

WANTED : New Types of Social Entity

Part 1 : The Role of the « Potential Association »

This article is reproduced from a new UAI Study Paper entitled : « The Next Step in Inter-Organizational Relationships; the use of information, rather than organization, as the foundation for the inter-organizational activity of the future. »

The fragmentation, suspicion, duplication, unnecessary competition for limited resources and conscious or unconscious opposition to change and new patterns of activity which is increasingly characteristic of interorganizational relations, suggests the need for a new type of social entity.

Federations of organizations or even groupings of individuals - as the current solution to this malaise - are considered a potential threat to the autonomy and freedom of action of the proposed members, unless the grouping has a highly specific function (in which case its coordinative power is limited). Members do not want to have things said in their name except on very specific issues with their approval.

Is it not time that we examined the assumption that « organizations » as we have known them - and they do not differ fundamentally from the first associations and limited liability companies that were created several centuries ago - are the only possible form of organizing social activity. This is an incredible absence of development in a society characterized, by change in all domains.

Perhaps we could bypass the impasse in inter-organizational relations and the legal recognition of such entities by creating a new type of social entity (*).

As a first suggestion, why do we not « create » (or, really, « think in terms of ») what might be called a « potential association » (« société

potentielle » in French, as opposed to « société anonyme »). Such an association would, as such, not have « members » in the sense of people subscribing in common to a particular set of views or being represented in any way via any election procedure. The relationship would be loose - almost to vanishing point - to avoid any threat to autonomy. The bodies brought into relationship via a potential association would be held, or, strictly speaking, would hold, themselves, in this relationship simply by the fact that they received information, whether on a paying basis or as some form of subsidized service, from a central point on topics of interest to them. Such centres, each functioning as the secretariat for a potential association, could take any existing organizational form - the fact that each made available information (on a subscription basis, for example) to a list of people or organizations implies no membership relationship whatsoever.

But, and here lies the difference from the multitude of information distribution operations, the secretariat would also ensure that that each « potential associate » or « subscriber » was regularly and rapidly informed of the identity and degree of « interest » or « desire to act » of other associates, with respect to each new subject or issue (falling within the domain of that particular potential association) on which he had also registered his interest (or desire : to act, to commit funds, etc.). Each associate therefore has a comprehensive picture, updated weekly for example, of what new opportunities for joint action are open to him.

On such particular issues contact between a group of associates, self-selected from the total « pool » of associates, is facilitated by the

(* Equally urgent, if less obvious, is the need for equivalent new structures or processes to relate, « potentially », the activity of autonomous disciplines and as a device for catalyzing individual integration.

secretariat. This could take the form of a list (of the names and addresses of all associates who had registered the same degree of interest in a given topic) sent to each person on the list - or this could be extended so that a willing contact person was appointed and indicated on the list. Such a restricted « transient » group (*) may then decide quite independently on the organizational form or joint action it has to take, if any, (i. e. whether formal or informal, profit or nonprofit, one-off meeting, organization, joint letter, delegation, etc.) for the period of duration of common interest in the subject. The potential association's central secretariat may, in some cases, then prove to be the most appropriate administrative structure to carry out the secretariat function of the specialized transient group. In other cases" a separate secretariat may be created.

In this way the existence of the central secretariat is continually facilitating and catalyzing the creation and crystallization of a multitude of transient groups - self-selected from the total pool of autonomous associates and dissolving back into the pool on completion of the activity for which they were created. Clearly at any one time a given associate may be, be becoming, or coming to be, a « member » of a number of such transient groups with different : constitutions, degrees of formality, governmental character, continuity, degrees of permanence, binding power over members, types of programme, etc. Such specialized groups may result, in the normal way, in the creation of their own information systems or administrative apparatus - and associates may in fact have no further relationship with the potential association from which the transient group « gelled ». Associates may even then constitute themselves into a more specialized potential association but at no time is the autonomy of the associate infringed upon without his direct consent on the specific issue. The potential association constitutes a development which is a « hair's breadth » beyond current practice. This is encouraging in that it indicates that the novelty would not be so

(*) See : Alvin Toffler. *Future Shock*. London, 1970, p. 133 (transient organizations), p. 340-3 (situational groups).

great as to jeopardize its use. Some organizational techniques which are related to it are : ad hoc committees and working parties, use of mission oriented « task forces » in complex organizations in order to get collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries (this is highly developed in the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation for example), « invisible colleges » of scholars, natural disaster or crisis contact groups, « situational groups » advocated for people passing through the same life situation at the same time (*), and working groups of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC (**).

