

# Institutional « Games » and Strategies as a Response to Complexity

*This paper introduces one aspect of the complexity-theme which has been explored from other points of view in earlier papers in this periodical : Les Katas institutions, by Thierry Gandin (1977, 3, pp 77-79); Wrecking an international Project — 114 notes from a saboteur's vade mecum (1972, 10 pp 487-490); and Limits to Human Potential (1976, 10, pp 444-446; 1977, 4, pp 147-151).*

The complex intra- and inter-organizational environment constitutes, for many people in industrialized societies, a reality which is as substantial as that of the natural environment with which previous generations felt themselves to be in closer contact. Within such a context in which those involved must simplify their perception of their surroundings in order to be able to act and survive, additional dynamics occur. Individuals, groups and institutions use that part of the environment upon which they have some conceptual or operational hold as a « territorial » base from which to interact with others. There therefore emerges a form of territorial behaviour in which each attempts to build up the significance and

of others. This occurs between organiza-

tions, between disciplines or schools of thought, between languages, between cultures, between ideologies, between religions, between values, etc. Having acquired a hold on a part of any domain, the individual or group in effect transforms it into a fortress which has to be defended against enemies from without and against rivals from within. Survival demands an expertise in strategy and tactics which may well involve obstructing the development of

control has been achieved.

## **Nullification of innovation**

Clearly there is a discrepancy between the declared reason for the existence

of an organization and its behaviour in practice. It is widely assumed that people or organizations acting on societal problems are attempting to improve the system as a whole or in part. But in the case of politicians, academics, and organizations in general, it is not always the substantive problem which is important. This is in many cases merely a symbol for the territory constituted by the issue.

a. In the case of diplomacy or politics, for example, issues may be viewed as an opportunity for advancement of the nation or party, or for the benefit of its public image, and only incidentally as a question which requires solution in its own right, independent of national interests or party politics.

b. In the academic environment, again it is territory which is often the prime concern. A new hypothesis or paradigm may be viewed, if at all, as a territorial intrusion. Even if it is satisfactory, in terms of explanatory, it may be analyzed in terms of opportunities for publishable criticism or counter proposals which will improve the academic status of the scholar. A scholar must dissent to distinguish himself from his fellows.

c. Organizations in general, including international agencies, are locked into complex « games ». Again it is not program effectiveness which tends to be the final criterion but rather the territory constituted by the problem for which the programme was created and its implications for the survival of the organization. Organizations become « learning environments » and role habitats and have a system maintenance, rather than a system change, function. » The organization is the message. » To borrow from McLuhan.

Activity in politics, organizations or academe may thus be more directed to stabilizing a condition of fulfilling behaviour. As a result - more effective » or « more truthful » may become interpreted as doing more activity of the same kind and avoiding or opposing innovation. The tension involved in the process of problem identification and solution, and the associated behaviour, may be considered a desirable feature of the environment and therefore oppose convergence to any « solution » which would terminate the problem solving activity. Much activity is therefore a question of - tourner autour du pot » in order to ensure maintenance of the status quo. Such activity may effectively, but indirectly and invisibly nullify any innovative activity as Stafford

Beer has made clear in his adaptation of Le Chateller's Principle to social systems :

« *Reformers, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in short who \* want to get something done* », often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their strictures, advice or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either to achieve a measure of success in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultrastable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. It specializes in equilibrium readjustment, which is to the observer a secret form of change requiring no actual alteration in the macro-systemic characteristics that he is trying to do something about. » (Stafford Beer, The cybernetic cytolast — management itself. Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetics Congress, September 1969).

