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A sociocratic co-housing on TV

January 19, 2023

A New World : The French-German public channel Arte is currently broadcasting a 3-part documentary series directed by the French ecologist Cyril Dion. It gives an international panorama of our societies, which are probably facing the most serious environmental crisis the planet has known since the appearance of our species. You may wonder what this has to do with sociocracy?

In the first episode, entitled "*Resist*", Cyril Dion begins by setting the stakes. Is it that bad? Human beings have always adapted, right? To go beyond denial and minimization of the facts, he highlights, by giving the floor to various researchers, that this situation concerns us all, starting today. Climate, biodiversity, agriculture, oceans, drinking water, access to energy...: the trajectory of "*laissez faire*" (in English, we say "business as usual", an evocative expression) concretely implies going further and further into a collapse of the terrestrial biosphere, this self-regulating system that has allowed human life for tens of thousands of years. This is not about the distant future. It is about the present. It is about influencing what we adults will experience during our lifetime, and also what our children will experience by 2100. We do not have 20 years to continue debating the issue or pretending that the problem will be solved in a humane and reasonable way thanks to the providential power of the States, the market and the new technologies. Otherwise we would not be here.

This is why Cyril Dion introduces us to people involved in movements determined not to "let it happen", through collective actions of non-violent resistance, but also, in the following two episodes, in actions of economic and social transformation or even large-scale ecosystem regeneration.

Among these different initiatives, we discover the Wohnprojekt, a participatory housing in Vienna, Austria, completed in 2014, consisting of 39 apartments (to be seen in [episode 2](#), starting at 38:30). With this example, Cyril Dion wants to illustrate how the cooperation necessary for radical changes in our lifestyles and in the management of social infrastructure (energy, transport, housing...) can be realized. The reportage illustrates the large number of services and spaces that are shared and co-managed by the building's inhabitants (grouped orders from organic farmers, vegetable gardens, cargo bikes...). The touching testimony of a Syrian refugee, who lives there with his family, also attests to the high level of psychological security and trust that has been established in this building.

But how do they do it? Many people have the experience of the laborious functioning of condominiums and building managers who would hinder initiatives of mutualization and mutual aid. In addition, many other shared housing or ecovillage projects struggle to materialize, or lose their solidarity character over time, because of the



relational and organizational difficulties that arise. Indeed, the stronger the interdependence, the more the grounds for potential conflicts are numerous. I believe that the "every man for himself" attitude is not only a matter of values: for many people, it is a strategy of protection, which allows them to avoid situations and responsibilities that they do not feel able to live through personally, nor to manage collectively. It is largely a lack of "resources" (in the psychological and social sense).

In the documentary, the inhabitants testify that the community is organized in a sociocratic way. All tasks are distributed among thematic working groups that can make decisions by themselves (sociocratic circles). According to them, decision-making is "*much faster and more efficient*" thanks to these groups in which it is not sought that "*everyone agrees but that everyone can live with*" (rule of consent, defined as no objection and not as consensus). On the website of [the Wohnprojekt](#) there is a link to the [Sociocratic Center of Austria](#), which is a branch of the "Soziokratie Zentrum", a non-profit organization also active in Germany and Switzerland. Many other shared and eco-housing projects around the world have built sociocratic governance. However, this approach requires a certain rigor, it cannot be improvised. Thus, [Diana Leafe Christian](#), a specialist in "intentional communities", shared in a video presentation 4 necessary conditions, according to her experience, to achieve an efficient and sustainable operation.

The presentation of the functioning of the Wohnprojekt is succinct, sociocracy not being the subject of the documentary. The links between ecology and sociocracy being an important subject for me, I propose to open this reflection in another more detailed article.

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Sociocracy: a strategic axis to understand and respond to the ecological crisis?

Introduction

I felt the need to write this article after having seen the recent documentary series *A New World* by Cyril Dion¹. In another short text², I summarized the issues for humanity that this film raises and the way sociocratic governance is briefly evoked, through the particularly successful example of a cohousing in Austria.

I think this example reveals a more far-reaching fact that has not been emphasized so far: the sociocratic method of governance is intrinsically adequate and effective to support a sustainable social life project, both in human and environmental terms.

