

The Paths of Authority: From the Unconscious to the Transcendental...

Intervention at the Arab University of Jerusalem.

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"Nothing can be taught to others. They can only be helped in their discovery". Galileo

Since the School of Human Relations, numerous studies have referred to Organizational Development as an approach in the understanding of men and systems to which they belong. However, as consultants at Praxis International and at the International Forum of Social Innovation, our activity is closer to an approach of organizations in terms of **Institutional Transformation (I.T.)** than Organizational Development (**O.D.**).

Institutional Transformation differs from Organizational Development in the sense that its goal is to take into account the unconscious and its expression, whenever possible. As consultants, we try to detect or interpret the unconscious processes in institutions. In this perspective, consultants focus their attention on the exercise of authority, leadership and transformation within the institutions.

Our practice as consultants in Praxis International (through our activity as Advisers in Leadership) and in the International Forum for Social Innovation (through the organization of "learning from experience" conferences) is centered on a principle: **the revealed unconscious, when worked out, can be a resource which opens and transforms blocked situations**. To illustrate this, we would like to recall our last conference in East Jerusalem.

The International Forum for Social Innovation (Paris, France), together with Al-Quds University (the Arab University of East Jerusalem), devised, prepared and organized and under the authority of David Gutmann, the first international Palestinian conference entitled "Leadership, Innovation and Transformation". This conference took place in one of the schools of Al-Quds University from the 14th to the 19th of July 1996.

In the complex and moving context of the Middle-East, questions concerning boundaries, identities and relationship are at the core of the life of each individual and each social group's life. Surely, the conference would "resonate" with its environment...

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The Methodology.

We will briefly describe the content of conferences such as "Leadership, Innovation and Transformation".

In the first place, the conference is an **institution**, just like a firm, an association or a football team; with the difference that it is clearly defined within time limits, that is, it is temporary. In the second place, it is a **learning from experience** institution; the learning method is centered on exploration and interpretation of experience while it is happening, in the *here and now*, by the participants of the conference.

On the experiential field of the conference, participants go through situations they have met within the organizations they usually belong to, in which they must exercise their authority and leadership as well as their capacities of innovation and transformation.

Thus, they can work out the political, unconscious and spiritual material which constitutes the essence of institutions, and better understand what is at stake in an intellectual or even affective way.

Reveal the Unconscious in order to Transform the Conscious.

During these conferences, the consultants are particularly aware of the **political dimension** (what is at stake in terms of balance of power, rules, behaviors,...), the **unconscious dimension** (each person's mental image of the institution, marked by his or her fantasy about others, power, institutions,...) and the **spiritual dimension** (the belief or faith in the institution, which has something to do with the transcendental) of the temporary institution. The issue is to reveal some of the individual or collective barriers which limit social innovation.

Besides management (which includes conference administration), the conference's staff members, besides intervene as consultants during the sessions. While it is taking place, the consultants set up working hypotheses concerning the political, the unconscious or the spiritual material which is at work. Often, such working hypotheses are focused on psychological blocks, resistances, fears they have observed in the group.

One of the basic assumptions in these conferences is that the collective revelation and expression of resistances is a way of transforming the institution. Therefore, to discuss and debate about these resistances is a way to work them out, to go beyond them, and transform them.

Respect the Boundaries in order to Transform them into Resources.

A strict principle on which are based these conferences is the respect for space, time and task boundaries. That involves a strict schedule: each conference offers a frame where

boundaries are continuously clarified and serve as a support for the interpretation of actual experiences. During the conference, several types of sessions are set up (Large Study Groups, Small Study Groups,...) according to a strictly defined schedule

These groups can deal either with the limits worked out during the conference, or the limits separating individuals and systems, social groups and territorial entities. The two may be similar. In terms of transformation, it is necessary that "**barricades**", which are impermeable, become "**barriers, borders, boundaries**", which can be progressively more permeable. **Institutional transformation** might be: moving from a closed conception of the limit ("the barricade") to a more open conception ("the boundary"). It carries the idea that a boundary marks both a rupture **and** a passage; without boundary, there is no differentiation, but also no transaction.