The differences from these techniques are however highly significant. Firstly, the potential association is given social recognition, it becomes a social phenomenon which can be labelled, discussed and improved upon. At present the processes encompassed leading to the crystallization of such groups occur in a very haphazard, change-dependent, inefficient way (to the horror and despair of members when they finally make contact and realize the effort they have wasted). No information system has yet been designed to facilitate this type of contact - the closest approaches are the high-volume, high-cost, highly specialized, profile-based, journal-abstract systems. Secondly, as a distinct organizational technique it can be active between hitherto partially or totally isolated organizations - as such it

(**) « Due to the increasing desire on the part of a number of NGOs to combine for consultation on specific matters under the consideration of the Economic and Social Council or its subsidiary bodies, slowly a new approach has been gaining ground. Without changing the basic concept, the Conference agreed that it or its Bureau may act as a convener of meetings of consultative NGOs who wish to meet, consult and cooperate on specific matters. The conference or its Bureau : should however not bear any responsibility for the actions of the groups thus formed. This method which is certainly" capable of further and wider application is not objectionable, provided that there is always a clear distinction defining the competence, the action and the responsibility of the Conference and the Bureau on the one hand, and the competence, action, and responsibility of the cooperating groups or ad hoc committees of NGOs on the other hand. »

(A review of the Aims and Objectives and the Structural Organization of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC. 11th General Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC, Geneva, 1969, 11/GC/19. p. 9-10)

The Coming Adhocracy

« We are, in fact, witnessing the arrival of a new organizational system that will increasingly challenge, and ultimately supplant bureaucracy. This is the organization of the future. I call it « Adhocracy ».

Man will encounter plenty of difficulty in adapting to this new style organization. But instead of being trapped in some unchanging, personality-smashing niche, man will find himself liberated, a stranger in a new free-form world of kinetic organizations. » (p. 113)

« Organizations now change their internal shape with a frequency - and sometimes a rashness, that makes the head swim. Titles change from week to week. Jobs are transformed. Responsibilities shift. Vast organizational structures are taken apart, bolted together in new forms, then rearranged again. » (p. 113-4)

« Gardner referred to the « crises of organization » in government and suggested that, in both the public and private sectors, « Most organizations have a structure that was designed to solve problems that no longer exist ». The « self-renewing » organization he defined as one that constantly changes its structure in response to changing needs ». (p. 118 citing John Gardner, author of Self-Renewal. Harper, 1963; a similar view is expressed by Donald Schon who says that some organizational structures are very much « a series of memorials to old problems »).

« Transient teams, whose members come together, to solve a specific problem and then separate, are particularly a characteristic of science and help account for the kinetic quality of the scientific community. » (p. 121)

« Clearly, there is nothing new about the idea of assembling a group to work toward the solution of a specific problem, then dismantling it when the task is completed. What is new is the frequency with which organizations must resort to such temporary arrangements. The seemingly permanent structures of many large organizations, often because they resist change, are now heavily infiltrated with these transient cells. » (p. 121)

«...we need to create « self-destroying organizations... lots of autonomous, semi-attached units which can be spun off, destroyed, sold... when the need for them has disappeared. » (p. 122 citing Donald Schon, President of the Organization for Social and Technical Innovation). « What is now within our grasp... is a kind

productive capability that is alive with intelligence, alive with information, so that at its maximum it is completely flexible; one could completely reorganize the plant from hour to hour if one wished to do so. » And what is true of the plant is increasingly true of the organization as a whole. » (p. 122 citing a management consultant). « This typically bureaucratic arrangement is ideally suited to solving routine problems at a moderate pace. But when things speed up, or the problems cease to be routine, chaos often breaks loose. It is easy to see why... It takes more information to cope with a novel problem than one we have solved a dozen or a hundred times before. It is this combined demand for more information at faster speeds that is now undermining the great vertical hierarchies so typical of bureaucracy. » (p. 125).

« You no longer have the strict allegiance to hierarchy. You may have five or six different levels of the hierarchy represented in one meeting. You try to forget about salary level and hierarchy, and organize to get the job done. » (p. 126 citing the Director for Personnel Planning for International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation).