How can human societies and their economies be reorganized to take into account the limits of the biosphere? This is a vast and sensitive subject. I would like to address here specifically the issue of governance, which is the exercise of power. I will therefore not answer the question of "how to do", in order to privilege a preliminary step: can we understand, thanks to a sociocratic perspective, the fundamental social problem underlying all the current ecological and human challenges? If the collective efforts seem to be not very efficient so far, and in any case not up to the real, current and future damages, it is perhaps because the diagnosis of the functioning of the vehicle that leads us "into the wall" is insufficient. Why do we still not manage to "change course" when no human being seems objectively interested in creating an unlivable planet?

In order to anticipate a legitimate objection, I do not suggest here that sociocratic governance would be a panacea to "save the world". Indeed, it remains a simple management tool, i.e. a means, leaving full responsibility to its users on the goals and values pursued. Moreover, the current civilization crisis has other dimensions than governance, which require other perspectives and complementary tools.

These limits being set, here is the thesis I defend here: it is only possible to achieve an "ecological transition" - or more broadly a positive transformation of our civilization in its relation to the biosphere, whatever the term used - if we take hold of the thinking and practices coming from sociocracy. In my opinion, it is a necessary and at the same time non-sufficient means that can remove many obstacles currently encountered in the decision and implementation of deep social transformations. If I use a chemistry metaphor: sociocracy could be an indispensable catalyst to add to our strategic plans, and first of all on the side of civil society - I think in particular of committed scientists

¹ <https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/092191-000-A/un-monde-nouveau-2-3/>

² First published in French: <https://www.sociocratie-france.fr/on-parle-de-sociocratie-sur-arte/>

and citizen movements -, or in the sector of the social economy.

1. A systemic diagnosis of the social mechanisms of degradation of the living world

As a starting point, it is useful to draw attention to the fact that sociocratic governance was conceived by Gerard Endenburg from a systemic way of thinking. It is an answer to the following question: how can we organize ourselves collectively in such a way that we constitute social entities that are dynamically self-regulating, like living systems? ³ Not only in small teams or associations, but also on larger scales, like nested Russian dolls.

The fact that human societies have managed to thrive in different parts of the world for thousands of years without depleting their ecosystems suggests that this question may already have been answered in other cultures. ⁴ Sociocracy would therefore not be a radical novelty but a new formulation adapted to the Western scientific and technical culture. I also want to make it clear that I do not believe in ethno-centric evolutionary schemes such as the "dynamic spiral" interpretation developed by Laloux in *Reinventing Organizations*. In it, pre-state political organizations (i.e. most of the history of our species) are caricatured according to the classical imaginary of the "primitive tribe". For a powerful challenge to the colonial mythology that still distorts our view of human history today⁵, I recommend the book *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow⁶. In our current situation, to quietly maintain the arrogance of a Western civilization, now globalized, which believes itself to be at the forefront of the evolution of the human species, seems to me to be totally inappropriate!

The ambition of the sociocratic method is to re-instate an essential property of dynamic systems in our social organizations, in an intentional way: the fact of functioning and evolving based on feedback loops. We need to restore effective feedback mechanisms. This is why structures resulting from the application of the sociocratic method are sometimes referred to as *dynamic governance*. This means concretely:

³ I refer here to his book "Sociocracy as social design" (Eburon, 1998) as well as to my experience as a sociocratic practitioner and trainer.

⁴ Before European colonization, the Amazon, North America and Australia were populated for tens of thousands of years without depleting the ecosystems, while other civilizations quickly deserted their territories through deforestation (for example in the Near and Middle East, around the Mediterranean, or on the famous Easter Island). The human presence has always had an impact, however, as ancient hunter-gatherer societies caused the disappearance of the largest mammals. The subject is discussed between archaeologists, anthropologists, biologists... and goes far beyond the scope of this article.

⁵ For example, in the seductive "story telling" that Yuval Noah Harrari does in *Sapiens* - a work that Cyril Dion cites for highlighting the power of "stories" in humans.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dawn_of_Everything

1. measure the effects of our activities, take into account what happens in reality, inside and outside organizations, and evaluate the gaps between intentions and their implementation.
2. to give a real influence to this information in order to change the objectives, rules, strategies, working methods, investment choices, technological choices, etc.

Without effective feedback, there is no self-regulation, and therefore no respect for limits: limits of human beings, of social groups, limits of ecosystems, limits of extractable resources (fossil fuels, metals...). Isn't the transgression of limits a recurrent observation in our societies?