The words "boundaries" (which contains "bind", the link), "borders", "barriers", "barricades" form a progression expressing from one word to another a growing demarcation. In terms of transformation, it is necessary that "barricades" become "barriers, borders, boundaries".

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A Conference in East Jerusalem.

The conference at Al-Quds University in July 1996 took place in East Jerusalem —a city which stands for a symbol of all religious conflicts in the Middle-East— while relations between Israelis and Palestinians had suddenly worsened (Rabin's assassination in 1995, the election of a pro-Likud Government in Spring 1996).

The main issue for the participants was to understand their place in the transition process from an Israeli authority to a Palestinian Authority.

The conference was meant to help members understand the transformations that should accompany the recent political evolutions in the Middle-East.

Tasks such as instituting borders, creating territories, building up a democracy, building roads, cities, and moving populations are important. But it raises fears, anxiety and obvious resistances. Such transformations request an evolution in habits, mentalities, which was the main issue of the conference.

Of the 36 participants (the maximum allowed), 28 were Palestinians (one of them originally European), 6 were Israelis (three Jews and three Arabs — two Muslims and one Christian) and two other Europeans (a French and a Belgian). The staff was composed of 8 members of different nationalities, religions and culture. Members came from the Palestinian Authority, from the United States, from France, from India, and from Israel. Along with Islam, almost all Judeo-Christian religions were represented. The director was a Jewish European (French).

It is difficult to recount the actual rich content of the conference. However, some situations deserve description, as well as the main working hypotheses presented by the consultants.

During one of the first events of the conference, for example (the Small Study Group), the group elected a chairman; someone who would moderate the discussion. The consultant noticed that the person chosen was the only Jewish Israeli in the group (which was composed of Palestinians, except the consultant). The consultant was surprised. Was this situation a sign that for Palestinians, imagining themselves in a role other than dominated by

Israelis was difficult? Recounted here, this interpretation seems extensive. But in the *here and now*, to formulate publicly the working hypothesis is a way to give birth to a debate, sometimes rough —or, on the contrary, to generate encounters. In the best cases, such a practice can reveal habits, prejudices, defensive attitudes, fears, anguish,... All elements that can inhibit the individual in his relationship with others, and which are resistances in the social innovation process.

The Impossible Transaction.

Another situation met during the conference enabled the consultants to put forward an important working hypothesis and therefore begin to understand what was at stake in the *here and now*. The interpretation was based on the following observation: the staff had great difficulties in persuading the participants to respect the conference's time, space and task boundaries.

The external borders were acutely present in this conference since numerous Palestinians (in addition to the actual thirty six participants) had been forbidden to enter Jerusalem and couldn't participate in the conference; others were stopped at the border (the "green line") and could not meet in Jerusalem.

During the conference, the staff was confronted with a high number of people being absent or late. Some participants left the conference at the very beginning, never coming back or coming back a few days later. Other participants attended only a few sessions. Other participants came late to the events.

Another type of border was defined in relation to the primary task of the institution. For example, a woman came one day with her child: it was difficult for the staff to make clear to the members, individually or collectively, that she had forced a border.

Thus, the staff noticed on several occasions that it was difficult for the members to respect the limits of space, time and task of the conference. The consultants presented a working hypothesis: the resistance to the respect of limits (borders) is the expression of a larger resistance to the respect of borders in the Middle-East.

The consultants used the following observation: the border as a limit or a separation has been is contested since the creation of Israel. An agreement on this matter between Israelis and Palestinians seems impossible, on a political point of view, but also on an unconscious point of view. The refusal or repression of the border as a limit were perceptible at numerous moments during the conference.

