption) (Fuenmayor, 1997) come to be taken as given.

Even if there is no appetite within a systemic intervention for deeply penetrating critiques of political assumptions, the privileging of accommodation and the refusal of critique still have negative consequences: the boundaries of who should be involved in dialogue and what issues should be considered can harden, and possibilities that would be revealed by critique (e.g., new

stakeholders who could be relevant and other agendas that could interact with the ones being discussed) will remain hidden (Ulrich, 1983). Córdoba and Midgley (2008) also argue that over-emphasising accommodation can perpetuate marginalisation, as people who are marginalised are either not noticed, ignored or derogated by those who take it for granted that they alone should be the key participants in agreeing accommodations. Critiques of the boundaries of accommodation are essential.

The bottom line here is that, regardless of whether we are interested in fundamental economic, political and cultural paradigm shifts or more local changes in organisations and communities, if we privilege accommodation over critique, systems thinking will never really achieve its transformative potential.

Conversely, if we over-emphasise critique and neglect accommodation, we fall into the trap that Jackson (1992) identified as the fate of interpretive systemology (see earlier in this paper): we end up producing penetrating critiques of the societal status quo while failing to bridge to any meaningful change in society, beyond the realm of unrealised ideas. Thus, critiques languish in the academic literature and never inform the accommodations that are necessary if action is to be taken.

Even if we reframe the production of academic critiques more positively as “intervention in discourse with the uncertain hope of contributing to future change” (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2001: 616), it has to be acknowledged that the opportunity to think more strategically about how to reduce that uncertainty and increase the likelihood of action for change is missed when critique is over-emphasised—inevitably, strategic thinking about the translation of critique into action has to be concerned with bringing together people who need to reach *accommodations*, and the neglect of this makes change a lot less likely.

This resolves the problem that Jackson (1992) identifies with interpretive systemology—the paralysis of action for improvement—because accommodations, and not just critiques, are granted legitimacy. It also addresses the issue discussed by Ulrich (1983) and mentioned earlier: critiques without system boundaries in principle become endless, because every phenomenon we might wish to understand interacts with other phenomena, which then get swept into inquiry. Accommodations are one way of establishing boundaries, and such boundaries need not harden (thus making future critique impossible) if the essential tension between accommodation and critique is kept in view, so we work in the broken middle between them.

Earlier, we suggested that accommodation and critique are not only a mutually interdependent pair of dirempted concepts themselves, but failure to address the

complexity of their interrelationship has significant implications for how we deal with the diremption of ethics and intervention. This is explained in more detail below.

Over-emphasis on accommodation not only hardens the boundaries of who is involved in generating accommodations and what issues are considered (as discussed above), but it also restricts ethical reflection. As Ulrich (1983) cogently argues, boundary judgements and ethics (defined as what we believe ought to be done in any given context of action) are tightly interconnected: if we widen or narrow the boundaries of who can participate and what issues can be addressed, it brings different ethics to the fore.

For instance, Winstanley et al. (2005) present a systemic intervention where the possibility of building a water storage dam was compared with other potential water management options that could deal with drought and the consequent failure of irrigation. Farmers were primarily concerned with the viability of their businesses, future profitability, the welfare of their families, the sustainability of food production and jobs in the local community. These were the main values that orientated their ethical commitments, and for them, building a water storage dam appeared to be the most ethical solution because it addressed all these concerns. In contrast, other stakeholders brought a set of broader values to the table, ranging from biodiversity and global (not just local) environmental sustainability, through to the preservation of leisure pursuits, such as kayaking, fishing and birdwatching. What people thought ought to be done (i.e., what action was considered most ethical) hinged on which issues they were considering. The primary focus of the intervention was therefore to support stakeholders in evaluating the various water management options using a set of criteria that embodied *all* the above considerations, so people widened their thinking about what mattered. The result was the design of a more comprehensive water management strategy, including but not limited to a water storage dam, that secured robust community and stakeholder consent. This is an example of being critical about the boundaries of inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation so the resulting accommodations could account for a wider range of interrelated ethical concerns.