Today, it seems obvious that the normal functioning of organizations (companies, administrations...) operates rather *by fighting against the* influence of feedbacks, that draw attention to the transgression of limits and their consequences: the feedback loops are broken. In a sociocratic perspective, the root cause is not a moral deficiency of individuals or social classes exercising decision powers, it is the result of some social patterns so anchored that they seem natural to us. Failing to see these social patterns (presented in Part 3), we are reduced to making moral judgments about the vices of leaders or elites (selfishness, greed, perversion, etc.).

Let's look at some concrete examples of barriers to the influence of legitimate feedback on decisions.

As a member of an organization, exposing malfunctions and even criminal abuse can be very risky. Organizations designed to regulate themselves would thank whistleblowers instead of forcing them to keep quiet and punishing them! Similarly, on a collective level, the fact that employees in Europe have fought for the right to form unions and to strike is a symptom of the structural failure to take feedback into account in decision-making. From this point of view, environmental protection and occupational health protection are in the same boat. The damage caused by asbestos or pesticides is proof of this. Unfortunately, the State, which is supposed to act in the name of the general interest, often turns out to be an employer just as irresponsible as multinational companies whose legal purpose is exclusively lucrative. This is evidenced by the chronic suffering and exhaustion of many staff as we see in French public services such as hospitals, the school system, ... When human limits are chronically overstepped, those who can afford it resign, to protect themselves. For the others, the last outcome is burn out and long-term sick leave: the non-respect of limits, both by a higher authority source of financing (State or shareholders) and by the collective system of the organization itself, leads in the end to surpass the self-regulation capacity of the body of its members. The cost of this damage is itself externalized in the general system of Health Insurance. So how can we take care of larger ecosystems if so many work organizations are already unable to take into account the biological limits of all their members?

In the absence of internal feedback, activist organizations, sometimes public bodies or investigative journalists, with few means, do essential work of monitoring, data collection, public interpellation, legal proceedings, or even civil disobedience, to alert, prevent or stop too serious nuisances on society and the environment. The current radicalization of environmental movements, as witnessed by the first part of Cyril Dion's documentary series, reflects the tragic awareness of an ever-increasing gap between the consequences of atmospheric pollution and the imperturbable pursuit of the policies of public and private institutions that continue to aggravate it, under the cover of a few demagogic speeches and marginal measures.

From a certain point of view, these public pressures are indispensable and allow some precious victories. However, the magnitude of the challenges encountered and the difficulty of changing the orientations of public and private organizations in this way forces us to think and act in an even more radical way: it becomes unavoidable to question the systemic patterns that are an obstacle to social self-regulation.

To put it differently: in our body, when self-regulation processes are broken, we are sick, and other processes intervene to try to restore them. On the scale of human societies - if we also look at them as complex systems - it is illusory to hope that the normal biological functions of all ecosystems can be restored and maintained in a perennial way thanks to the heroism and moral qualities of the people and their leaders. How can we expect them to decide (finally) to listen to the feedback from scientists and to initiate radical changes, if the ordinary processes of exercising power in companies, administrations, markets, etc. remain as they are? I have the impression that this is the implicit bet of all strategies that rely mainly on "education" and "awareness", without including the questioning of power structures.

2. In search of an alternative form of social organization

In the perspective of this questioning of power structures, the originality of Endenburg's contribution is that it does not rely on criticisms coming from political philosophies such as Marxism or Anarchism, but to have transposed the principles of cybernetics (which he used as an engineer), in an experimental social approach within his company, then in the formalization of a method which proved to be applicable to a great diversity of contexts.

The fact that he relied on technical concepts did not, however, limit Endenburg to the metaphor of the collective organization as a machine, which should be optimized and rationalized, following Ford's "scientific organization of work" - which still seems to be the dominant way of thinking in schools and large management consulting firms. It is striking that Endenburg begins the chapter devoted to the principles underlying the 4 rules of his method with the following statement: *"My initial premise is that life is only possible by virtue of a process which is capable of maintaining a state of dynamic equilibrium (...) The purpose of the circle process is to detect the disturbance of a dynamic*

equilibrium and to take steps to restore it." ⁷ Taking measures to restore the dynamic equilibrium of the world's climate or biodiversity, isn't that exactly what we need to learn to do collectively? And it is not the so-called *artificial intelligence* fed by big data that will give us the solution. For this is not a technological or administrative problem, but a profoundly political problem - that is, the way humans exercise power within their societies.

However, the systems perspective, as applied by Endenburg in his methodological proposal for a new social design, is often misunderstood. It seems to me that his contribution is interpreted in a biased way because of the cultural prism of our relationship to power. This therefore requires a detour through a little history.