Can this type of hypothesis be accurate? One can obviously suggest as an explanation to absenteeism or lateness, the cultural background of the Middle-East. However, one must keep in mind that such working hypotheses are put forward in the *here and now* (when situations are occurring) and that a public discussion about them can begin, bringing up other elements to work on, and so on. Progressively, by means of successive interpretations, we can hope that some "hidden elements"¹ of the institution will be revealed. Afterwards, the work of the staff can be analysed in this way: it was interesting to work on the notion of "borders" since it is a conflictual issue in the Middle-East.

¹ René Girard wrote [Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde](#) (literally, "[About Things Hidden Since the Origins of the World](#)"), in which he defends the idea that the "scapegoat" phenomenon is constant and universal, in human groups. In our sense, the "hidden elements" are the constant (anthropological) elements of all institutions. They are hidden to those who don't want to see them.

The most striking revelation was the difficulty for the participants to acknowledge the border as a **place of transaction**, of exchange, of commerce. One situation enabled to reveal this point: the two Palestinians of the staff (the administrators) were questioned by the members. This questioning was very strong since members came to the two administrators and asked them why they accepted to "serve" such a staff, composed of individuals coming from primitive people. For a better understanding of this example, let us recall that one of the consultants of the staff was an Afro-American and another, an Indian. Also, in all our conferences, just as in all institutions (firms for example), the administrator's role is quite unrewarding: he or she is often considered as a servant. Thus the two Palestinian administrators were seen as servants of the other staff members, who were largely Western.

The participants' projections on the staff gave rise to the following working hypothesis: the staff was perceived as a strongly hierarchical group (director, consultants, administrators), as if a common project were unthinkable, whereas the work of the staff, composed of different nationalities, cultures and religions, was to be understood as the result of cooperation. We (the International Forum for Social Innovation) believe that the primary task of an institution can only be fulfilled if each person carries out his or her role. Ideally, "managers/managed" relations have to be structured in view of the institution's primary task and cannot be reduced to hierarchical links.

In the temporary learning institution of the conference, one of the working hypotheses put forward by the consultants was that the Palestinian members were reluctant to accept any cooperation other than between themselves, as if Palestinians could only count on themselves. To take on the idea of boundary, it appeared to the staff that differences of nationality or religion were uncrossable borders ("barricades" or "barriers") for the Palestinians. But a boundary is also a place of transaction, and possibly cooperation (between countries, for example). This transaction is both a link (since a transaction links two systems together) and a form of communication by exchange. It is probably the reason why it is so difficult to accept.

A "Prison in the Mind".

The observation of the identity games in the conference (and in its environment) revealed an image of two societies coming face to face in a mirror-like situation. Let us develop this working hypothesis...

On both sides, everything was happening in a mental state which fueled a mutual exclusion. This mental state was structured by a closed representation of oneself and of the society one belonged to. The image which came to us was confinement. Each person, whether Israeli or Palestinian, confronted the other with a confined mood. On the Palestinian side, it was a "Prison in the Mind"; on the Israeli side, it was a "Ghetto in the mind".

The working hypothesis, called "Prison in the Mind", was formulated by the staff during the conference while trying to understand the behavior of participants who had been in the Israeli prisons for a long time. These participants lived as if they were constantly constrained by hostile authorities (embodied by the staff or other participants). Were they not acting as if prison remained within them?

It appeared to us that the "Prison in the Mind" could be a good metaphor for the unconscious representation of life for the Palestinians: in general, prison is a closed place, where existence is organized around one sex, as if only part of life were possible. In Palestine, the "Prison" exists because of the curfew, the temporary closing of territories, the walls and the barbed wire, all elements which achieve the confinement of a people in the Palestinians' daily

life. Observing what was happening during the conference, the staff thought that Palestinians had a "Prison in the Mind".

Afterwards it appeared to us that, confronted with this representation, the Israelis opposed maybe another type of confinement: we called it the "Ghetto in the Mind", as if images from the Jewish people's history confronted the Palestinians'. The Ghetto stands in a surviving dimension, as people desperately try to stay alive.