Had Winstanley et al. (2005) worked with just the original participants suggested to them by the first stakeholders they spoke with (the farmers and local council), this would have over-emphasised accommodation at the expense of critique. A systemic intervention with such a narrow boundary of participation would have been easier to manage in terms of securing accommodations, but the emergent plan for action would undoubtedly have been undermined by community conflict when stakeholders

with neglected ethical concerns saw that they had been excluded from the decision making. We can be reasonably sure that this is what would have happened because we have knowledge of what transpired after Winstanley et al.'s (2005) systemic intervention: the Council decided to put *two* alternative water management strategies out for public consultation—the one developed through the systemic intervention and another one that had been designed non-participatively later. Every single one of the many objections from members of the public was aimed at the new design that did not account for the community's ethical priorities.

The above example illustrates how over-emphasising accommodation at the expense of critique undermines dealing with the diremption between ethics and intervention: the intervention was only successful in supporting decision makers to act because critique enabled the inclusion of a wide range of ethical concerns in the generation of accommodations, and neglecting the critique would have narrowed the ethical considerations being addressed, generating community conflict.

Conversely, over-emphasising critique at the expense of accommodation also undermines dealing with the diremption between ethics and intervention, but in a different way. It would be perfectly possible to undertake critiques divorced from the accommodations that need to be secured to enable action, just as the interpretive systemologists discussed earlier did (Fuenmayor et al., 1991; López-Garay, 1991). While the result could be academic papers with remarkably subtle and sophisticated arguments with respect to ethics (what should be done to enable benefits and minimise harms), the lack of a focus on accommodations between stakeholders would undermine any possibility of an intervention into anything other than discourse, and primarily academic discourse at that. The opportunity would therefore be lost to work in the broken middle between ethics and a more applied form of intervention. This work is important because it is only if ethics can be made meaningful in practical contexts, replete with all the constraints that need to be negotiated with stakeholders, that they will flow into action.

Again, we can provide an example. Midgley et al. (2023, 2024) report an intervention to look at the potential for designing a new approach to governing the use of antimicrobials (antibiotics and other substances that kill bacteria) in US agriculture. This issue is a public health priority because the overuse of antimicrobials risks the rise of antimicrobial resistance amongst populations of bacteria, with the possibility that currently treatable human and animal diseases will become resistant to all antimicrobials, leading to significant mortality (e.g., Dadgostar, 2019). Midgley et al. ran a participative

workshop process, using a combination of critical systems heuristics (Ulrich, 1983) and idealised design (Ackoff et al., 2006), in which the ethical concerns of beef farmers, dairy farmers, public health professionals and consumer advocates were all included. Because a participative process was used, it might appear that accommodations were being sought, but actually this only happened in a very limited way: due to mistrust between stakeholders, the four groups mentioned above were kept separate, so they secured accommodations with like-minded colleagues, but not with other stakeholders with significantly different ethical priorities. After the workshops, the original plan was to undertake a preliminary analysis of the discussions and feed this into a second participative process, bringing the stakeholders together once sufficient trust had been built. It was also intended to have significant engagements with food-producer industry organisations and the US Department of Agriculture, which might be involved in implementing the emerging design of a governance system. However, covid-19 intervened, and no more workshops or stakeholder engagements were possible: face-to-face meetings were stopped, and of course, the priorities of the industry and government stakeholders changed overnight, so the opportunity to make progress on the governance of antimicrobials was interrupted. Thus, through circumstance rather than design, Midgley et al. (2023) ended up doing an in-depth analysis themselves. While their report has been circulated to stakeholders, to date, there has been no uptake into action.²² This is hardly surprising, as it has been well-known since the early days of systems thinking and action research that ‘expert’ reports with limited decision-maker engagement often gather dust on shelves rather than inform policy and practice (Adelman, 1993; Lewin, 1946).

