

The Thread

Within the Deliberative Democracy Labyrinth



Alexander N. Christakis
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QUOTE

*“Demosensus is the consensual co-construction of futures
by the people and for the people, through inclusive deliberative
dialogue beyond walls and beyond borders.”*

Maria Kakoulaki

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*To future generations,
Who inherit “Spaceship Earth” in a state of crisis,
that can only be reversed
by engaging people in authentic deliberative democracy,
and
To Hasan Ozbekhan, the Visionary mentor and partner on the road.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alexander N. Christakis was born in Athens, Greece, in 1937 and earned a PhD in theoretical nuclear physics from Yale. After working with Doxiadis Associates on applying science to human settlements, he shifted focus from the “hard” sciences to the complexity of social systems. This insight shaped a lifelong commitment to designing inclusive, democratic processes.

In 1989, he founded CWA Ltd., applying the Interactive Management discipline across fields such as education, healthcare, environmental policy, and technology. His structured dialogue methods have been used by governments, NGOs, and businesses worldwide.

Christakis held academic roles at Yale, Georgetown, and George Mason University, where he directed the Center for Interactive Management. He co-founded the Club of Rome, authored books on technology assessment, and published over 100 articles on complexity. A past president of ISSS, he continues to advise systemic design and indigenous leadership programs globally.

Maria Z. Kakoulaki is a writer, independent journalist, and trained Structured Democratic Dialogue (SDD) facilitator specializing in European political and economic affairs. She brings twenty years of professional journalistic experience across television, print, and digital media in Greece and London, with particular expertise in European Parliament coverage, consensus building, and mediation. Her work centers on democratic dialogue practices and inclusion, countering elitist behaviors and systems that perpetuate exclusion and racial discrimination. Her interdisciplinary education from the University of Greenwich in London includes a BSc in Psychology, a BA in Media Culture and Communications, an MA in Media Arts & Philosophy Practice. She has received multiple awards in poetry, photography, and literature, and has participated in numerous European conferences, seminars, and workshops addressing human rights, racism, and discrimination issues.

As an SDD practitioner, she has applied this methodology to address complex political situations in Cyprus, Greece, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Israel, and Palestine. Maria also served as principal director and producer of acclaimed documentaries (*Destination: Truth & Light* 2024, & *Dialogue Beyond Borders*, 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKwXw6hFpAA>), which focus on amplifying grassroots voices and fostering peace building initiatives among Israelis & Palestinians.

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS...

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are to arrive today.
Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today
What laws can the Senators pass any more?
When the barbarians come they will make the laws.

Why did our emperor wake up so early,
and sits at the greatest gate of the city,
on the throne, solemn, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
And the emperor waits to receive
their chief. Indeed he has prepared
to give him a scroll. Therein he inscribed
many titles and names of honor.

Why have our two consuls and the praetors come out
today in their red, embroidered togas;
why do they wear amethyst-studded bracelets,
and rings with brilliant, glittering emeralds;
why are they carrying costly canes today,
wonderfully carved with silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today,
and such things dazzle the barbarians.
Why don't the worthy orators come as always

xiv *Waiting for the Barbarians...*

to make their speeches, to have their say?
Because the barbarians are to arrive today;
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

Why all of a sudden this unrest
and confusion. (How solemn the faces have become).
Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?

Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.
And some people arrived from the borders,
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.
And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.

Constantine P. Cavafy (1904)

ABOUT THE COVER ART

This metal work, titled as “All As One” (2022), embodies the very principles of deliberative democracy and collective wisdom that contemporary society desperately needs. The graceful central figure, reaching upward with arms extended in both supplication and celebration, serves as a powerful metaphor for the democratic citizen; one who aspires toward higher understanding while remaining deeply rooted in community and natural law.