### Problem displacement

Close analysis of « successful » social innovation may therefore reveal that the particular problem has been eliminated to the satisfaction of all concerned (from the electorate to the policy-maker) by eliminating the particular set of symptoms by which it was recognized and which gave rise to the call for remedial action. But action of this kind may merely have ensured that a new set of symptoms emerges in some other social domain. The new set may well be considered more acceptable, or may be less easy to focus on as the basis for an effective campaign for remedial action. Some time will also be required before the new set of symptoms can be effectively recognized. It may in fact be very difficult for an organization to see that its programmes merely displace a problem into the jurisdiction of some other body — whose own actions will eventually result in the problem being displaced back again or into the jurisdiction of a third body. (Institutions may deliberately engage in problem displacement throughout a network of jurisdictions as a way of legitimating their own continued existence.) Such displacement may be difficult to detect because one set of symptoms may be apparent in legislation (e.g. legal discrimination), but when eliminated may then take on an economic character (e.g. economic discrimination) which if eliminated may then take on a social character (e.g. social discrimination), and then a cultural character, etc. Such displacement chains may loop back on themselves and develop side chains which are difficult to detect since each organization is only sensitive to the problem symptoms in its own domain and con-

siders symptoms of the same problem in other domains to be acceptable or of secondary importance. This situation makes it difficult to compare the presence or absence of problems in different geographical areas because of the different forms its symptoms take, the acceptability of some forms in some areas, or the lack of sensitivity to them.

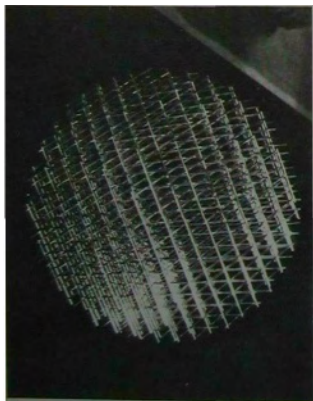
### Insubstantiality of complex problems

The fluidity and complexity of this situation is reinforced by the nebulous character of societal problems. Such problems are the artefacts of concerned minds, their shadowy nature derives from the fact that they represent in part an objective state of affairs and in part a subjective state of mind. What is a critical problem to one person may appear unimportant, not a problem at all, or even an aspect of a solution, to another person. There is no paradox then in finding that some complex industrial societies, having a comparatively high plane of material life and rapid advancement of cultural values, may nevertheless be regarded by their members as more problem-ridden than other societies with substantially less material wealth and cultural achievement. Problems thus bear a resemblance to « negative theories », namely they « exist » in the same way that theories exist (bearing the same relationship to data and values), but instead of providing explanatory and predictive power to link related phenomena within a coherent framework, they mark the presence of confusion and unpredictable relationships between seemingly unrelated phenomena.

### Structuring the societal environment

In this strange perceptual environment based almost entirely on the movement of symbols and data through information systems and the media, individuals and organizations may well, in the absence of grounded realities, engender experiences for themselves analogous to those under sensory deprivation. A generalized sense of eventlessness may thus provoke the emergence of compensatory collective tensions (having an illusory quality), which can be called societal problems, and to which the collectivity can enthusiastically respond with positive innovative activity - thus structuring its

«... the temptation in our position at the present time, vis-à-vis this enormously complex set of problems, is to grab quick, quick, but quick, at anything that will obscure the darkness of the sub-



ject and , *above all, give us something to do, preferably with our larger muscles* ». (Gregory Bateson conference summary. In : M C Bateson. Our Own Metaphor. 1972).

In the case of an individual there exists a phenomenon known as stimulus-hunger, which may be partially transformed into recognition-hunger. These both express the need to avoid sensory and emotional starvation which lead to biological deterioration. Structure-hunger is a further phenomenon through which the individual, in order to avoid boredom and eventual emotional starvation, experiences the need to structure his time — most commonly through some project or activity designed to deal with the material of external reality.

There are several options for structuring time in an intra- or inter-organizational environment. In order of complexity, these are : rituals, pastimes, games, intimacy, and activity (which may form a matrix for any of the others).

The goal of the individual then becomes that of obtaining as many satisfactions as possible from his transactions with others. The satisfactions of such social contact revolve around somatic and psychic equilibrium and are related to :

1. the relief of tension
2. the avoidance of unwelcome situations
3. the procurement of recognition
4. the maintenance of an established equilibrium.