However, it also illustrates the point being made about over-emphasising critique at the expense of accommodation, which undermines the possibility of dealing effectively with the diremption between ethics and intervention. There was extensive critical thinking about boundary judgements and associated ethics in this project, ranging from consideration of who to invite to workshops to the design of safe spaces for people to openly discuss their own ethical priorities. Also, Midgley et al. (2023) used the 12 questions from the methodology of critical systems heuristics (Ulrich, 1983) to facilitate stakeholder discussions, and these are specifically useful for exploring ethical concerns of relevance to governance

(Midgley, 2017). However, as mentioned earlier, the opportunity for securing cross-stakeholder accommodations was lost because of covid-19. Thus, although methods from systems methodologies were used for the workshops, the idea of a systemic intervention to engage decision makers as well as stakeholders had to be abandoned. While the prioritisation of critique over accommodation was not planned, it had the effect of biasing work on the diremption between ethics and intervention towards a focus on ethics. The result was a much more limited systemic intervention than intended, focused on increasing knowledge about the possibility of a new governance approach rather than enabling its implementation.

13 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper has sought to introduce the social theory of Gillian Rose as a new resource for both CST and interpretive systemology. It has built the argument for using Rose's work on Jackson's (1992) two-fold critique of interpretive systemology. First, by welcoming critique but refusing accommodation, interpretive systemology paralyzes action for improvement: accommodation is necessary if people with different perspectives are going to cooperate on social change. Second, by seeing the search for truth as something that is pursued outside practical contexts of action, interpretive systemologists double down on their paralysis: the point at which action needs to be taken is never reached if truth seeking is regarded as a never-ending academic pursuit. The best that can be achieved is an intervention into academic knowledge, with the uncertain hope that it may be translated into public policy or practical action at some unknown point in the future (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2001).

While Jackson (1992) makes an important contribution by explaining why critical systems thinkers need the concept of accommodation, his ideas on this have not been accepted by interpretive systemologists. Arguably, our use of Rose's work stands a better chance of being accepted because it demonstrates that viewing accommodation and critique as a pair of dirempted concepts (mutually dependent on one another, but nevertheless in perpetual tension) is consistent with the philosophy of essential recursion that is at the heart of interpretive systemology. It offers the prospect of working in the ‘broken middle’ between accommodation and critique.

Below, we conclude our paper with some final reflections on how interpretive systemology, CST and indeed systems thinking more generally might be further enriched in future work using Gillian Rose's ideas.

²²The lead authors are still discussing how to proactively address this, but it is undoubtedly the case that the work was considerably set back by covid-19.

What Rose offers both interpretive systemology and CST is a development of the philosophy of essential recursion and, more importantly, a way out of what we might call the ‘twin tragedies’ of critique and accommodation. When the pursuit of critique is divorced from accommodation, it enables a far-sighted vision of a better society, but no means to foster the collaboration needed to move towards it (Jackson, 1992). Thus, the vision becomes tragic, because it is little more than a chimera. Conversely, as Fuenmayor (1997) and others recognise, when the pursuit of accommodation is divorced from critique, only incremental rather than transformative change is possible. Loss of the potential for transformation likewise represents a tragedy, especially considering major threats to our communities and ecosystems that require nothing less than transformational change if they are going to be adequately addressed (Fazey & Colvin, 2023). If, instead of framing the choice between accommodation and critique as an either/or, we view them as dirempted concepts—always connected but in an essential tension—then each has the potential to correct the weakness of the other: when we are aware that critique is becoming too academic and divorced from practice, we can connect it to participative processes to facilitate accommodations, and when we see that the pursuit of accommodation is restricting the potential for transformative change, we can inform the accommodations with critiques.

Earlier, we made the point that, by seeing accommodations purely as constraints, rather than enablers, Fuenmayor (1997) misses the potential for *transformative accommodation*: accommodation that harnesses the energies of diverse actors for desired social change. Smith (2022) argues that the idea of transformative accommodation could be of value to both interpretive systemology and CST, and indeed systems thinking more generally.