The intricate botanical tapestry surrounding the figure speaks to the fundamental interconnectedness that forms the foundation of genuine democratic practice. Just as the flowing vines, delicate leaves, and organic forms create a seamless ecosystem where each element contributes to the whole’s vitality, so too does healthy democracy depend upon the harmonious integration of diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences. The large circular motif, whether sun, moon, or cycle of life, represents the recurring patterns of dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-building that sustain democratic communities across time.

The very meaning of this artwork, is how the human form emerges from, rather than dominates, the natural world. This integration mirrors the essential democratic insight that individual wisdom flourishes not in isolation but through engagement with the broader community of life. The figure’s upward reach symbolizes humanity’s capacity for conscious evolution, our ability to transcend narrow self-interest and participate in the collective creation of just and sustainable futures.

The relief’s intricate detailing creates a visual democracy of forms, where no single element overwhelms the composition. Like voices in structured dialogue, each carved leaf and flowing line contributes to a larger harmony while maintaining its distinct character. The technique’s depth and dimensionality invite prolonged engagement, much as democratic processes require patience, attention, and the willingness to discover new perspectives through sustained interaction.

The warm, golden tones suggest the transformative potential that emerges when human creativity aligns with natural wisdom. The artist

(Maria Kakoulaki), envisions democracy not as a mechanical system of votes and procedures, but as an organic process of growth, learning, and mutual flourishing. It reminds us that authentic democratic engagement requires the same qualities we see in thriving ecosystems: diversity, resilience, interconnection, and the capacity for continuous renewal.

This metal artwork, offers a vision of possibility; showing that politics, at its deepest level, is about learning to participate skillfully in the ongoing creation of life itself. It challenges us to become citizens worthy of the natural world's profound democracy, where every element has voice and value in the magnificent symphony of existence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to express our sincere gratitude to all the partners on the road, who have made this journey both joyful and painful.

Some of them, but not all, are.

Hasan Ozbekhan, John Warfield, David Keever, Robert McDonald, David Mackett, Diane Conaway, Robert Whitejouse, Diana Post, Nicholass and Dimitri Christakis, Bela Banathy, Walter Bogan, Kazuhiko Kawamura, Kan Chen, Rasjod Ahmad. LaDonna and Laura Harris, Benjamin Broome, July Carlston, Zan Fleming, Bill Darrow, Vigdor Schreiber, Larry Maglioca, Roy Smith, Kenneth Bausch, Roxana Cardenas, Tom Flanagan, Kevin Dye, Peter Jones, Mathew Shapiro, Heiner Benking, Marios Michaelides, Sotos Shiakedes, Yiannis Laouris, Craig Lindell, Reynaldo Trevino Cisnero, Jeff Diedrich, Gayle Underwood, Andy Hegedus, Janet McIntyre, Norma Romm, and many more. Special thanks are due to Jeff Diedrich, who has devoted many hours of hard work to developing and testing the Logosofia platform, which is an integral part in the praxis of the Thread.

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PROLOGUE

(Experiences in Democratic Deliberation and Praxis)

*“The significant problems we have
cannot be solved
at the same level of thinking we used
when we created them”.*

Einstein

In our rapidly changing societies—in which fear and misinformation easily spread and hope is a quest—it appears more critical than ever before to identify the barriers preventing the visioning and attainment of alternative, desirable future(s), which can be co-constructed collectively and implemented consensually. Today’s world confronts a backsliding of democracy and democratic practices; its horizons seem constrained by growing inequalities, systemic racism, the escalating ecological crisis, the increasing scarcity of resources, and the decline of justice. According to data compiled by the Freedom House (2020), democracy has been in a recession for over a decade, and more countries have lost rather than gained civil and political rights each year. From 2019–2022, the world was confronted by the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which spread globally like a wildfire without regard to national and regional boundaries. It impacted millions of people and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. It forced political leaders to lock down national borders and entire cities, in a futile effort to prevent the infection.

A main concern remains that Covid-19 might turn the democratic recession into a depression, with authoritarianism sweeping across the globe like a pandemic. The effectiveness of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic,

greatly depends on the level of coordination and collaboration across the diversity of stakeholders involved, and on the active participation of civil society. Furthermore, redefining democracies while responding to this unprecedented health emergency necessitates new models of governance, leadership, adaptability, and innovation.