Thus, each Middle-Eastern participant opposed the other, and him/herself, with a confined state of mind. These strongly internalized representations had to be worked out during the conference.

Let us note that these two types of confinement are not complementary. Somehow, they reproduce the political and human situation in the Middle-East, which was blocked until the Oslo agreements. These agreements initiated an actual transformation (a concrete, noticeable one). But transformation "in the mind" has been more uncertain, as showed by Rabin's assassination: some are firmly opposed to the peace process, on the Jewish side as well as on the Arab side.

Once these representations revealed, how could the staff work them out? How does one engage a transformation process? How does one leave confinement?

During the conference, the image of a tunnel appeared as a way out of a confinement. The participants worked on this image. How does one escape from a prison? From the ghetto? Can a tunnel be the answer? The tunnel, just like the one in Jerusalem, was another cause of fight between Jews and Arabs in September 1996.

But the tunnel does not allow two parties to meet; it is not a Forum, a place of discussion, of exchange; it is a "closed exit". The tunnel places someone directly on the other side, on the adverse side... The tunnel is also a good metaphor for the inevitability of fate. The invocation of fate enables us to act without any responsibility... without any authority.

The task of the staff was to detect these resistances (the "Images in the Mind") and to reveal them in order to help the participants in taking their own authority, so as to become co-authors of one transformation.

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The Advent of a Secular Society.

It was not easy to organize this conference in East Jerusalem. The major difficulties were financial. A European sponsor (Electricité de France) agreed to fund Al-Quds University. Without Electricité de France's help, it is likely that the conference would never have taken place. It did eventually... and under tough external conditions. Just after the May 1996 elections in Israel, which brought to power a Government hostile to the Oslo agreements, tension suddenly rose in the territories as Israelis closed the borders. Some Palestinian members of the staff, from Bethlehem to Ramalha, from Gaza to Jericho, were forced to give up their project of attending the conference due to the sealing of the territories. However, the maximum number of participants was eventually reached. This allowed us to overcome the most important obstacles.

During the conference, the staff's role was challenged several times by the participants. It is true that this type of contestation is very common in the conferences organized by the International Forum of Social Innovation and is an expression of the anxiety felt by the members. Anxiety is caused by the perspective of having to deal with the unknown, such as confronting other people first and, later, learning authority. This sort of challenge is used as a medium through which working hypotheses are expressed by the consultants.

During the Al-Quds University conference, the staff was once severely challenged by the participants. Two Palestinians, who had attended the first session on the first day, came back on the fourth day during the "Institutional Event"² and violently expressed their opposition to the staff. In doing so, they took the lead in an internal challenging movement. Their intervention shook up the other members who had been attending all the sessions on a daily basis. They had worked together and created solidarity. What surprised the staff was the way the challenge was personified by two Palestinians (who were employees of the University), who had not participated in all the events. The two men joined two other male participants. These four men were sitting together as if they formed a physical "front", thus breaking the initial circle of the room (an obvious association was made by the staff, recalling the "Islamic Front"). Going beyond this first observation, and remembering that the two men were actually chemists, the staff formulated the following working hypothesis: the two men came back in order to set a bomb in the temporary institution of the conference, in order to sabotage the current transformation process. This hypothesis was put forward and explored by the participants. Here again, the strong resonance between the conference's incidents and what was happening (the attacks which preceded the Israeli elections of May 1996) was a great discovery. *Thus, in formulating some working hypotheses (sometimes in a metaphoric way), we can help people to be conscious of what is really at stake in some situations.*

Women also played a great role in the conference's evolution. Let us take the case of this young student wearing a veil. On the first day, she hesitated before sitting down and asked a porter to indicate where she could sit. At the very end of the conference, she sat directly in front of the staff. Moreover, right after the conference, she gave the director a set of drawings she had made, which were representing her different mental states throughout the past six days. In several of them, she had portrayed herself without a veil.