The contemporary political critique of power structures, largely inherited from the counterculture of the 1960s, has primarily focused on the bureaucracy of large organizations, denounced as a rigid pyramidal structure. Organizational "verticality" and its hierarchical, top-down chains of command were seen as a characteristic social form of domination and the state's hold on society. In reaction to these structures, a valorization of "horizontality" was developed, supposedly allowing the abolition of dominations. The result was a form of consensus among radical, ecological or anti-capitalist movements, that the only legitimate organizational form would be self-management lived as equals within small groups⁸, or direct democracy within confederated popular assemblies⁹. This utopia of horizontality also nourished some pioneers of the computer industry and the Internet, coming from the counterculture in the United States.

The problem is that this dichotomy between verticality and horizontality has condemned many alternative movements to a form of political impotence. On the one hand, the counterculture has led to a retreat into the individual, devoted to solitary personal and spiritual development, or to small-scale actions carried out by affinity groups, whether local or on the internet. On the other hand, recent protest movements, such as the « Gilets Jaunes » in France, have developed with a valorization of spontaneity and a mistrust of instituted organizations... while depending on the

⁷ Endenburg, *Sociocracy as social design*, p.65.

⁸ David Graeber, *La démocratie aux marges* [Democracy at the Margins], la bibliothèque du MAUSS, publisher Le bord de l'eau (2014), p.18. This anarchist anthropologist was notably one of the figures of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement following the 2008 financial crisis.

⁹ Murray Bookchin developed the strategy of libertarian municipalism, including a larger-scale organization of society through confederations, aiming to eventually replace the states. To avoid reconstituting hierarchies, he advocates that the different levels of political organization be controlled by local assemblies, through an exclusively ascending verticality (from the bottom to the top). This political ideology (assumed as such) is notably presented in a posthumous collection of articles : *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, Verso, 2015 ; published in French by Agone, 2022.

infrastructure of monopolistic companies such as Facebook, to aggregate a large number of individuals around common ideas and actions.

The French economist Daniel Cohen, in his recent book *Homo numericus*, explains that the critique of vertical hierarchies has been integrated by neoliberal capitalism following the conservative counter-revolution of the 1980s. As he explained in a France Culture program: *"You don't want hierarchies anymore? Fine, we'll do away with them, but now it's all against all, you'll be in general competition."*¹⁰ The aspiration to horizontality, to autonomy, has been recuperated in the market society model. Work collectives and their bonds of solidarity have been broken, with industrial companies replacing the bond of salaried subordination with an equally asymmetrical relationship between a principal and subcontractors who have been put in competition and relocated. Automation has also led to less and less dependence on salaried workers to ensure production. Digital technology allows this logic to be extended, via the model of platform capitalism, which takes advantage of the work of independent and competing service providers. Neoliberalism shows that relationships of domination can thrive in a very "horizontal" and deregulated context. We can see this very well with the multinationals of Silicon Valley, whose libertarian leaders have no qualms about bypassing the "vertical" power of the States and their tax obligations. These companies base their fortunes on the apparently "free" acceptance of the public to accept all these illegible contracts associated with the use of their services, which are so practical that they become indispensable... And these private fortunes then allow them to decide in a totally opaque way what new technological developments should be carried out in order to continue - according to their marketing pitch - to "change life", or even to "save the planet"!

Organizational fragility, political impotence, ideological recovery by neoliberalism and the digital industry: this series of impasses can legitimately lead us to dissociate the question of power and self-regulation from the organizational form, more or less vertical or horizontal, that links its actors. In reality, verticality and horizontality are two necessary dimensions, in a variable way, in any social organization, according to the aims pursued and the constraints to be assumed. We need both to organize, at many scales, the large-scale social change that will keep the Earth habitable¹¹. The sociocratic method offers practical answers to bring into play the complementarity between organizational horizontality and verticality, by putting in place a healthy regulation of decision-making power. In order to activate the lever of a viable systemic transformation, it is therefore necessary to put the finger on an elementary social mechanism, which seems to me to underlie all our ecological and human problems. In

¹⁰ *Who is "Homo Numericus"? Interview with Daniel Cohen* : program "Le Meilleur des mondes" on France Culture radio, 2022.