The diagnosis, symptoms and medical treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic belongs to the objectivity of Health Sciences, based on measurable observer-independent data and statistics. On the other hand, the amelioration of the social, economic, political, and psychological impacts of the pandemic on the citizens of a particular nation, region, or city, and the challenge of creating a new world order when the health crisis is over, belong to the “intersubjective domain” of social systems design. This domain should be capable of a more inclusive approach by taking into account both objective and intersubjective observations i.e. those observations that are dependent on the variety of perspectives and experiences of people. Intersubjectivity makes it imperative to engage citizens, from all walks of life, in deliberations focusing on designing social systems. These deliberations should enhance collaboration, design, anticipation, imagination, and consensus-building among diverse stakeholders. In order for humankind to accomplish such a formidable design challenge, it must embrace a scientific revolution by objectifying intersubjectivity through inclusion of all voices. The revolution implies a shift from the dominance of the paradigm of “evolutionary consciousness,” to that of “conscious evolution,” founded on inclusive deliberative democracy. By the end of the book, readers will have internalized the devolution of humankind from the “ideal of democracy,” as experienced in the Athenian Agora of ancient Greece, to the “triumph of technocracy,” as experienced today by citizens in terms of technologies of localized wars and the deterioration of the quality of health and human development on our planet. We argue that the only pathway for reversing this trend is the adoption and implementation of authentic deliberative democracy.

CHAPTER 1

THE GLOBAL PROBLEMATIQUE

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the prospectus of the Club of Rome on the predicament of Mankind, by the identification of forty-nine Continuous Critical Problems (CCPs), such as population growth, ecosystem deterioration, obsolescence of the value-base and the educational systems, climate change crisis, and the like. This set of CCPs are strongly coupled in our era to form a new high complexity entity, called the Global Problematique. The complexity of the Problematique cannot be identified and resolved by means of conventional problem-solving methods, such as the simulation modeling of MIT that produced the “The Limits to Growth” report in 1972. It is, therefore, an imperative to develop methods for engaging stakeholders in deliberative dialogue for the construction of consensual narratives and the collective ownership of Problematiques. Such a systemic design methodology is equivalent to a paradigm shift, which Christakis and Kakoulaki have called Demosofia (wisdom of the people). They argue that this paradigm, will be gradually validated by objectifying intersubjectivity through stakeholder inclusion in co-laboratories of democracy, “The Thread” systemic design co-laboratories, represent the Third Phase Science equivalent to the telescope of Galileo, which when combined with the theory of gravitation of Newton, was instrumental in accomplishing the paradigm shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric explanation of planetary motion in the 18th century.

Keywords: The Club of Rome; Global Problematique; co-laboratory of democracy; paradigm shift; Demosofia; stakeholder inclusion; intersubjectivity; social systems design

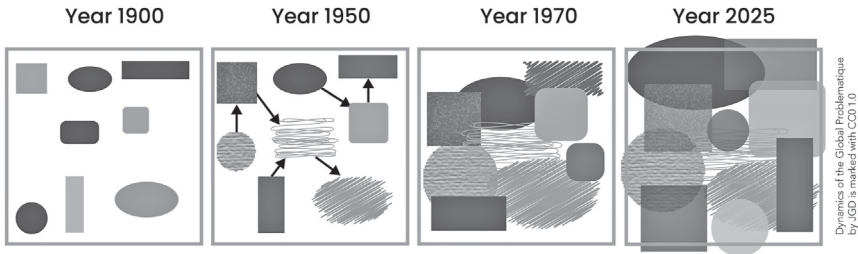
The Concept of the Problematique

The idea of the Problematique was introduced in the Club of Rome (CoR) prospectus (Ozbekhan, 1970), as a way to draw a linguistic, and hence conceptual, distinction between the well-bounded problems that we are accustomed to perceive and articulate, and the meta-problem (or the enormous problem) that emerges as a result of the interactivity and interdependency among these problems.

