The Missing Helmsman: Cybernetics, Public Memory, and the Path to Wisdom

Tomislav S. Šola, 2026.

I assure myself that only rare wanderers come across my eccentrically labelled website. In a way, as a voluntary contribution, it places no obligation on either side. True, there is little point in writing and publishing if nothing is actually read; but with the advent of artificial intelligence and its “perfect memory,” even this no longer holds: everything that has been published can easily become building material for that memory, and there, at least, lies a new illusion of usefulness. All tens of millions acquired and guillotined books were a fair revelation of the new status of authorship. They have all been read and memorized through IT machines (Google admits 40 while Claude boasts of buying 2 million in one turn) and became common memory.

I write most often about traditional memory institutions and their (in)ability to find their footing in the world they are meant to serve. Running through everything I write is my frustration with the fact that, after half a century of engagement with the subject, we have made no radical progress. We have not become a factor in social development. Instead, the centre of gravity of memory institutions, museums especially, has merely shifted from science, with its autistic neutrality towards social processes, towards business: tourism, or whatever names are given to these departures. the heritage industry, the destination industry, cultural tourism.

The purpose of the past decades of development was, in my view, to create a profession that, as a distillation of selected human experience, would participate in making decisions about the future. This time, I wanted to clarify why the wider context was also unfavourable to these ideas, and how a particular opportunity offered by cybernetics, which emerged for me as a key concept in this process, was lost along the way. I apologise, therefore, if this sounds too philosophical.

1. The Lost Science of Governance

When Norbert Wiener published *Cybernetics* in 1948, he introduced a framework designed to bridge the gap between human purpose and machine execution. Rooted in the Greek *kybernētēs* (the steersman), cybernetics asked a fundamental question: How do complex systems process feedback in order to self-regulate, adapt, and survive?

Wiener, alongside pioneers such as W. Ross Ashby, recognised early on that human society is the ultimate complex system. Governing a society requires continuous, intelligent feedback loops. Ashby formulated the Law of Requisite Variety, demonstrating that a control system must possess at least as much complexity and internal variety as the system it attempts to steer. As Wiener readily acknowledges, the work is always collective: in his books, he

describes the people involved and the circumstances in which the ideas emerged. He even attributes the primary inspiration for "his" cybernetics to Leibniz.

In socio-political terms, a complex and turbulent society cannot be governed by simplistic, short-sighted political dogmas. It requires a vast reservoir of collective experience, a feedback mechanism capable of matching the complexity of real-world crises. This is where professions fit into the social contract. Politicians are representatives of the electorate, and both, at best, are sufficiently educated to acknowledge their inability to govern society. We are not speaking of visionaries or people driven by a sense of mission. They lack expertise, an in-depth understanding of particular fields, or even a comprehensive grasp of society's problems as a whole. This is precisely why professional disciplines were established: they possess the knowledge and competence required to address such problems. Yet, particularly in the West, they have largely become a burden on the conscience and an obstacle to various forms of corrupt behaviour.

2. The Great Hijack: From Cybernetics to Informatics

During the late twentieth century, while writing my doctoral theses, I was aware that there was a buzzing of ideas about how to manage a world whose development seemed to be getting out of hand. Being counteractive seemed to be a magic formula. But this required a clear vision of the problem and a strategy for countering the threat perceived. I never imagined, by the way, that we would somehow lose sight of that objective.

It must have been the new collective fascination with laissez-faire and the self-regulation of the market, a prevailing mindset, that brought us to the present chaos of neoliberal dogma and total capitalism (https://www.mnemosophy.com/the-vault).

Yet, already in the 1980s, a subtle conceptual hijack had occurred.

The dynamic science of cybernetics was stripped of its sociological, philosophical, and governance-related dimensions. I am not a fan of conspiracy theories, because they seem to oversimplify explanations. Yet one cannot help wondering about two things: first, whether this apparent simplification might itself be the catch; and second, what if we all live within a kind of collective psychology, with a parallel collective consciousness and shared patterns of communication and behaviour? Dominant patterns can spread like signals passing through a flock of birds or a shoal of fish. Curiously, physics, as a "hard" science, has acknowledged the existence of as many as eleven dimensions, while the social sciences remain largely attached to their customary modes of analytical inquiry.