¹¹ Elinor Ostrom, "A Multi-Scale Approach to Coping with Climate Change and Other Collective Action Problems" in [The Solutions Journal](#), February 22, 2016.

the following section, we will therefore examine the basis and effects of authoritarian power structures.

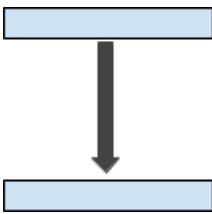
3. Understanding the systemic effects of an authoritarian power structure

In the first part, I presented examples illustrating the non-respect of essential limits by different types of organizations and structures, as a consequence of a functioning that resists critical feedback. In the second part, we have just seen that the reaction consisting in refusing verticality, which is assimilated to hierarchy, and in giving a general positive value to horizontality, has not provided a consistent alternative. Now, if a problem seems insoluble, there is a good chance that it has been badly posed. We will therefore follow Endenburg in another way of formulating it.

In a way that cuts across any organizational form or political ideology, Endenburg¹² draws attention to a basic relationship pattern that is so pervasive in our civilization that it is almost unnoticed, the master-servant relationship. He describes this relationship structurally as a "linear descending hierarchy". It is the basis of all dominant/dominated relationships and obedience as a social norm. The recurrence of this pattern is clearly apparent in a line of command, such as can be imagined for example in the army, where each soldier is commanded by a non-commissioned officer, who is then commanded by another, and so on up to the supreme commander. On the scale of a state, this pattern is typical of an authoritarian government: a superior authority (whatever the origin of its legitimacy) is in a position to impose its decisions unilaterally on the population, without being controlled itself. Considered in the context of a work organization, this pattern applies to the subordination relationship between employer and employee, but also between principal and subcontractor, and more broadly in any contractual business relationship in which one party is dependent on the other (for example, a dairy farmer towards an agri-food firm). This top-down linear hierarchy can be identified in many other examples.

I would like to draw your attention to one point: this diagram does not attempt to describe either a way of relating or a management style, described as "authoritarian". A hierarchical superior can be quite friendly with his subordinates on a daily basis, or even quite responsive in the day-to-day organization of work, but this does not change the fact that he makes the important decisions without them - for example, what targets the subordinates should meet, and who will receive what bonus at the end of the year.

¹² Endenburg, idem, p.31

Relation pattern diagram:	The top down linear hierarchy
	The master gives orders to the servant

The value of Endenburg's engineering perspective is that it allows us to unravel the social mechanics of the exercise of power, without being distracted by appearances and discourses. Of course, there are differences between the social forms I have cited. They are situated in a larger context that has variable effects, so that there is no "pure form" of the top down linear hierarchy in reality. But for Endenburg, there are indeed common systemic effects induced by this elementary pattern of power relations, in all contexts and at different scales: e.g., employee/boss, firm/state, state/international financial markets...

A first characteristic is that this pattern of relationship is not *reflexive*. The master's point of view is imposed on the servant. In his great goodness, the master may ask the servant for his opinion, but he alone decides, without having to explain whether or not this opinion is actually taken into account. On his side, the servant also has his own point of view, his own experience, and will not necessarily understand nor execute the order received as his master wanted.

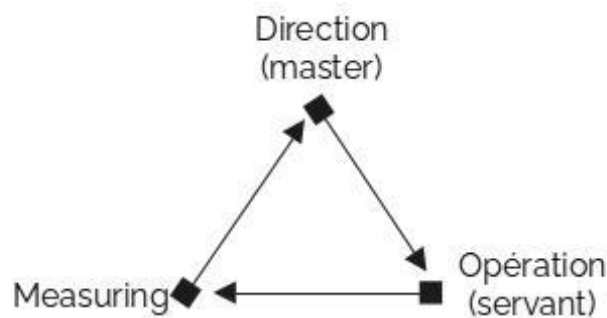
This gap tends to gradually increase *polarization* between the two positions. The dissatisfied master takes decisions to reinforce his control: more rules, more sanctions, etc. The servant, on the other hand, has less and less autonomy in his work: he must constantly show signs of his obedience and compliance with the rules.¹³ Polarization can lead to violence and exclusion.

For Endenburg, these relationships of domination necessarily result in a process of ossification of the organization. Positions become rigid. Power relations are the norm. Collective inertia prevents adaptation. The balance remains precarious because reality is always unpredictable, in spite of all the measures taken to control it. Any real questioning is however prevented.

