

This is an account of an international laboratory, 'Organisation Today and Tomorrow', set up by John Southgate (with me as right-hand man) and Max Pages. It was sponsored by EIT and run jointly by Polytechnic of North London and Paris Laboratoire de Changement Social, in France in 1971. I'd forgotten the details but I was excited to find this article by myself, published in ODMAG (Journal of the British Organisation Development Network). I promise it makes a good read!

A FIVE-LANGUAGE GROUP (ODMAG, Vol 2 Spring 1972)

This lab, Organisation Today And Tomorrow, planned a year ago, happened in April in a chateau near Chartres (Chateau de Charbonnières) - run by some Quakers as a rather informal hotel and which feels sometimes like the Hotel in 'Last Year In Marienbad'. The lab was a bit like that too - I mean that any one view of it can only be partial. For one thing there was, by design, no unified staff view: except for the starting goals and over some proprietary rights, as I shall tell. I say this to emphasise that I am writing a personal account of a very rich and complex experience.

There were 74 participants from ten countries, plus a research team of 5, 7 staff and 1 administrator, so a total community of nearly 90 people. The English participation, by which I mean the group enrolled by John Southgate and myself, was thoroughly characteristic of our European involvement: small, late and partly composed of Danes and Dutchmen! (*I have no recollection at all now of what the 'research team' did, nor where I could find their records! If anyone can help with this, please make contact*).

In the laboratory, language was only a problem when the real issues were not being faced. When dealings were straight - suddenly people started speaking in unexpected languages, instant translators sprang up all over the place and clear demands were made for translation when someone couldn't understand.

After 5 days of planning discussions, three a few months before and two just before the lab (of course this included administration, publicity etc), we arrived finally at one of the most 'unstructured' large group designs I have worked on - which is saying a lot as I tend towards low structure anyway.

The starting point was a statement of staff objectives, formulated somewhat like this and presented, in speech and writing, at the opening session:

"We want to work towards the building of a non-hierarchical organisation, in which there is psychological freedom to act. We want to study the blocks to building such an organisation." It was also stated that the staff "will not lead" and that they would try to act independently of each other, as members of the whole community, and working with other members and groups.

We indicated this in action by moving away from each other and joining various groups of participants in the meeting room. This opening was frequently referred to by participants later in the lab as the staff 'resigning'!

However, it didn't feel like that to us. I think all of the staff retained a sense of special responsibility and special behaviour, and all of us to a greater or lesser extent were frequently pushed into a position where people depended on us.

I believe this lab did in fact define the limits of non-hierarchy in our society at the present time. The organisational crisis came on the sixth day, when a group of participants tried to push through a demand that we give up our fees and that the finances of the lab be controlled by the lab as a whole. Actually there was no mechanism in place at the time which would be capable of handling this. And psychologically it could clearly be characterised as a dependent manoeuvre to push the staff back into the position of staff (- which it did!). Seen in this sense it presented a clear and dramatic image of the connection between psychological and economic structures.

Also, it was an example of a group working through process issues by trying to make concrete action decisions. This is important. Because there are a number of ways in which groups and organisations progress: by working at decisions; by analysis; by imagery; and by enactment.

We need to know which is happening at any particular time, and we need to be able to sense which is going to be either fruitful or paralysing.

The crisis continued on the morning of the seventh day when a sort of point of fear was reached. Sanctions were mentioned, one participant said he would consult his lawyers, and I personally had fantasies of being tied up and tortured till I agreed to give up my money. I actually went to the extent of locking my room and hiding the key on that morning, and I discovered that Mirella Ducceschi (our Italian colleague) lost her money over that period (she found it again later!) and that several other people carried their spare cash around with them instead of leaving it in their rooms. The reality was that a number of people had not yet paid their fees, and many people had not paid the Chateau living costs, so there was some real potential for economic pressure.

The staff stood their ground and for the first time in my experience there was some very direct political learning in a lab. It can be stated like this: the ownership situation in our society limits the extent of non-hierarchical, or collective, relationships.

It was in fact a highly political laboratory. People came to question their own social function and their own position in society and to understand some of the social consequences of economic relationships. One of the organisers of the revolutionary group left the lab immediately after this crisis was over. In a declaration he stated that he had nothing more to stay for and that his real work lay outside.

Also there was an important counter-culture group in the lab - recognisable by its comparative lack of dependence, by the way it handled its sexual relationships and by the way it rejected formal structural procedures. Generally in our society I believe that the counter-culture threatens the established culture in five main ways: by its sexuality, by the use of drugs, by its tolerance of unusual behaviour (extending to madness), by its tolerance of children - and by its politics.

(NB 2012: on reading this now I am surprised I didn't put art in this list - but this does get coverage elsewhere on website - see 'Happenings', 'FGA Notations' and 'Mini Autobiography').