One could say that part of the resistances expressed during the conference were worked out and possibly transformed. The conference eventually ended, and a party followed. The event was described in several articles (with photographs) in the Palestinian press. Moreover, a meeting between the International Forum for Social Innovation and some officials of the University was organized during subsequent days. These talks led to a future conference each year in five years time.

In October 1996, this decision was reconsidered by the authorities of the University, who decided not to organize the conference in 1997. We were surprised and concerned. By December 1996, this refusal appeared to be less certain. Today, the situation seems to be not so hopeless. At the same moment, in Hebron, Israeli and Palestinian authorities made new (fragile) contacts... While surveying the political, unconscious and spirital dimensions, this conference echoes its environment.

The toughening of the political situation in the Middle-East was an important element in the decision not to organize the conference in 1997. But we feel that what was at stake was much stronger and deeper, and uneasy to name. When we examine all the valid reasons for this refusal, are they not secondary? When we attempted to work on the reality of the

² The Institutional System Event sessions are designed to study the relations between members and staff who, in part, constitute the management of the Institutional System Event.

Palestinian society, its highly hierarchised clan structures appeared. This type of relationship was probably strengthened by the Israelo-Palestinian conflict. However, we pointed out the Palestinians' difficulties to locate and respect borders, as well as dealing with authority. The conference enabled the participants to explore the possibility of a "secular" society (in its etymological sense: "common"), the society of persons, men and women in equality. Such a society contrasts with the actual "theocratic" society which seems to be the reality of the Palestinian society, and is growing in Israel...

A Quest of the West?

This working hypothesis —the emergence of a secular society— was formulated six months after the conference, when some French members of the staff met (including the director). It enabled us to think about the meaning of our coming to Jerusalem. It is obvious that the idea of an emerging secular society appeals to us, for as Europeans we inherited the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment...

What was the staff searching for by coming to East Jerusalem? This coming is probably an expression of our fascination with Jerusalem, as Europeans. Jerusalem is a sacred land we would like to see secular. We would like to see a land where religious passions are pacified and... transformed. This place is a symbol of universal identity conflicts. It appeared to us as a privileged location for such a conference. In a way, we were there legitimizing our experience of conferences.... So when this experience is evoked, our excitement is still vivid and easy to understand.

Somehow, this conference symbolizes a meeting between the West and the East. With the heritage of the Age of Enlightenment and methods born with the psychoanalytic movement (whose inventor was an Viennese Jew), have we not planned to reconquer a sacred land, just like we did with the Crusades, a few hundred years ago? Western naïveté? If so, we accept the judgment. We also want to recall that in these conferences, the staff comes also with its own preconceptions. The staff's main task is to help the "pre-conceptions" become "pro-creation" within the temporary institution of the conference.

These questions show that one can make associations out of mere facts, images, fantasies. This progressively gives a meaning to some actions. This meaning is in no way the truth. But the sense elaborated in the *Here and Now* or afterwards can be a momentary "prerequisite" for the understanding of behaviors; especially when there are "hidden elements".

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Moreover, this conference enables us to say that working out the revealed part of the unconscious is the only way to fight against the traditional resistances —"Images in the Mind".

We think that during the conference in East Jerusalem, each participant was able to understand the dependency hold institutions have over individuals. Thus, perhaps they will start assuming their own authority.

Concerning the unconscious, when we succeed in revealing part of it, we break off some walls... but the collective unconscious, as a meta-system, gets the upper hand, and this requires more work on resistances, which will result in another phase of progression and

regression and so on...³ Acknowledging this perpetual cycle, we can use unconscious elements as resources in order to assist **Institutional Transformation** in Organizations.

Paris, December 1996.

³ See "The Transformation and Its Zig-Zags" in D. Gutmann, J. Ternier-David, C. Verrier, **Groups and Transformation**, Ubevidste Processer, Copenhagen, february 1995.

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