Lack of reflexivity, polarization and ossification: any linear hierarchical relationship tends inevitably to deteriorate: the "master" may have an interest in transforming it into a circular, cybernetic relationship, completing it with a measurement function. In a

¹³ A limiting tendency to polarization, which is not mentioned by Endenburg, can be seen in the mechanism which leads the servant to internalize the master's point of view, to identify with him. This allows him to want to act and think as the master wants him to act and think. But this type of psychological mechanism is a secondary adaptation, not the cause of the master-servant relationship.

company, this means, for example, establishing tools for evaluating customer satisfaction, or a production quality control process, periodic accounting audits, a social climate barometer, etc.



Circular cybernetic structure, in its autocratic version ¹⁴

This evaluation allows the boss or political leader to access more detailed information about the collective activity. Without it, the command structure he or she leads inherently discourages the upward flow of information. If you risk negative consequences, you would probably prefer not to escalate problems.

But does this lead to a process of self-regulation and thus avoid polarization and ossification? For Endenburg, the answer is no: certainly, efficiency will be better, but the dynamics of the master/servant relationship remain, because there is no reciprocity. The master retains unquestionable power to direct according to his own will. A boss can even decide to give more autonomy to his employees if he wants to, inspired by the Liberation Management. This does not change the power structure: *"the dominant way of making decisions remains authoritarian. In the management-operations-measurement circle, the 'management' function is still that of the traditional boss, to whom the 'operations' and 'measurement' functions are subordinated."*¹⁵

The analysis of these two variants of the same pattern of relationships (with or without measurement) allows us to understand how self-regulation is formally prevented in social structures of this type. Yet these structures are at the heart of the organization of today's society. Only informal relationships allow for their manifestation to be tempered. For example, the head of a small company will probably be much closer to his employees and therefore more sensitive to their needs than a megalomaniac billionaire CEO. But the basic rule of power, based on the legal rights arising from ownership of a business corporation, is the same in both cases. If the former's company is successful because of its ability to innovate, the latter is likely to buy it out and thus become its owner. Everything that is built up informally remains fragile and needs to be extended by a change in the formal rules in order to survive. At the same time, it is

¹⁴ Endenburg, 1998, p.37

¹⁵ Endenburg, 1998, p.38

useful to keep the flexibility and the adaptation that the informal practices allows. The sociocratic method of governance seeks to reconcile the two aspects, which distinguishes it from all managerial approaches that advocate change built on the will and vision of leaders, leaving the legal framework unchanged.

4. Integrating organic circular processes into the governance of organizations

From the beginning of this article, I have been talking about the problem of not taking feedback into account and therefore the tendency of organizations to infringe ecological and human limits. You may think that this is a form of biological inevitability for the human species, that we are unable to limit ourselves because of physiological mechanisms:

- that force us to live in relationships of domination, like other social species;
- and that push us to acquire more technological power to dominate the matter as well.

In short, the human species could only be the powerless spectator of a natural selection process in which it has become a major disruptive agent, in this Anthropocene era (instead of meteorites and volcanoes in other geological eras of the Earth's history).

To invalidate this pessimistic view of the human species, which is based on unproven assumptions, all that is needed is one counterexample. Indeed, if it turns out that this situation is not universal, then it has social and cultural causes - which could therefore be changed. History and anthropology provide us with many counterexamples, even if these can be invalidated by all sorts of interpretations to maintain the prior belief¹⁶. On the other hand, the naturalness of domination in human societies is unquestionably refuted when we can show through experience the concrete possibility of taking entire communities, made up of "normal people", out of this paradigm, and establishing another one that is operational and perennial. That is the challenge!

Sociocracy is not a new paradigm by itself, but it could be an important catalyst. A first asset is the possibility to start experimenting with it on a small scale, with all kinds of existing organizations or collective projects in the process of being created as a starting point. It can also be discovered over a limited period of time as a methodology to help solve a collective problem (on the condition of being guided by a qualified facilitator or consultant). Indeed, living a stimulating collective experience can free the imagination and open the field of possibilities much more deeply than reading an article like this one.

¹⁶ *The Dawn of Everything* exposes how European societies were challenged by indigenous criticism following the onset of colonization in the Americas. This critique was partially integrated into the anti-absolutist thinking of the Enlightenment, and then its origin was obscured.