It is the nature of our languages, hence our manner of perceiving reality, to see and call the dissonant elements in a situation “problems.” Although it is true that there are certain problems (mostly within one discipline and usually in the field of engineering and physical sciences, where the construction of observations is designed to be observer-independent and hence by definition “objective”), that can be addressed in their own domains by applying conventional problem-solving techniques. However, it has become empirically evident over the last fifty years, starting with the urban development projects of the 1970s in the USA, that critical issues in the social arena are not capable of being resolved in their own specific domains.

When we consider the truly critical issues of our times, such as “climate change,” “environmental pollution,” “poverty,” “homelessness,” “criminality,” “population explosion,” “urban deterioration,” “racial and cultural discrimination,” “biodiversity reduction,” etc., we recognize that it is virtually meaningless to view these as problems that exist in isolation of each other or independent of human intervention. The burning of Los Angeles in the summer of 1992, after the verdict on the Rodney King human rights trial, provides evidence that criminal justice cannot be divorced from race, poverty and slum living conditions. Thirty years later, the “Black Lives Matter” movement of 2020, is another manifestation of the racial discrimination injustice that has deep roots and connection to other issues such as educational inequalities, poverty, heritage, etc. Similarly, problems clustered under words such as “hunger” or “malnutrition” in Somalia cannot be separated from social, economic, and geo-political problems on the global scale. Trying to solve any of these problems in isolation exacerbates the intensity of the Problematique, whose resolution is beyond the scope of the concepts and methods we have traditionally employed during most of the 20th century.

As a means to visualize the interactivity of problems it is useful to look at [Figure 1.1](#). This Figure provides a graphic portrayal of the dynamic and interactive development of the Problematique in the 20th century. It shows problem areas in three frames with approximate dates. In each frame, a particular problem area is symbolized by differently shaped shaded areas. One sees that at the start of the 20th century (Frame A, Year 1900) each problem area is distanced from the others. Because each area is separated

Figure 1.1*Dynamics of the Problematique for the 20th Century*

from the others it is meaningful to think and tackle these as independent problem areas. It is with reference to this type of situation that most of our problem-solving methods and approaches were developed and applied in the 20th century.

By the middle of the 20th century, the problem areas began to interact because of the escalation of the intensity of each problem area (Frame B, Year 1950). These interactivity trends continued at an accelerated rate during the next 20 years. The individual problem areas began to strongly interact and overlap in the 1970s (Frame C). The emergence of large-scale metropolitan areas (Doxiadis, 1968), where it is meaningless to separate the transportation problem from the pollution problem, from the population explosion problem, and so on, provides an example of this interactivity as shown visually in Frame C (Year 1970).

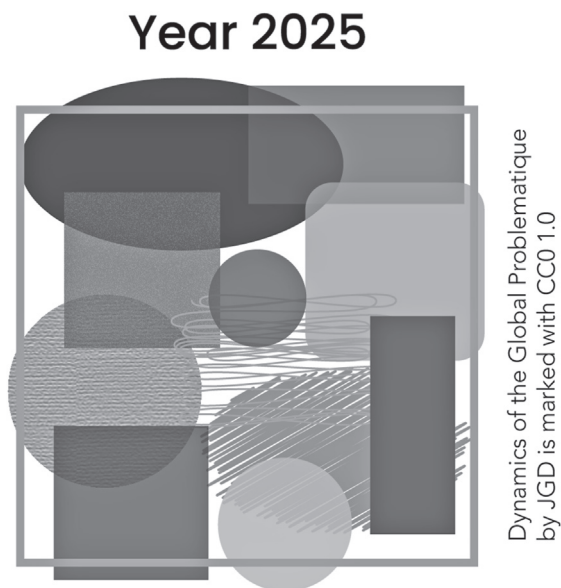
By 2021, complexity appears to look more as an “enormous mess” that cannot any more be dealt with in terms of its individual problem areas but must be addressed in its entirety (see [Figure 1.2](#)), and preferably with the inclusion of stakeholders’ perspectives. Attempts at fragmentation of reality and non-inclusion of the voices of stakeholders have exacerbated the “Situational Complexity.” Over the previous five decades, Problematiques have contributed to serious social and technical disasters, such as the burning of Los Angeles in 1992, the escalation of the nuclear arms race in the 1980s, the mythology espoused by the World Bank of “trickle down” social and economic development of third world countries, the nuclear disasters at the Three Mile Island and the Chernobyl power plants in the 1980s, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020, the Ukrainian war in 2022, and many more to come.

