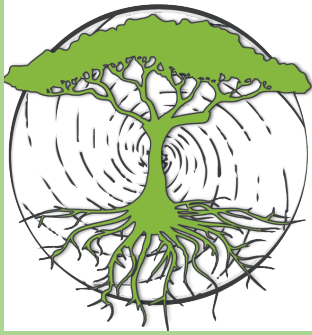


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Upcoming Issues, Themes, & Deadlines

#112	Learning from Our Mistakes, II	March 1
#113	Stocking Up	June 1
#114	Retrofit	September 1

Systems Thinking Parallels Permaculture & Sociocracy as Tools

Henny Frietas

THE OIL CRISIS LED THE US, Brazil, Sweden, and the United Kingdom into recession in the 70s. Yet, the economies of countries such as Japan and Germany (West Germany at the time) began to grow. It was the time of the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the defense of the environment. A significant number of women became heads of state, and the behavioral revolutions of the previous decade, such as the sexual liberation movement, continued to grow.

Many consider it to be the “age of individualism,” but what the 70s don’t tell is that during this period Bill Mollison and Gerard Endenburg began to experiment with different participatory approaches in agri(cultural) and social design environments. The first, an Australian researcher, author, scientist, teacher, and biologist, along with David Holmgren, developed the concept of permaculture. The second, a Dutch electrical engineer and entrepreneur, designed a methodology to put into practice the concept of sociocracy. He was directly influenced by Kees Boeke, a Dutch reformist educator.

Both Mollison and Endenburg worked with the notions of complex systems. Mollison and Holmgren were inspired by the idea of a forest as the model for agriculture in a smaller scale. From a simplified forest, the concepts of permaculture originated. Mollison and Holmgren considered that, in order to produce yields, a system should be designed from patterns to details, taking into account climate change as an unpredictable factor influencing the system directly. In sociocracy, Endenburg developed the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, where patterns are applied to different layers of abstraction in a system of dynamic governance. The patterns can be constantly adapted and combined to grow organizational structure. Here, the influential factor is the people.

In either case, the relationships established by observing these patterns tend to emerge through the self-organization and co-evolution of systems. The common aspects noted in both nature and society allows us to not only understand what is being observed, but also to analyze and design new patterns across diverse contexts and scales. The recognition of these patterns is a result of the application of the first principle of permaculture: “Observe and Interact.” It is considered the precursor of the design process.

In permaculture, the problem indicates the solution to the system itself. This so-called “disturbing factor” serves as an indicator that something is in imbalance and needs to be improved. In sociocracy, people bring the problem, or disturbing factor, up through tension (a place between the present reality and the place where it is intended to be) in order to seek resolution through consent. Consent occurs when there are no more objections to a proposal. In other words, when at the moment of discussion, no more improvements are foreseen.



Holma Folk High School in Sweden uses both permaculture and sociocracy. Photo by SOFA permaculture circle member, Andreas Jonsson.

Ecological indicators point to issues around energy flow, for example, or materials limits. For example, an indicator might show that it is either too watery or that fertilizer is missing. Social indicators reveal problems in the communication flow or problems related to distribution of power. This can include too little or too much autonomy.

Every Voice Matters!

By imitating existing patterns in nature, Ernst Gotsch, a Swiss farmer and researcher working in Latin America on models of agroforestry, says that there is no competition in syntropic agriculture. According to him, all beings—including humans, plants, and animals—work from cooperation and unconditional love, and each species performs complementary functions. Therefore, there are no pests in the system. Instead, there is the possibility of improvement for the good of the macro systems that replicate patterns in the microsystems, and vice versa. The function of humankind is, therefore, to act as a dynamizer to complexify the energy of life into the system in the most efficient way possible.

Following another permaculture principle: “Integrate rather than segregate,” the equivalent in sociocracy would be: “Every voice matters.” In order for all voices to be heard, every member of the organization performs complementary functions in order to achieve common goals. Be they “pioneer or emerging plants,” “secondary or climax trees,” belonging to “high, medium, or low stratification,” the distribution of roles in the organization will be determined by

the needs of the organization in which a governance system seeks to achieve solutions that create harmonious environments as well as productive businesses. Permaculture designs include macro and microsystems. In sociocracy, the parallel structures could be organizational circles that interact. The circles could include very specific groups (such as the departments of a company) to general ones that include a network of specific circles (microsystems), and the general circle that embraces the whole organization (macro system).

As well as defining the function that each person will assume within a certain sociocratic circle, it is important to identify who will be the persons carrying and bringing the information from one circle to the other. Those roles are called “the double link” in sociocracy. The double link facilitates the two-way flow of information and influences between the circles. That is, circles that make decisions that can impact or be affected by the voices of others can benefit from each other if they ensure that there are clear channels of communication between them. In permaculture, the edge effect demonstrates the parallel. When using the borders and the marginal elements, the interface between those elements is where the most important events happen. A classic example is the space where two ecosystems encounter each other to create a new system, like mangrove swamps. Here, the mangroves’ brackish water is the result of sea and river waters. When these elements combine, new elements are generated.

The search for constant improvement in agreements is necessary.

These are usually the most valid, diverse, and productive elements of the system.

Bill Mollison used to say that humankind has already achieved such a level of knowledge that perhaps there was no more need for further discoveries. Rather, we might seek to implement all the solutions for one entire century. But, according to him: “The tragic reality is that very few sustainable systems are designed or applied by those who hold power, and the reason for this is obvious and simple: to let people arrange their own food, energy, and shelter is to lose economic and political control over them.”

While in the 70s, over half the world’s population lived under repressive dictatorships, sociocracy was designed to distribute power amongst its associates through a circular model for governing. As a model of participatory governance, it requires continuous feedback sessions among the people involved in the process. The search for a constant improvement in agreements is necessary to develop actions with the purpose of taking healthy steps towards shared visions. If Bill Mollison were still alive, perhaps he would adopt sociocracy as the circular governance with such distributed power

structure he once envisioned! In his own words: “We should cease to look to power structures, hierarchical systems, or governments to help us, and devise ways to help ourselves.” Δ

This article was first published on the permaculture page for Sociocracy for All (sociocracyforall.org/permaculture/). The circle’s mission is to promote the understanding of sociocracy for permaculture networks.

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