This cultural split is international and far more important than national differences (- as was well shown in this lab). The counter-culture in this lab was powerful. This was not through its size but through its certainty and there were a number of

confrontations with the established culture. I think these were fruitful, in terms of learning, for both sides.

The connection between the counter-culture and organised political activity is not simple. At a stage where the established culture holds the power and the means of doing things, the counter-culture expresses itself largely anarchically. Chaos, itself, may be progressive, but the threat of chaos can be reactionary - not only by its effect on political reactionaries but actually by its effect on political revolutionaries also, leading in its extreme form to a Stalinist bureaucratic centralism. All these forces were present in the laboratory.

Of course a laboratory is not a complete society: it has no working class. We were fed and cleaned up after by the staff of the hotel who were not part of the laboratory.

However, one important event in the lab was when the hotel staff went wild because of the mess one morning and because of the noise late at night. One of them tore up all our flip sheets and harangued Max Pagés, who happened to be on the way to his morning shower, in a loud voice for several minutes. This brought us into very real touch with our environment. In trying to discuss what to do about it, we learnt another lesson, cogently expressed by a young German woman who works on new forms of educational organisation at the University in Berlin: "We discuss and argue about what to do and meanwhile the real decisions are taken for us, outside, by the established powers."

One of the marvellous things about this laboratory was its richness in imagery, and not just spoken, but enacted imagery. On the evening of the second day there was a succession of spontaneous rituals, including the dismissal by 'burial' of Max and the mock crowning of Peter Furstenau, the staff member who was ever ready to analyse what was going on (later he was also 'buried'); the intended marriage of Traugott Lindner and Mirella Ducceschi (it didn't come off because I was the priest and after the wedding I declared that "in the collective organisation there is no marriage!"); then a gradual sweeping up of everyone who had remained at the side of the room into a huge undulating chain and a wild surging mass - which some of us interpreted as practising for the riots!

I vividly remember Max approaching me fairly early in the evening, me making some customary intellectual comment and him saying "Don't interpret, help me to dance", with a hair-raising desperation which led us into whirling round the room together - later, people spent perhaps half-an-hour with hands laid on his body moaning in the candlelight. Max was a very central figure in the lab in that he symbolised in himself perhaps more clearly than anyone the desire to move towards new ways of relating and some paralysing blocks to doing so.

All this seems absolutely relevant to our situation in society and particularly to our situation as organisation specialists. One thing which I regret did not happen in the lab, which I and also Traugott pushed for unsuccessfully, was an examination of the actual organisation of our community as it was. It never consciously evolved a 'structure', but of course it was an organisation: decisions were made, communications occurred, groups formed and dissolved, power and leadership were exerted, people pushed for things and were frustrated or satisfied.

How all this occurred was never studied. (*What were the researchers doing?? Who were they?? Where are their records??*) There was a soup-café in the village where sometimes the odd two or three people spent a few minutes having coffee. One

morning (it was the day of the fee-crisis, when important developments were also taking place for many people at the level of personal relating) a few people were allowed to sit in a small back kitchen by the woman who ran the place. Within half-an-hour about twenty-five people had crowded into that tiny room and stayed for the morning. It was almost impossible to move, the café lady struggled through to the stove every few minutes to make more coffee, people talked very intently and quietly in two or three cross-groupings - and all the time the actual coffee room was virtually empty.

How did this happen? Why did people collect there? Who collected and why? Why did they leave when they did? Was there some communication system which told people about this meeting? What were the issues, the topics, that were discussed? These questions were never thought about. Yet it is well known that informal meetings are often important in organisations.

I regret this lack of attention even more because I believe we have an enormous amount to learn from the 'cluster organisation', a prime example of which, often unhampered, is the children's playground, where clusters collect around an activity and then dissolve when that activity is over. Some of the characteristics of this form of organisation are as follows: a group exists only while the dynamic of an event lasts; decisions are made by whoever is available at the time, and everyone present has a voice; decisions are temporary and only committing while their appropriateness to the situation is felt; there is no difficulty about joining or leaving groups.

I have studied some organisations like this in occupations of colleges and in communes. I don't suppose it could be permanent in this form, but I am convinced it has enormous importance for the more permanent organisational forms of tomorrow in a somewhat permanent form, and a necessary aspect of a co-operative structure.

Perhaps people will be able to think about this later. It is quite possible, because one concrete decision to come out of the lab was that made by a small group headed by the manager of a Dutch newspaper who intend to collect and circulate the written accounts and statement of all those who send them in. I hope this happens.

(2012: again, I have no recollection of anything that resulted from this Dutch newspaperman's intent, and I don't remember his name. So if he, or anyone knowing anything, reads this, please make contact!)