« Quite possibly... the only truly effective methods for preventing, or coping with problems of coordination and communication in our changing technology will be found in new arrangements of people and task, in arrangements which sharply break with the bureaucratic tradition ». (p. 126 citing Professor Read of McGill University). « Information surges through society so rapidly, drastic changes in technology come so quickly that newer, even more instantly responsive forms of organization must characterize the future. What, then, will be the characteristics of the organizations of super-industrial society ? « The key word... will be « temporary »; there will be adaptive, rapidly changing temporary systems ». Problems will be solved by task forces composed of « relative strangers who represent a set of diverse professional skills ». (p. 129 citing sociologist Warren Bennis).

« Once again, there is nothing new about people seeking advice from one another. What is new is our ability, through the use of computerized systems, to assemble situational groups swiftly, to match up individuals with counselors, and to do both with considerable respect for privacy and anonymity. » (p. 343).

Extracts from : Future Shock; a study of mass bewilderment in the face of accelerating change, by Alvin Toffler (London, Bodley Head, 1970; Chapter 7 is entitled « Organization : The Coming Ad-Hocracy »).

increases the whole pace, potential and flexibility of organized activity. Thirdly, by objectifying the tenuous concept of a group of bodies or persons which **could** link together in different transient patterns under different appropriate conditions, the need to centre attention on **existing** organizations (with their tendency to self-perpetuate and constitute obstacles to social change) is diminished in favour of recognition of the range of **potential** patterns into which the component entities could « gel » in response to new conditions. A meaningful and dynamic social framework for ordinary organizations is thus supplied.(*). Fourthly, at a time when the need for greater participation is being felt, the « société anonyme » can be seen as crystallized out of a system of potential relationship between associates known (i.e. non-anonymous) to one another. Namely the transient bodies in which a given associate does not participate are not totally alien to him (provided they arise from the

(*). Thus whilst society may, with the use of a technique of this type, form a highly ordered (low entropy) complex at any given time - satisfying short term, stability requirements - the high probability of switching to completely different high order patterns at later points in time supplies the « randomness » (high entropy) condition essential to the facilitation of social change and development in response to new conditions. In this connection, note Professor Johan Galtung's view on the importance of high entropy for world peace :

« Thus the general formula is : Increase the world entropy, i.e. increase the disorder, the messiness, the randomness, the unpredictability - avoid the clear-cut, the simplistic blue-print, the highly predictable, the excessive order... Expressed in one formula, this seems to capture much of what today passes as peace thinking, particularly of the associative variety. »

(Johan Galtung. Entropy and the general theory of peace. Proceedings of the International Peace Research Association, Second Conference. Assen, Van Gorcum, 1968; also published as Chapter 5 of Theories of Peace, prepared for Unesco under a contract with IPRA.) In other words we have a means of ensuring high social stability at each point in time with low predictability over time, or alternatively, and paradoxically, we can think of it as a potentially (i.e. unrealizable) highly ordered situation over time which « contains » a sequence of very disordered situations. An advantage of this is that people and power groups cannot take up feudalistic roles in potential structures. (In this connection see : Johan Galtung. Feudal systems, structural violence and the structural theory of revolutions. Proceedings of the IPRA Third Conference. Assen, Van Gorcum, 1971.)

same potential association) - the alienating effect of an ordinary organization is thus reduced.

Note that there is no limit to the number of associates of a potential association - nor to the degree of sub-division or over-lapping between such associations. (Limits worth a moment's reflection are perhaps constituted by the total world population or the total number of groups.)

Two other thorny problems are bypassed :

- (a) legal status is irrelevant since the association as such, does not « exist » in the present in any tangible form - it only exists **potentially** (hence « potential association ») as a future possibility, and then only partially, through any of an infinite (or a least very large) combination of possible sub-patterns called into existence by particular conditions - it is these sub-patterns which **may** take on forms which could usefully acquire some form of legal status for their usually limited duration - there is however no need for them to « recognize » one another or be recognized by non-member associates.
- (b) control of the central secretariat is not the critical problem it is in the creation of a normal organization. Its operation could even be carried out under contract or be carried out by an organization totally dissociated from the transient groups which « gel » out of the potential association. Control could be in the hands of a few or all of the associates by their constituting themselves **for that administrative purpose only** into a limited liability group or even some form of « Committee of the Whole » (a technique used by the United Nations General Assembly). Alternatively, the minimum administrative operations could be carried out as a normal subscriber-service by periodicals - overlap between such services to common associates would merely confirm their effectiveness.

