

Unlearning Domination with Participatory Governance

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Reflection Paper for ASA 2022 Conference Studio 'Anthropology as Education'

April 2022

I have been working in the field of regeneration for over a decade now, having studied permaculture design and agroecology, and then, from my anthropology background, taking (perhaps too) seriously the need to reimagine not just the way we manage ecosystems but also our personal/internal and collective/societal systems in a regenerative way. What does it really mean to learn to live peacefully, addressing conflicts and power inequalities in practice? How can we truly live within planetary boundaries? What skills does it take to create contexts in which people can develop their full potential? How can we unlearn much of the hierarchical modes of functioning and build commonly held tools that help people to thrive?

Sociocracy is a mode of participatory governance that evolved from Quaker practices. It combines consent decision-making, a decentralized system of authority and intentional processes to improve our decisions and processes over time into a governance system that supports effective and efficient process while increasing connection, listening and co-creation among members. Today, sociocracy is applied in businesses, communities, nonprofits, cooperatives, grassroots groups and in education.

I came across sociocracy as a form of governance in 2013, when I was actively looking for ways in which to organise internally a burgeoning grassroots non-profit organisation ([CELL](#)) that I had founded in 2010, as it was growing rapidly. I was working at the time in a dual-system secondary school, and building CELL as a volunteer. The encounter with sociocracy was quite transformative and brought me to unlearn much. I want to focus here on a few pivotal aspects of this transformation.

Authenticity means that I am able to show all of myself, with my various endearing and less endearing personality traits, temporary bodily states of alertness, excitement or sleepiness, trauma I have been carrying (potentially unbeknownst to myself) for decades, and current life contexts. At work, quite often, structural hierarchy makes it impossible or at least culturally very difficult to embody authenticity.

Based on my experience on operating in classical schooling hierarchies, 'being professional' or 'behaving professionally' is not about actual skillset or competencies or a shared approach to a workplace issue, putting on display a highly curated version of myself that only displays the projected shiny aspects of my self. In practice, 'being professional' tends to conceal incompetence and unacknowledged aspects of the self as a daily practice.

Let me preface the following with the disclaimer that I loved and continue to love teaching, because it allows a ritual container within which authentic dialogue can happen. So I did love my work, and both challenging and supporting my teenage students, but my experience of the governance of classical hierarchies was much less enthusiastic, because it prevented authenticity as part of the system and marginalised it to its edges, not taking in its lessons at all (besides posing other challenges to distributed leadership, initiative and so forth).

I will illustrate this issue with three examples: One, if I am not doing well, for instance, because I may be going through a grieving process or a relationship breakdown, there is usually no space to address that in a formal way. It is required of me to mask any personal issues and go about my work as if they did not exist. I need to split work and personal life, though if I am lucky, there may be informal ways to share with trusted, long-term colleagues over a coffee. While this may help me, the organisation usually does not offer support, which is often externalised and medicalised. I am not advocating for a complete breakdown of the boundary between professional and personal, because that is often the short path to burnout. I am merely speaking about acknowledging the existence of the one realm in the other, so that the work within the realm is contextualised and the person is made to feel safe to show up as they are. It also means talking about power inequalities openly, and about the ways in which degrees of privilege may interfere with one's presence or relative absence as authentic self from work. This is particularly true for the unequal weight mothers carry, and the ways in which the intersections of race, sex, (dis)ability create conditions where authenticity is more or less possible. If this is not addressed, it leads to perpetuating patterns of inequality in being able to speak up, being heard, being acknowledged, being promoted, etc.

Two, if, in a group context, I do not know the answer to a question that is in my domain of expertise, it is usually very hard to admit this. As a consequence, I will probably choose to gloss over my lack of expertise, which might lead to bad decisions down the road. This is because, in the structure of these kinds of organisations, effective group work is not valued for its potential positive contributions, and the practice of systemic thinking and action is not endorsed as having the potential to solve issues that cannot be solved by individuals. New kinds of problems, such as 'sustainability' and ecological overshoot issues, but also, for instance, the fragmentation and breakdown of democracy through, e.g. the rise of global alt-right authoritarian movements and a broken ecology of AI-controlled and profit-driven, inflammatory digital communication platforms, cannot possibly be addressed in any meaningful, collective way within these structures.

Three, often, in these organisations, despite the obvious hierarchy, among the non-management staff, no formal distinctions can exist, as these are perceived as unwarranted hierarchy, and attempts to take control. Any proposals towards more explicit participatory governance structures with, e.g. designated roles and the introduction of consent decision-making processes are met with suspicion and rejection, since there is a very strong idea of 'unstructured meetings' and 'discussion culture' where the usual dominant participants dominate, and everyone else watches the time pass with one desire: for the meeting to end asap in order to be able to return to 'the real work'.