But back to the problem: the prefix *cyber-* was co-opted by market forces and computer science, shrinking in meaning to such terms as "cyberspace," "cybersecurity," and digital infrastructure. What should properly have remained within the domain of informatics came to usurp the entire field of cybernetics.

This semantic reduction had severe consequences for the social sciences and public institutions:

- **Anesthetisation of Action:** By reducing cybernetics to digital hardware, we lost the vocabulary needed to critique and refine the ways in which societies govern themselves. Writings on social cybernetics are rare and often discouraged.
- **Drowning in Data:** Society entered the information age, but, as T. S. Eliot famously asked: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"
- **Static Heritage:** Memory institutions, museums, archives, and heritage site, were pushed to digitise their assets into massive databases, treating heritage as a static digital inventory rather than as a source of dynamic feedback for society.

Back in 1997, I wrote a book, *Essays on Museums and Their Theory: Towards the Cybernetic Museum*. Rather than heralding the emergence of other works of this kind, it remained a rare voice advocating the counteractive museum: one that fights the perils confronting its community of users. I therefore turned towards redefining the theory of the museum as a professional field, seeking to establish a broader theoretical and practical understanding of societal memory institutions.

3. Mnemosophy: Public Memory as a Steering Feedback Loop

This is precisely where mnemosophy, the science of public memory, provides the vital missing connection. Mnemosophy does not advocate a retro-futuristic return to the cybernetics of the 1950s; rather, it identifies public memory as the primary cybernetic feedback mechanism of human culture.

Heritage is not a collection of dusty relics; it is the encoded experience of human trial, error, adaptation, and survival. In cybernetic terms, public memory bears potential of corrective signals that prevent a system from repeating fatal errors.

When the cybernetics practitioner Stafford Beer designed Project Cybersyn in the 1970s, his goal was to use real-time data to enable social and economic self-governance. Looking backwards, it was part of that atmosphere that invented neoliberal belief that the market would regulate the economy. Mnemosophy applies a similar logic to culture only relieved of greed for profit societal decisions must be informed by a continuous, active feedback loop drawing on our collective past. However, heritage industry started to open up a new dilemma.

Without public memory integrated into decision-making, governance operates in a state of permanent amnesia, reacting blindly to immediate noise rather than steering by long-term signals.

Rather than vainly attempting to establish a science on the basis of the phenomenon of an institution, as museologists had aspired to do for some century and a half, mnemosophy sought a solid foundation in the more fundamental and self-evident concept of memory. But not just any memory: memory so sifted, refined, condensed, and carefully curated that it represents aspects of wisdom.

The idealism that unites beauty and moral virtue is intentional: it defines a goal that can never be fully attained, but provides a clear and justified direction. Good governance must draw on

knowledge, wise insight, and the recognition of virtues. Knowledge alone may suffice to run a company; running a society requires wisdom.

4. The Role of AI: Synthesising the Collective Mind

Here lies the transformative potential of modern artificial intelligence. For decades, the sheer volume of human historical experience was too vast and unstructured to be applied dynamically to day-to-day governance.

If we move beyond using AI merely as an automation tool or a generator of commercial content, it can become an ideal cybernetic assistant to mnemosophy.

Artificial intelligence has the capacity to process, correlate, and reveal patterns across the vast expanse of humanity's collective memory. It can act as a cognitive mirror, allowing decision-makers to:

1. **Detect Historical Feedback Patterns:** Identify how similar ecological, economic, or social pressures were addressed in the past.
2. **Bridge Siloed Knowledge:** Synthesise interdisciplinary heritage into actionable insights for modern urban planning, environmental stewardship, and social policy.
3. **Elevate Knowledge to Wisdom:** Shift the focus of technology from generating more data to distilling contextual wisdom.

5. Restoring the Helmsman

Norbert Wiener warned that relying on technology without a clear, ethical human purpose would lead to catastrophic failures of control.

To navigate the complex existential crises of the twenty-first century—from climate destabilisation to social fragmentation, we must reunite technological tools with the wisdom of experience. Informatics provides the pipes; cybernetics provides the feedback architecture; AI provides the analytical engine; but mnemosophy provides the content: the public memory that transforms information into wisdom.

It is time to take cybernetics back from the technicians, place collective memory at the heart of decision-making, and put the steersman back at the helm of society.