## Games

Whilst much could be said about rituals and pastimes as a substitute for activity on problems, the concern at this point is specifically with « games » as one form of activity which may govern the dynamics of an intra- or interorganizational environment and structure individual behaviour in it. Eric Berne (author of Games People Play; the psychology of human relationships. 1966) provides a definition :

• A game is an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome. Descriptively it is a recurring set of transactions, often repetitions, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a snare, or « gimmick ». Games are clearly differentiated from procedures, rituals, and pastimes by two chief characteristics : (1) their ulterior quality and (2) the payoff. Procedures may be successful, rituals effective, and pastimes profitable, but all of them are by definition candid; they may involve contest, but not conflict, and the ending may be sensational, but it is not dramatic. Every game, on the other hand, is basically disho-

nest, and the outcome has a dramatic, as distinct from merely exciting, quality ». In contrast to a mathematically definable game postulating completely rational players, this type of game is « un-rational », or even irrational, and hence more real .

In addition to the satisfaction they provide, which do not necessarily imply fun or enjoyment, people play such games for a variety of reasons :

1. to avoid confronting reality
2. to conceal ulterior motives
3. to rationalize their activities
4. to avoid any real participative activity.

Clearly all these reasons and the games to which they give rise, may constitute significant obstacles to effective innovative activity. For whenever the individuals involved are in key positions in their respective organizational units, the games they play will effectively determine the positions, policies and activities of their units.

It is for this reason that it is important to understand the nature and range of such games. It is characteristic of the current approach to such matters that the games are only referred to in a humorous context, as coffee-table gossip, which thus prevents any formal recognition of their implications for innovative activity.

As all who are directly involved in organizational activity are aware, such games may be the occasion for humor, but their existence and acquisition of expertise in them can only be ignored at the risk of becoming ineffective in the initiation and implementation of any project.

it is significant to note that a recent in-depth study of institutional executives concluded that a new type of person is taking over the leadership of most technically advanced corporations in the U.S.A. The study names this type a gamesman, described as follows :

*« The modern gamesman... loves change and wants to influence its course. He likes to take calculated risks and is fascinated by technique and new methods. He sees a developing project, human relations, and his own career in terms of options and possibilities, as if they were a game. His character is a collection of near paradoxes understood in terms of its adaptation to the organization requirements.*

*detached and playful but compulsively driven to succeed; a team player but a would-be superstar, a team leader but often a rebel against bureaucratic hierarchy; fair and unprejudiced but contemptuous of weakness; tough and dominating but not destructive. Unlike other business types, he is energized to compete not because*

*he wants to build an empire, not for riches, but rather for fame, glory, the exhilaration of running his team and of gaining victories. His main goal is to be known as a winner, and his deepest fear is to be labeled a loser ».* (Michael Macoby. The Gamesman. Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1976).

Of special interest is the gamesman's attitude toward change and innovation, for this is in contrast to the status quo orientation noted above as characteristic of participation in most games in institutional settings. Perhaps these new gamesmen should be considered as super-skilled at the games at which the vast majority are merely novices. The study concludes that - *given our socioeconomic system, with its stimulation of greed, its orientation to control and predictability, its valuation of power and prestige above justice and creative human development, these fair-minded gamesmen may be as good as we can expect from corporate leaders* ».

The key question is whether, through the various existing semi-humorous perceptions of the kinds of game which are played, it is possible to develop greater recognition of their importance both for advancing social innovation or for retarding it. In doing so, it is important not to lose sight of the positive function of games for the individuals who play them, and for the organization units they represent. If, as Eric Berne notes :

*games are both necessary and desirable, and the only problem at issue is whether the games played by an individual offer the best yield for him ».*

Then in order to stabilize a highly innovative environment, it may be necessary to ensure the emergence of more sophisticated creative games and

might then be both directly supportive of social innovation and of the fulfillment of the individual players. The highest form of game skill, with the most benefits for society, may presumably bear some resemblance to the attitudes finally developed in the Eastern martial arts. A.J.