

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

# The Cybernetics Group

© 1991 MIT

## License Terms:

Made available under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0  
International Public License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## OA Funding Provided By:

The open access edition of this book was made possible  
by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of  
Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/2260.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2260.001.0001)

---

## *Acknowledgments*

A large number of people have been helpful in the preparation of this book, which has been in process, intermittently, for many years. It is, in fact, the second half of the project begun in the book about von Neuman and Wiener, and some of the people are already mentioned there.

Harvey Shepard and Millard Clements, in their steady friendship, have been important through the years over and above any specific conversations. Leila Head, my daughter, with her professional devotion to the facts behind official obfuscation, is a continuing source of inspiration. Sharon Lamb, Susan Sklan, and Terri Payne Butler each read a chapter or more of the book critically, and each was a source of encouragement at a moment when it made a difference. The following people have contributed at one point or another, through conversation or by reading and commenting on a chapter or in some other way: Jonathan Bayliss, Iain Boal, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Arthur Grant, Jay Haley, Joy Harvey, Rachel Joffe, Anita Landa, Mark Levine, John Lisman, Frank Manuel, Jennifer Markell, Robert Morison, Seymour Papert, Robbie Pfeufer, Edward Reed, Morris Schwartz, Silvan Schweber, Oliver Selfridge, Ann Sinclair, Michael Sokal, Lora Tessman, Erin Walsh, Sheldon White, Michael Wold, and William Woodward.

I greatly appreciate the interest shown by those members from the cybernetics group, most of them now deceased, who had taken time to talk or correspond with me. I am also grateful to other people who are not named individually here but have at some point during the past twenty-two years influenced or informed me in regard to some facet of the cybernetics group. I cite particular names and their contributions where appropriate in the notes. Archives at the Massachusetts Insti-

tute of Technology, Yale University, Harvard Medical School, the Library of Congress, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Library of Medicine were consulted in the course of the research, and I thank the archivists and librarians for their helpfulness.

A large number of people have been helpful in the preparation of this book, which has been in process, intermittently, for many years. It is, in fact, the second half of the project begun in the book about von Weizsäcker and Wiener, and some of the people are already mentioned there.

Henry Shepard and Millard Clement, in their steady friendship, have been important through the years over and above any specific conversations. Lalla Heald, my daughter, with her professional devotion to the facts behind official education, is a continuing source of inspiration. Sharon Lamb, Susan Sider, and Terry Payne Butler each read a chapter or more of the book critically, and each was a source of encouragement at a moment when it made a difference. The following people have contributed at one point or another, through conversation or by reading and commenting on a chapter or in some other way: Jonathan Baskin, Jan Baul, Jean-Pierre Dubois, Arthur Gans, Jay Haley, Jay Harvey, Rachel Joller, Anita Lande, Mark Levine, John Loman, Frank Manol, Jennifer Markel, Robert Marzano, Seymour Papert, Robert Packer, Edvard Rasmussen, Mavis Schwartz, Sylvia Schwab, Oliver Schindler, Ann Sinden, Richard Solig, Lois Freeman, Erin Walsh, and Don White, Richard Wild, and William Woodward.

I greatly appreciate the interest shown by those members from the cybernetics group, most of them now deceased, who had taken time to talk or correspond with me. I am also grateful to other people who are not named individually here but have at some point during the past twenty-two years influenced or informed me in regard to some facet of the cybernetics group. I cite particular names and their contributions where appropriate in the notes. Archivists at the Massachusetts Insti-

---

# *The Cybernetics Group*

The aim of this book is to describe a moment when a new set of ideas impinged on the human sciences and began to transform some traditional fields of inquiry. A proper description of this historical event entails not only attending to published research in the human sciences but also to individuals, to small groups, and to the larger social and political matrix in which the event was embedded. I will start the story with an overview of its particular setting: midcentury in the United States of America.

In the middle of the twentieth century the United States had reached a peak of power and standing among nations. Most of Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, and China had been economically and physically ravaged by the Second World War, while the United States had emerged—as it had from the First World War—relatively unscathed and with a thriving economy. The war was generally felt by Americans to have been just or even righteous, and the country had made a special contribution to the victory by its technological know-how, managerial organization, and industrial production.

In the years following the end of the war in 1945, more than at any time since, Americans had faith in their government, were proud of their country, and felt secure in having a technological base that was second to none.<sup>1</sup> They were impressed by the country's newly acquired and unsurpassed status in the sciences. Scientific researchers, especially in applied physics, applied mathematics, and high-technology engineering, had returned from war work with high prestige. The population learned of their efforts from the mass media's treatment of scientists at press conferences. Emerging high technologies included the electronic general-purpose computer and devices for more efficient communication.