By the year 2023, we are experiencing a situation whose morphology is drastically different because of the strength of interdependencies among the problem areas, giving rise to a composite core that needs to be co-constructed, explicated, and understood by all stakeholders for its own sake.

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Figure 1.2

The Morphology of the Problematique in the Year 2025



In other words, the dynamic convergence of all these originally distinct problem areas has given rise to a new entity, namely the Problematique of the year 2025. The strength of couplings and overlaps is such that a new approach is required to navigate the situational complexity efficiently and effectively, as a single complex system of problems. The traditional means of breaking it apart in its component parts and assigning responsibility to various individuals or government departments with expertise in the separate areas would not be effective any longer. Such a systems approach, to be effective and meaningful, should be capable of engaging stakeholders in intersubjective deliberations for the purpose of articulating and internalizing the Problematique, and integrating their relevant knowledge and wisdom as a systemic representation. This systemic approach should also redefine the notion of “the expert” so that all the voices of the people affected by the Problematique will be heard, independent of their education, social status, or power (Kakoulaki & Christakis, 2018; Christakis & Kakoulaki, 2021).

The original conceptualization of the CoR prospectus advocated the position that any attempt to resolve the global Problematique founded on traditional elitists, exclusionary, and disciplinary approaches is doomed to failure. In 1993, Ozbekhan and Christakis conducted a structural inquiry of the Problematique as articulated in the CoR prospectus by means of

forty-nine Continuous Critical Problems (CCPs), employing the “CogniScope” software, which was available at the time for supporting the application of the methodology of Structured Democratic Dialogue (SDD). The findings from this inquiry, twenty-three years after the CoR prospectus, indicated that no significant progress had been accomplished in terms of penetrating the core of the Problematique, which as discovered in this inquiry was the “value-base” (Christakis, 2004). As mentioned, the Problematique was described in the prospectus by the articulation of forty-nine CCPs. The CCP that was determined by the structural inquiry of 1993 to be at its core is:

(CCP-18) GROWING IRRELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES AND CONTINUING FAILURE TO EVOLVE NEW VALUE SYSTEMS

The Role of the Value-Base

Even though the complexity of the Global Problematique demands that we avoid fragmenting complexity, the fragmentation of reality is inherent to our conceptual and linguistic make up. It is a limitation that applies to all natural languages. The challenge is to transcend this limitation by enabling stakeholders to use natural language to discover collectively, systemically, and collaboratively the systemic nature of the Problematique.

Having discovered the essence of the Problematique, the same or a different group of stakeholders depending on the situation, should be engaged in designing action plans for making progress toward resolving it. Ideally, in an authentic deliberative democracy the definition and resolution of the Problematique should not be the sole responsibility of disciplinary experts and politicians only. People, whose value-base and quality of life will be affected by the policies and decisions adopted, should be engaged if real progress is to be accomplished. It took approximately 20 years of research and testing in the arena of practice for a group of systems scientists to meet this challenge by developing the SDD approach (Christakis & Bausch, 2006; Flanagan & Christakis, 2010, 2021; Flanagan & Lindell, 2018; Warfield, 1994; Warfield & Cardenas, 1994).