My experience in these hierarchies contrasted with what I learned from sociocratic organisations in terms of authentic selves. For the last decade, I have been part of many groups, both operational, project-driven groups and inner-change-focused, sharing groups. During my first encounter with sociocracy, I was lucky to experience the powerful practices I experienced first-hand and that first gave me a glimpse of how much of a game-changer this approach to governance could be: consent-based decision-making, rounds, facilitation, circle structure, double links, etc. Besides learning to practice these, I also had the opportunity to learn about a therapeutic mode of inquiry called 'Voice Dialogue'. The technique was developed in the early 1970s by Hal and Sidra Stone and it has affinities with Jungian and Gestalt lineages of psychotherapy. Hal and Sidra Stone discovered the presence of numerous sub-personalities (also called energy patterns or selves) within the human psyche. The Stones theorized that each sub-personality behaves like a real person and has its own beliefs, characteristics, rules, and behaviours. By speaking with individual selves, they were able to discover some of the various roles each self could play in protecting the individual. The theoretical framework of their approach, referred to as the psychology of selves, involves an analysis of how selves operate, how

they function in a relationship setting, how they influence the choices a person makes, and how they affect the evolution of a person's consciousness.

When witnessing the technique in practice, I saw, for the first time in my life, how people's various sub-personalities were not just abstract 'inner' voices, imperceptible on the 'outside', but that these various selves correlated to particular facial expressions and particular patterns of gestures. It was absolutely mind blowing to me; I was so touched to see these archetypal selves in another person that tears were streaming down my face. The night after the experience I had a particularly strong dream that dramatized the archetypal family patterns that I have been entangled with since childhood.

Following this experience, I experimented with Voice Dialogue myself, getting familiar with various sub-personalities of mine to gain a better understanding of my strategies for taking action under duress or when 'triggered', for instance. I found 'the General', which tends to be my default work personality when I am getting close to my limits. She marches on with a stiff upper lip and does not let any emotions or bodily exhaustion get in her way. I also got acquainted with many other selves, including 'the Spirited Freedom Lover', 'the People Pleaser', 'the Guardian', and 'the Child'. Voice Dialogue showed me these aspects of myself with a quality of objectivity that allowed me to better integrate all of these selves and to better understand and feel their embodied emergence in context. It also enabled me to muster more compassion in the relationship to my life partner, and appreciate the patterns I tend to act out in groups.

I want to now go back to the three examples I sketched out above and show how, with sociocratic tools, we can counteract (some of) the alienating effects of a workplace to some degree.¹

Remember example number one where people took their personal lives underground to give expression beyond the inauthentic façade they (need to) keep up. Check-ins and check-outs are very easy implementations towards a workplace culture based on authenticity. They serve to presence everyone, and symbolically serve as a gate towards a new kind of space. They allow everyone to share how they arrive and, if need be, what they carry today as baggage, or, on the other end of the spectrum, what celebratory things are happening within their lives. Voice spaces can also be integrated if, through interpersonal or structural conflict, meetings get stuck, and people's perspectives are explicitly valued within the system, so that the break-out deviation to informal gossip spaces and secretive rumour mills becomes less necessary. Together with inner work such as VD, different selves that may become dominant at turning points of facilitated processes are more easily recognised by the facilitator and the participants themselves, as archetypal patterns of conflict may be playing out.

In example two, rather than being able to admit gaps in their individual expertise with a smile, people resort to brushing over knowledge gaps, which results in potentially bad decisions. If we recognise that finding new solutions requires going along unfamiliar, difficult paths of 'not knowing together', if we acknowledge that through collective intelligence we may get much further in our common thinking and action, and if we admit that having a facilitator to guide us on this exhilarating yet deeply unsettling journey, well, then a culture shift might be on its way. The metaphor of the journey is pretty worn out, but it does signal the need for a readiness to cast off familiar shores and explore the unknown together to perhaps overcome the existential threats of the twenty-first century, where authenticity means alignment of walk and talk. This alignment can only happen if we continue to work on ourselves. In that sense, sociocracy is not a magical toolbox containing merely 'rounds', 'selection processes' and 'consent decision-making' – it is an

¹ Of course, our room for manoeuvre is limited within a political economy dominated by capitalist practices.

evolving framework for transformation, if you are ready to keep doing the work. Without 'the work', no magic will happen.

In example three, I noted the difficulty in hierarchies to take on temporary roles, as these are interpreted as attempts for individuals to take control. Often there is an erroneous presupposition that an individual has become an extension of management itself. If roles such as facilitator, time keeper, heart keeper and secretary become institutionalised, the authenticity dynamics at play could bring about interesting openings for more meaningful dialogue and true innovation that serves the mission of the organisation. Explicit sociocratic roles are a very meaningful pattern to make visible and change the existing power dynamic of a circle, and they can extend to taking more seriously the archetypal roles that we may be playing in a circle (e.g. victim, perpetrator, rescuer...) and become more aware of everything (all the selves) that we bring – consciously or unconsciously – to the circle.

I continue to learn in sociocratic organisations, which I move in, in work contexts, being in the process of establishing an unschooling project based on regeneration and sociocracy, and the eco-community I call home.