A second advantage is that sociocratic governance is an approach that has been applied concretely since the beginning of its development, and that has also proven to be able to last and to accompany changes. 50 years after the beginning of its transformation, Endenburg Elektrotechniek is still operating in this way, long after Gerard Endenburg has retired. The analysis of this experience has been published in an international scientific journal¹⁷. This method of governance has also been successful outside the specific context of the Netherlands. Several studies have reported on it¹⁸, and in particular, in the French context, in a chapter of a collective work to be published in 2023, to which I contributed alongside two other researchers.¹⁹ The Sociocracy For All movement has published numerous case studies and video presentations from an annual online conference. You may also be interested to learn about the sociocratic experience of a network of tens of thousands of [children in India, organized into neighborhood parliaments](#).

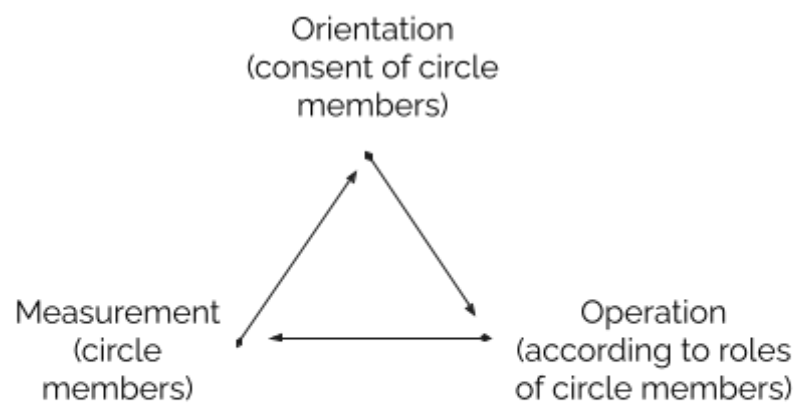
The purpose of this article is not to explain how to implement a sociocratic governance, but how this method is a relevant resource to think about a strategy of social transformation able to respond to ecological challenges. I will therefore return to the systemic problem of self-regulation explored in part 3. Endenburg brings a key distinction to characterize the type of social functioning that sociocratic governance allows to introduce. It is to go beyond the type of circular process represented above, which remains quite close to the mechanical metaphor of a thermostat heating system: one entity sets the desired temperature (direction), one entity produces heat (operation), and one entity controls the temperature reached (measurement). In a similar way, in classical power structures, management controls production, taking into account the measurement of results. But in this system, there is nothing to allow the performers to question the management's objectives. For example, the objectives set can lead to the production teams crossing their limits, if management does not measure and pay attention to this parameter. Thus, at the macroeconomic level, the assumption made since the beginning of the industrial revolution that "natural resources" were freely available and in indefinite quantities, has allowed the pursuit of a global growth objective without taking into account the environment, considered as a negligible "externality" of the economic system.

¹⁷ Romme, "Domination, Self-determination and Circular Organizing," *Organization Studies*, 20/05, pp. 801-831, 1999. The author is a researcher in management science at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands.

¹⁸ Romme and Endenburg, "Construction Principles and Design Rules in the Case of Circular Design," *Organization Science* 17(2), pp. 287-297, 2006. This study analyzes the conditions for successful implementation of sociocratic governance.

¹⁹ Anne Carbonnel, Senior Lecturer in Management Sciences at the University of Lorraine and Jacqueline de Bony, sociologist at the CNRS who has extensively studied the specificities of social life in the Netherlands. The book in question is about social innovations and will soon be published by the Reims University Press (EPURE).

The self-regulation of living systems is also based on circular cybernetic processes, but organic rather than mechanical. It is this type of process that Endenburg is interested in, *"in which each part represents the whole (...) In the organic version of the circular cybernetic structure, no part can be separated as absolutely independent."*²⁰ In this context, there are only interdependent relationships and any isolated structure implementing linear master > servant power becomes impossible. In political terms, it is a matter of setting up self-government. On a small scale, this self-governance is based on a particular decision-making place, the sociocratic circle, which is the size of a team. The organization is composed of a set of articulated circles. Each circle has a specific aim that contributes to the overall mission of the organization. The function of the circle is to ensure collective self-regulation. The diagram below introduces a fundamental difference with the previous one: the basic functions are the same, but there is no longer a break between the people who deal with them.



Sociocratic process of collective self-regulation: the feedback loop, in its organic version
(adapted from Endenburg, 1998, p. 73)

All members of a sociocratic circle are involved at the same time in the direction (orientation), in the implementation (operation) and in the evaluation (Measurement). There is no longer a difference in status between decision-makers, operators and controllers. The functioning of the circle prevents the supremacy of one over the other, so as not to hinder a continuous mutual influence.

