

# This Week's Citation Classic

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Emery F E & Trist E L. The causal texture of organizational environments. *Hum. Relat.* 18:21-32, 1965.

The further development of the open system thinking propounded by von Bertalanffy<sup>1</sup> and Prigogine<sup>2</sup> requires us to characterize the environments within which open systems are functioning. Four levels of environmental organization can be distinguished in terms of their causal texturing. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (SSCI<sup>™</sup>) indicates that this paper has been cited over 220 times since 1966.]

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"The line of thinking that led to this paper arose from an extracurricular interest in the postwar debate about appropriate divisional structures for the nuclear battlefield. I gained a great deal of inspiration from Wynne's analysis of the evolution of the Western Front, 1914-18.<sup>3</sup>

"Coming out from an academic cocoon to work at the Tavistock Institute in London I found myself trying to comprehend the behavior of very large organizations in the face of very devastating winds of change. The gestation period from marginal notes and backs of envelopes was no more than 18 months. The opportunity to test the reality of these ideas was provided by an 'invisible college' that emerged in Europe at this time. This was the 11 to 13 member 'Informal European Croup,' which met for a couple of days and nights every nine months or so in secluded retreats. Its only business was that of hashing over embryonic ideas.

"We struck a sticky patch in trying to label the different environments: My predilection was to simply number them as a series. My colleague, Eric Trist, convinced me that

people would need more descriptive labels in order to handle the ideas. The labelling of the type IV environment as a 'turbulent environment' certainly seems to have caught the eye, if not much more. Perhaps this explains some of the citations. However, I think that by the late 1960s, with burning US cities, the Beatles, and the Paris students, very many analysts sensed that their social ground was moving in turbulent ways.

"When Trist and I presented the paper to the International Congress of Psychology, Washington, 1963, we were dumbfounded by the total lack of reaction. Many months later we received a very apologetic letter from the chairman of our session, himself in the forefront of organizational theorizing in the US, to the effect that it was only after the conference that the penny had dropped for him.

"The conceptual developments in that paper have continued to play a considerable role in my subsequent thinking. That has been a very satisfactory reward. I would not, however, quite think that it has attracted any award or honor. My fullest development of that conceptual framework, and its integration with my work on purposeful and ideal-seeking systems, was published in 1977.<sup>4</sup> That publication helped my last university to not renew my research contract as it could not find a place for, to quote, 'my systems cum futures' studies.

"I do not find this surprising, nor particularly bothersome. Those who want to play with, and cite, new ideas are not usually those who have to face the awesome problems of allocating resources to competing educational and research ends. Perhaps, though, some significant degree of social turbulence has to be experienced before any conceptual analysis of turbulence takes on significance. Perhaps I should have thought more deeply in terms of my own theory of environments before deciding to travel homewards."

1. Bertalanffy L von. The theory of open systems in physics and biology. *Science* 111:23-9, 1950.
2. Prigogine I. *Introduction to thermodynamics of irreversible processes*. Paris: Dunod, 1968. 147 p.
3. Wynne G C. *If Germany attacks: the battle in depth in the West*. London: Faber and Faber, 1940. 343 p.
4. Emery F E. *Futures we are in*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977. 230 p.