Sociocracy, Natural Living Systems, and Emergent Organizational Design

Pamela Boyce Simms
“That’s good enough to try,” and “It’s good enough for experimentation,” are phrases often heard in organizations that use Quaker process-derived, sociocratic governance and decision-making. “Good enough” [after much discernment] reflects the understanding that predict-and-control organizational strategic planning isn’t relevant anymore as we move deeper into the groundless uncertainty of an uncharted climate-changed future.

Organizations and movements that want to be authentically relevant vehicles for social change during the kaleidoscopic times in which we live, need to “unlearn” linear, inflexible approaches to
governance. They will need to become adaptive organisms that can foster true innovation. They must commit to dynamic, emergent transformation in order to ride the wave of perpetually accelerating climate disruption. Sociocracy, a dynamic whole systems set of design principles that foster “power with,” rather than “power-over” organizational governance,” creates that space. Equivalence, transparency, and efficacy are core tenets.

The QEW African Diaspora Earthcare Coalition (ADC) adopted, gave sociocracy a successful trial run in several of its projects, and conducted two sociocracy training sessions over the past year and a half. Coalition participants and partners —especially the Plant Medicine Project and Community Supported Enlightenment (CSE) Network— will undergo another round of trainings in January, and are poised to more thoroughly integrate sociocratic design principles this spring.

(f)Friends from Chester Friends Meeting, Chester, PA, Perry City Friends Meeting in the Finger Lakes Region of New York, Austin Friends Meeting, TX, and Broadmeads Meeting, Toledo Ohio, all of whom grow medicinal herbs for the Diaspora Coalition’s (ADC) Plant Medicine Project, will participate in online sociocracy immersion workshops based on the seminal work of Dutch Quaker peacemaker, Kees Boeke. In the mid-20th century Boeke formulated and was the first to implement sociocracy as a way to adapt Quaker egalitarianism in a secular setting.

**Sociocracy, Quaker Process, and Living Systems Biomimicry**

The confluence of Quaker process, natural living systems dynamics, and general systems theory shaped Sociocracy into the more recent iteration formulated by Gerard Endenburg, one of Kees Boeke’s students.

Biomimicry, an approach to innovation that emulates patterns in natural living systems, is a primary goal of the ADC’s Plant Medicine Project. The Diaspora Coalition’s sociocratic structure and process is designed to replicate closed-loop regenerative living systems even as it creates a space for people to build environmental resilience through direct engagement with medicinal plants.

In sociocratic spaces, interdependent, semi-autonomous nested circles function as specialized working groups —ecosystems unto themselves. Circles are organized like the fractal patterns in nature.

It is therefore fitting that the governance design and processes of the ADC Plant Medicine Project and it’s partnered Community Supported Enlightenment (CSE) Network are guided by feedback loops and circular information flows through a "rounds process" that mirrors natural living systems. The sociocratic rounds process ensures that each individual is heard, has genuine impact, and can practice deep listening skills with the knowledge that they’ll have an opportunity to speak their truth.

A frequent reference made in ADC sociocracy trainings is to the resonance between our culture-building aim and the natural self-organizing of mycelium—a vast underground nodal fungal network that undergirds forest floors which span the globe. Mycelial networks have been dubbed the nervous system of forests. Visual images of double-linked sociocratic circles, interwoven mycelial mats, and the interconnected filigree neural pathways in the human nervous system are strikingly similar.

Sociocratic organizations are optimally effective when they mimic, mycelia’s networked systems of feedback loops that sense and moderate both local and broader environments to achieve balanced ecological functioning.

**Sociocracy is a “Next Step”**

Global society is on an ecologically self-sabotaging course because the meaning we make of the world is distorted by the illusion of disconnection and duality. We intellectually understand and articulate that the nature of reality is unity and oneness. Yet de facto, people feel cut off from nature, from each other, and from any true understanding of themselves. Whether explicit or more invisibly implicit, this dualistic disconnection translates into hierarchical dominance by the “weighty,”
power-and-control dynamics, competition, and hyper-individualism at every scale in the organizations and networks we create.

Sociocratic governance generates an aerated, egalitarian safe space for innovative individual self-expression and organizational evolution. Objections and tensions that arise are cherished and explored as the “growing edge” at which an organization learns its most profound lessons. Rather than preserving the status quo, sociocracy builds a culture that intentionally encourages the emergence of the unexpected, and fosters universally equivalent agency.

Universal is the keyword. Mythological democracy entrusts power to the “demos,” —to the population as a political unit, absent of an authentic shared understanding of everyone’s priorities and issues. In a democracy, the majority can summarily marginalize the minority in decision-making. Factionalization, competition among cliquish alliances, and fragmentation ensue, compromising both harmony and efficacy.

Conversely, sociocracy distributes universal authority and vests power in the “socius,” —the people who interact in communities, and who share goals and values. Friends and colleagues make policies and decisions in deep-listening-consultation with one another. Each person’s needs are factored into decision-making in the context of overall organizational wellbeing. Consent-based sociocracy is often heralded as the “next step” in the evolution of democracy.

This is the nutritive, sociocratic, fully participatory culture that the QEW African Diaspora Coalition Plant Medicine and Community Supported Enlightenment (CSE) networks seek to deepen. Our mission is to swell the ranks of a joyous, robust, resilient remnant.