However, we need to explicitly head off an interpretation of this concept that would undermine the use of Rose’s work. If transformative accommodation was conceived of as a *healing* of the diremption between accommodation and critique—that is, a synthesis of them into something new that replaces the two original concepts—then the opportunity to work in the broken middle between them would be lost. It is the difficult work in the middle, using critique and accommodation to address each other’s weaknesses, that is most likely to give rise to emergent transformations. The problem with a healing interpretation of ‘transformative accommodation’ is that it preserves the word ‘accommodation’ while losing the term ‘critique’. The danger, if the concept of critique is not explicitly preserved, is that all changes requiring accommodations, however trivial, could come to be

labelled as ‘transformative’.²³ Working in the broken middle between accommodation and critique keeps both concepts alive and active, making *genuinely* transformative accommodations more likely.

Moving beyond accommodation and critique, the general idea of working in the broken middle between a dirempted pair of concepts that are in an essential tension with one another could be more widely useful. Earlier, we mentioned the diremption of ethics and intervention. This is particularly relevant to CST, and indeed systems thinking more broadly, because of the claims made by authors like Ulrich (1983), Midgley (2000) and Córdoba-Pachón (2010) that *systemic* intervention embodies ethical reflection in practical contexts. Understanding the tensions that emerge between ethical ideals and practical constraints, and how these are navigated in decision making as a systemic intervention unfolds, is essential to both good practice (Midgley, 2000) and write-ups of this practice (Keys & Midgley, 2002) so that others can learn from the experience.

There is also the potential to learn directly from some of the other diremptions explored by Rose, most notably between ethics and law, given that many critical systems thinkers work in public policy contexts.²⁴ Our laws and policies are inevitably flawed in terms of how they embody our ethics, simply because no law or policy can anticipate all the diverse variety of situations and lived experiences that it may relate to, so injustices may arise as side effects of political operations. Rose says this is inevitable and unavoidable, so we should try to produce ‘good enough’ laws and policies, not perfect ones. We should not be seduced into believing that any law or policy is an ideal instantiation of the ethics that inspired it, because this can make us blind to emerging injustices. Of course, what constitutes ‘good enough’ is likely to be contested, and the incremental work of listening to

²³We suggest that this is precisely what has happened with soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1981; Checkland & Poulter, 2006; Checkland & Scholes, 1990): there is little mention of critique in it, and all proposed organisational changes are labelled as transformations. The idea that a transformation is much more than just an incremental change (Fazey & Colvin, 2023), and that peaceful transformations can benefit from penetrating critical inquiries to question taken-for-granted assumptions (Ulrich, 1983), has arguably gone missing in that methodology.

²⁴For examples, see Clayton (2004), Walsh (1995), Santhakumar and Rajagopalan (1996), Midgley et al. (1997, 1998), Clayton and Gregory (2000), Gregory and Midgley (2000), Winstanley et al. (2005), Baker et al. (2006), Baker and Midgley et al. (2007), Foote et al. (2007, 2014, 2014, 2021, 2025), Jackson et al. (2008), Gregory et al. (2010, 2020), Larsen (2011), Cronin et al. (2014), Irawan and McIntyre-Mills (2014), Ariyadasa and McIntyre-Mills (2015), Riswanda et al. (2016), Hobbs and Midgley (2020), Sydelko et al. (2021, 2024), Vachkova (2021), Nguyen et al. (2023), Adisa and Bond (2024), Battle-Fisher (2024), Ingram et al. (2025) and Vachkova et al. (2025).

different perspectives on justice and injustice, making judgements on what should be changed, and then correcting injustices based on these judgements, is part of the difficult work in the broken middle between ethics and law. This approach might usefully inform future systems thinking for public policy.

However, we might want to consider a range of other diremptions too that have not yet been considered by us, or by Gillian Rose. These might have significant practical implications for how we conceive of systemic interventions in contexts where we need to account for tensions between interdependent imperatives. We look forward to more theoretical, methodological and applied research to see how systems thinking can be further enriched through the difficult work in the broken middle between pairs of dirempted concepts.

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