



## **Organising and Disorganising: A Dynamic and Non-linear Theory of Institutional Emergence and Its Implications**

a book by  
**Michael Thompson**

### **Discussants:**

**Bruce Beck**, Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia, USA; and at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria.

**Kurt Bayer**, Board Director, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, London

**11<sup>th</sup> December 2008** (1:30 pm – 6:30 pm), London School of Economics

**ORGANISING AND DISORGANISING** offers a different way of dealing with intractable problems such as Climate Change and the Credit Crunch. Conventional social science allows just two ways of organising: markets and hierarchies. But look at the Brent Spar fiasco, ten or so years ago, or at the long-running debate over climate change, and we see that at least one more way of organising is involved - exemplified by Greenpeace in the Brent Spar case, and by Earth First! in Climate Change: Institutional Dynamics are complex.

Plural rationality theory's "impossibility theorem" states that there are 5 and just 5 ways of organising, each of which at the same time is a way of disorganising the other four. And, this theory's "requisite variety condition" insists that all these five ways of organising, in varying strengths and patterns of interaction, will be present in all those outfits we call organisations. All decision-making therefore is inter-organisational and subversion is unavoidable.

"Just one right way" (like Margaret Thatcher's TINA: There Is No Alternative) corresponds to what Robert Dahl called "closed hegemony": one voice drowning out all the others. This was in contrast to his "pluralist democracy", in which (a) all the voices are able to make themselves heard and (b) each is then responsive to the others. But now, with this fivefold typology of ways of organising, we can put some calibrations on Dahl's two axes: accessibility and responsiveness. If we stick with just the three "active" voices - hierarchy, individualism (markets) and egalitarianism (eg Greenpeace and Earth First! and, in the credit crunch case, Main Street) we get a 3x3 matrix with closed hegemony in the bottom left corner and "clumsy institution" in the top right. Now, in place of Dahl's dualistic representation - closed hegemony/pluralist democracy - we have seven more boxes that fill in his excluded middle, all of which are named, and all of which are familiar to students of policy and decision-making. This, as can be demonstrated with a variety of examples: hydropower development in the Himalayan Region, Unilever's response to Green criticism of its products, Russia's botched transition to a market economy, and the designing of novel water tariffs in California, is a very useful device. And, for all its simplicity, it takes social science into Complexity.

### **About the speaker:**

Originally a professional soldier, Michael Thompson, studied anthropology (University College London and Oxford) while also following a career as a Himalayan mountaineer (Annapurna South Face 1970, Everest Southwest Face 1975). His early research on how something secondhand becomes an antique, or a rat-infested slum part of our Glorious Heritage, diverted him into teaching at the Slade School of Fine Art, in London, and at Portsmouth University's School of Architecture, and from there to the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA): an East-West (and now North-South as well) think tank in Austria. There he worked on energy futures, on risk perception, on ideas of fairness, and on environment and development in the Himalayan Region, the key unifying concept in all being, "plural rationality": people doing very different things and yet still behaving rationally, given their different sets of convictions as to how the world is and people are.

**Please e-mail [ComplexityGroup@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ComplexityGroup@lse.ac.uk) as soon as possible and by 20<sup>th</sup> November at the latest to let us know you plan to attend. Registration is by application, form provided overleaf.**