But if everyone had to take care of everything, we would lose a lot of efficiency. When the operational coordination of activities requires some form of command, this practical function can be retained. It is therefore not necessary to eliminate some management levels at all costs in order to "flatten" the hierarchy. What disappears is the decision-making power of direction, of orientation, usually associated with the role of a manager. Or more precisely, this power does not disappear, but it belongs from

²⁰ Endenburg, 1998, p.39

now on to the entire circle as well as to each of its members, in a non-separated way. It is therefore the circle that delegates various mandates, operational roles, to its manager as well as to its other members, and controls their implementation. If a person feels that the manager is abusing his or her power, policies decided by the circle represent a legitimate basis for refusing to obey. Furthermore, the manager no longer has the power to arbitrarily punish those who resist his or her domination. Finally, the perceived problem can be put on the agenda of a circle meeting by any member: the manager is not in a position to lead the meeting, he is a simple participant, and he will have to wait his turn to speak. Therefore, he will not prevent the expression of views other than his own! And if he lobbies to abolish or manipulate the circle meetings for his own benefit, he can be removed from his role. So you see that the sociocratic method does not advocate abolishing command roles, but by limiting them to their operational utility and by putting them under the collective authority of the circle, it profoundly changes their nature. The power of the master becomes the power of every team member to act in the service of the collective project.

To use a simple metaphor: a group of travelers decides in a circle where they will go, and also decides who will drive the vehicle. So there is no power of subordination between the driver and the passengers, even if only one person is actually driving, because all have agreed to the destination and the driver's choice. These decisions are also reviewable by the group, when it is gathered in a circle, not while the car is at 130 km/h on the highway! We stop at a rest area if necessary to discuss a change of destination or to replace the driver who is tired. This sounds simple, but in practice we are so used to the confusion of legislative power (direction) and executive power (operation)... Questioning the "verticality" of power leads many groups to the opposite excess, which is to take all power away from the "leader" and hand it over in bulk to a group of people with an equal responsibility. This means that everyone is supposed to hold the steering wheel of the car, if not permanently, at least in turn, to make sure that no one takes advantage of it to "take power" and hijack the vehicle to his or her preferred destination! Personally, I don't want to embark on this kind of collective journey, where leadership qualities (such as initiative, determination, anticipation) are subject to self-censorship, or are a source of suspicion and negative projections.

Opening

It is not possible to conclude here, as many important questions remain unanswered, for example, the construction of successive articulations from the self-regulation of a team via the circle, to that of an organization made up of many teams, and then to that of a society made up of a large number of individuals and organizations. Each scale of social life has its specificities, but perceiving them as systems gives us similar points of support to understand and transform their dynamics and structures.

Whether you are already a practitioner of sociocratic governance or you are new to the subject, I imagine that this article may raise many important questions. If this is your

case, then I will not have wasted my time!

Indeed, the sense of urgency is well-founded as far as the ecological crisis is concerned, and must push us to action. However, the renunciation to think collectively about social transformation condemns us to reproduce again and again action strategies that miss their goal. Yet the challenge is not only to "do something" to feel better - even if this is preferable to denial, cynicism or depression... The challenge is to put all the chances on our side so that our collective commitment to the "ecological transition" will produce coherent results in an efficient way (i.e. respecting the limits of available resources). This begins with an adequate way of posing the problem. Then, if we find that our efforts are not taking us in the right direction and at a sufficient speed, it is important to:

- to stop and reorient ourselves, revising our objectives and means in light of the experience gained and measurable results ;
- then make a decision to return to action.

This reflective pause leading to renew and evolve our action can take shape on a collective scale in the framework of sociocratic governance. I invite you to experience it, i.e. to enter into this transformation of your way of taking part in the social organizing, - with prior recognition of the necessity of an organic self-regulation, within the tolerance limits of the Earth system. I would also be interested in receiving your comments and questions raised by this article, which could stimulate me to write a second one!

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This text expresses the personal reflection of the author, it does not commit the French Center for Sociocracy nor its members.

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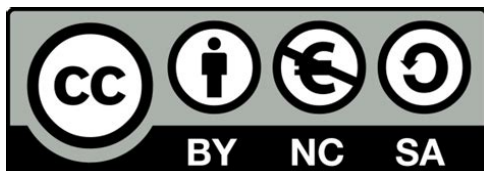
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