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HSS 371 A

12 March 2019

Cybersyn Never Went Cybernetic

In Chapter 5 of Cybernetic Revolutionaries, Medina uses the failed October Strike in Chile to advance her overarching argument—how technology and society are intertwined through the lens of Chilean cybernetic thinking—by examining both the short and long-term effects of the strike, a very politically charged and societal event, on Cybersyn, the Chilean cybernetic sociotechnical experiment, and vice-versa. However, Medina’s connections created here between these effects and cybernetic thinking remain largely either unfounded or unproven, as Cybersyn was too fragmented between its telex network and decision-making process and too short-lived to show long-term results.

On the surface, it looks like Cybersyn played a large role in subduing the strike, and Medina is quick to point out and glorify its immediate effects. With the strike being such an obvious social event, any change Cybersyn could have enacted on the strike, and vice-versa, would be a direct link between the concepts of computing and society. Thus, when the telex network created for Project Cybersyn was utilized extensively to circumvent road blockades and coordinate supply distribution by centralizing resource information during the strike, Medina is eager to tout the network. “The role of the telex network is a good example of the value of including technology in political history and analysis…the telex network gave the government options that it would not have had otherwise…[and] helped the Chilean government assess the rapidly changing strike environment as well as adapt and survive [1].” Furthermore, now that the telex network has gained exposure through its use in the October Strike, Medina aims to point out the short-term effects this exposure has on the project itself, writing, “after the strike, the telex network had ‘its own dynamic,’ Flores said. ‘Most people did not see the telex network as part of Cybersyn’ but rather ‘as a very astute idea to produce coordination and communication’…CORFO approved the purchase of additional telex machines to accommodate the five hundred new subscribers to the network that the agency predicted [1].” This turn of events is perfect for Medina: in such a short time span, Cybersyn’s telex network impacted the course of the strike and helped the Chilean government survive, and a direct result of the strike was an expansion of Cybersyn’s telex network due to people accepting and subscribing to the idea. Medina believes she establishes here a strong link between cybernetic technology and Chilean society.

However, Medina’s touting of the merits of cybernetics during the strike miss a key point: the only aspect of Cybersyn affected during the strike was the telex network. Not the algorithms to monitor and predict market trends, not the control room relaying information for decisions to be made, and not the implementation of the system to allow workers autonomy in their own factories. The telex network was a glorified way to send messages back and forth from a physical person in one place to a physical person in another place. The same effect could have been achieved with a telephone and an expanded telephone network with a centralized call center, something that can be barely called revolutionary or cybernetic. Yet, the anti-strike effort still had to rely on old telephone technology to continue, in the case where “if those in the command center could not reach someone by telex, they used the telephone [1].” While the telex network certainly played an important role in the subversion of the strike, turning the national government anti-strike effort into a national call center can hardly be called cybernetic, nor should a government official placing a telephone call to a factory be called “an intertwining of technology and society.”

Another aspect of Medina’s argument is how the strike and Cybersyn affected each other in the long-term. Both these long-term effects manifest themselves in the now contrasting visions of the project’s two top minds, Flores and Beer. The transformed political climate, especially with Flores’s new political position and ambitions, creates the context for the split. Flores, now “from his office in the Ministry of Economics, [had] a macroscopic view of the Chilean revolution…This new vantage point caused him to reconsider the utility of the project, and of cybernetics, as a way to regulate the complexity of the Chilean revolution [1].” The October Strike had caused Flores to go on the defensive, changing his desired application of cybernetics from managing the economy to managing the revolution and preserving the government he was serving. While Flores was going on the defensive, the nature of the October Strike resistance inspired Beer to go on the offensive. Drawing from the methodology of the strike and the workers’ resistance to the strike, Beer proposed an increase in scope to the cybernetic system, suggesting “the government should…establish an operations research department to monitor supplies of consumer goods…[use] science, technology, and cybernetics to serve as forms of pro-government propaganda…[and] to change the social organization that surrounded the Cybersyn technology…[such] that workers should control the use of Cybersyn [1].” Thus, Medina asserts that a direct result of the strike was a restructuring of the outlooks of this sociotechnical project. Furthermore, these new outlooks present new ideas of how to use the cybernetic system to regulate Chilean society, presenting, in theory, how this cybernetic technology can affect their future society, cementing the two-way relationship.

This future society, however, never arrived, and both approaches to cybernetic applications were lost to theory. Thus, it is hard to support Medina’s claim that this cybernetic project illustrates the intertwining of social and technological worlds. When the military coup happened the year after the October Strike, the Cybersyn project was only making predictions for factories, but too slowly for it to be useful to the factory owners [1]. It was not revolutionizing the decision-making process, nor promoting greater worker participation. While the new, doomed political climate created new ideas for Cybersyn, the Allende government did not survive long enough for either of these approaches to even be implemented, let alone show results. Thus, it is hard to give much credit to either of these long-term effects Medina identifies, as they never even come to fruition, and are rooted only in ideas and concepts.

Medina presents compelling ideas surrounding how Cybersyn could have established a strong link between the use of technology and politics. However, the Chilean government amounted to be both a suitable and poor platform for the execution of the project: suitable in that the government was willing to make a gamble on the project, poor in the limited budget, timeline, resources, and political and intellectual power. Unfortunately, the failure of the Chileans to contextualize the telex network in the realm of cybernetic thinking results in a disconnection between the actual use of cybernetics rather than glorified telephone infrastructure in the October Strike intervention, and the failure for the Chilean government to survive its own political climate results in a lack of concrete proof that cybernetic thinking could have influenced the long-term outlook of Chilean economics and society.

**References**

[1] E. Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011. [E-book] Available: Kindle e-book.