The new paradigm (Demosofia), when implemented with the SDD methodology, represents the correct response to the role of the value-base in planning, as conceptualized by Ozbekhan in his seminal chapter titled “Toward a General Theory of Planning,” published in 1968, in “Perspectives of Planning,” edited by the distinguished systems scientist named Erich Jantsch. Ozbekhan wrote in the chapter:

“In my view there is no more important question in planning discourse; it is truly the heart of the matter. Let me begin by saying. Yes, we can will the future, but only if change is caused to occur in values rather than an object’s other attributes. What I mean is that any change that is not a fundamental

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change in values merely extends the present rather than creating the future. It seems to me that from this general postulate one can derive five statements which govern all planning:

1. Only change in the overall configuration of values can change the present situation;
2. Only individual will can bring about such value changes;
3. Value changes cannot be predicted;
4. Value changes always occur as individual ideas, or responses, or insights concerning betterment, and when they become socialized over a large part of the system we have ‘progress;’
5. Planning is the organization of progress. Thus, the main subject of planning is the willed future.”

The Evolutionary Origins of Structured Democratic Dialogue

The evolutionary origins of SDD should be traced to Hasan Ozbekhan, the great systems thinker and mentor. We are grateful to Hasan for his vision to imagine a world that has never been. Ozbekhan and Christakis were close friends for forty-years, transcending the boundaries and stereotype of perpetual hostilities between Turks and Greeks.

The methodology of Structured Dialogic Design has been developed and applied globally over the last fifty years with a variety of social and business systems design challenges, always with the inclusion of stakeholders. There exist testimonials of its beneficial impacts in effectively navigating situational complexity from a variety of organizational leaders, leading to consensus and progress in the definition and resolution of wicked problems.

Three milestone events that occurred early in the decade of the 1970s, and contributed to the development of the SDD methodology. These are:

1. The development of the science of human settlements, Ekistics (Doxiadis, 1968);
2. The Club of Rome prospectus on the predicament of Mankind (Christakis, 1973, 1988, 2004; Ozbekhan, 1970); and
3. The interdisciplinary experiment of designing a hypothetical city of one million people (Arnstein & Christakis, 1976; Warfield, 1976).

These events have been discussed in the literature extensively (See Bibliography, for example (Christakis & Bausch, 2006; Flanagan & Christakis, 2010, 2021; Trevino et al., 2013)).

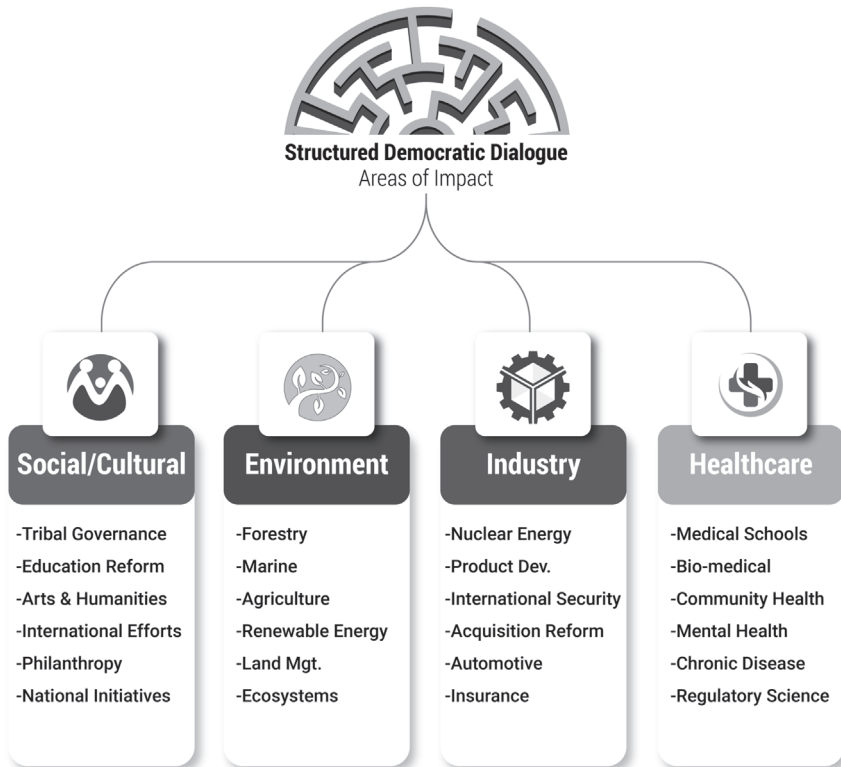
A marshaling event was the Club of Rome prospectus, in which the concept of the Global Problematique was defined for the first time. Some of the