By implication, both governmental and nongovernmental, and profit and nonprofit, bodies at any level could be associates of the same potential association. The feasibility of a given pattern gelling into some effective ad hoc, formal or informal, joint operation would be determined by negotiation as part of the « life »

of the potential association in terms of the political and other constraints valid for the proposed pattern over the period in question. (It could be instructive to speculate on the results of constituting the many thousands of bodies which make up the UN into a potential association. The same applies to the whole intergovernmental system, the nongovernmental system and could be equally interesting at the national and local levels).

It should be clear that it is precisely this type of method of ensuring a constant, very high and flexible **interaction** rate which would ensure generation of the maximum amount of self-coordinated new activity, commitment and involvement by associates of potential associations. It is this sort of approach which could be **catalyzed** by the UN to increase the amount of activity related to development, peace and other UN programme objectives. This could be done for the local and national levels, where the centres of interest lie, to strengthen grassroots interaction, with the recognition that this will build up and overflow **naturally** and of its own accord onto the international level and from the developed to the developing countries. This can be achieved **without** the need for the UN to be responsible for the **organization, control** or political implications of whatever

joint activity gels out - except where Specialized Agency departmental participation, as an associate in a given activity, is appropriate. It is the increase in the, absolute amount of such interaction which will ensure maximum collaboration with, and support for, the sub-set constituted by UN programmes. What social processes, pressures or bodies cause new UN programmes to be evolved (i.e..voted) in recognition of. new problems ? Does the UN believe that-non-UN joint activity can contribute to the achievement of UN long-term objectives without necessarily being tied to the UN definitions of methods and priorities - if so, what needs to be done to facilitate such activity (as a striking opportunity for accelerated development rather than as a politico-administrative problem of selective « recognition » of appropriate organizations ?) (*)

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(*) For specific proposals for the use of computers to facilitate high inter- and intra-organizational interaction, see A.J.N. Judge. Information systems and inter-organizational space. In : Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Association, Special Issue on Social Intelligence (for Development), Winter 1970-71. See also : International Organizations and the Generation of the Will to change; information systems required. Brussels, Union of International Associations, 1970 (INF/5).

Resume français de l'article (p. 148) :

ON DEMANDE : UNE NOUVELLE ENTITE SOCIALE

— le rôle de « l'association potentielle »

Pour faire face aux problèmes de coordination des programmes des organisations qui se veulent indépendantes et craignent tout lien qui risquerait de nuire à leur autonomie, il y a lieu de considérer la possibilité de concevoir une nouvelle forme de liaison entre personnes ou organisations — une nouvelle entité sociale qui éviterait ces problèmes.

L'auteur suggère la création d'une « société potentielle ». Une telle société n'aurait pas de membres, simplement des « associés » qui recevraient l'information d'un service central quelconque, ressemblant peut-être à un abonnement à une revue. Une différence cependant dans l'action supplémentaire du secrétariat de cette « société ». Celui-ci réunirait de la part de chaque associé des indications sur les questions qui l'intéressent et distribuerait à chacun des listes mentionnant l'identité des autres associés ayant indiqué un intérêt pour le même sujet que lui. Cette technique faciliterait la formation de groupes spécialisés qui

pourraient se réunir sur une base ad hoc pour se dissoudre leur travail une fois terminé dans le pool général de la société potentielle.

Une telle société potentielle serait ainsi le catalyseur de la création de sociétés au sens habituel du terme, mais n'aurait pas une « existence » organisationnelle qui pose toute une série de problèmes bien connus, d'ordre juridique ou autres.

Les lecteurs français remarqueront que l'article intitulé « La Coordination dans le cadre de l'ELEP » (page 141) décrit l'opération d'un système d'information qui fonctionne d'une manière similaire à celle d'une société potentielle.

Nous signalons qu'un article en français paraîtra prochainement au sujet des « associations momentanées » entre les OINGs. Une société potentielle est le cadre « fictif » qui pourrait faciliter la création de telles associations.