ontological constructs incorporated in the development of the SDD methodology were conceptualized in the CoR prospectus for the first time. For example, the construction of affinity clusters and influence trees of ideas were discussed by Ozbekhan in the CoR prospectus; however, at the time there was not a platform like Logosofia (Diedrich and Christakis, 2021), or the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method (Warfield, 1976) available to enable interdisciplinary teams to construct graphic representations by means of disciplined deliberations efficiently and effectively. Additionally, the CoR prospectus corresponds to a scientific revolution (Kuhn, 1970), because it includes the conceptualization of the deployment of appropriate methods for engaging stakeholders in defining the Global Problematique.

In Figure 1.3, we display graphically the variety, reusability, and robustness of the SDD methodology. For the last fifty years, it has been verified in the domains of Environmental and Natural Resource Stewardship;

Figure 1.3

Representing the Variety of Applicability and Reusability of the SDD Methodology



Social, Economic, Educational, Professional, and Cultural Development; Healthcare Systems, Biomedical Research, Development and Regulation; and Technology, Capital, and Knowledge Management. The applications of collaborative inquiry span a three-to-twenty-year planning horizon and include: Policy Development; Long-Range Strategic Planning; Research and Aggregate Program Planning and Decision Making; Enterprise and Information Systems Reengineering; and Process Design. In the past couple of decades it has become a methodology of choice for rapid launch of large-scale interorganizational, interagency initiatives involving scores of constituencies such as Future Scenarios for Regional Development, Formation and Redirection of Industrial Consortia (Jones, 2018; Weigand et al., 2014), Stakeholder Driven Modernization of Regulatory Policy, formation of Cross-Sector Public-Private Partnerships, and bi-communal peace-building initiatives in Cyprus involving Turkish and Greek Cypriots (Laouris & Christakis, 2007; Romm, 2010).

In [Figure 1.4](#), we display graphically the global distribution of SDD applications beginning with the year 1972, when the Academy for Contemporary Problems was established, where Warfield and Christakis collaborated as Fellows of the Academy, and started the development and application of the set of Consensus methods discussed in Appendix B.

The Demosofia Constructivist Paradigm

The scientific revolution for the science of deliberation (see Appendix B) began in the decade of the 1970s (Christakis, 1973). The new constructivist paradigm has been called “Demosofia,” a newly constructed Greek word meaning the “wisdom of the people” (Christakis, 1993). The name implies a “paradigm shift” from the traditional meaning of democracy, which in Greek meant the “power of the people”, to the “wisdom of the people.” The underlying premise of the Demosofia paradigm is that it is necessary to explicate the wisdom of the people in order to launch an effective assault on the Global Problematique (see [Figure 1.5](#)). Unfortunately, as we will elaborate in this book, on account of political, economic, and academic elitism, the wisdom of the people is necessary but not sufficient. The escalating complexity of Glocal Problematiques (e.g., climate change, pandemics, etc.), together with the dominance of the realist paradigm in political dominos, perpetuate localized wars (e.g., Irak, Syria, Ukraine), for the benefit of the military industrial complex, as articulated by President Eisenhower in the 1950s. It is much more difficult today to make wise policy planning choices collectively, as compared to those challenges facing the Athenianns in the Agora.

In the early 1970s a group of researchers at the Academy for Contemporary Problems discovered the importance of applying science for improving