Dialogue and the Critical Challenge of Governance

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In matters of governing, attention to dialogic process has never been more important. I say this because institutions of government – from local to global spheres – are losing the fundamental capacity to sustain viable order. The future of governing will essentially be the future of humankind, and it is within the process of dialogue that this future will be forged.

To appreciate the force of these assertions, it is first useful to touch on the pivotal place of dialogue in the creation of any form of governing. As people gather, so is a process of coordination or mutually adjusted action set in motion. Many see this process of self-organising as fundamental to the creation of human society. It is also a process of communication, both generating a language and relying on language as a means of coordinating. As mutually agreeable patterns of coordination are achieved, they also acquire moral weight. They become ways in which one *should* act, with means typically sought for their sustenance. The challenge of sustaining and protecting a way of life is essentially that of governance. Informally this could take the form of reminders and reprimands; even community gossip functions as a means of sustaining the informal order. It is with the creation of formal institutions to sustain and protect the moral order that we may speak of government.

In this sense, structures of government are much like other significant institutions – commercial, educational, military, and otherwise. They represent attempts to fix a form of life deemed optimal for achieving a given function. At least within the past century, many such organisations have drawn on the metaphor of the machine, with

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an emphasis on functional units, standardised procedures, instrumental communication, assessment, and top-down control. Government bureaucracies are exemplary, though many of these characteristics may be found from local to higher levels of government. Ideally, then, national government should function as a rationally structured and enduring institution.

Importantly, while the origins of our governmental institutions may be found in the process of dialogue, once the structures are in place, the originating process may wither. For citizens these structures provide a sense of security, stability, and safety. One wishes them to remain obdurate. Promises of their continuation are protected by constitutions, forms of law, and force of arms. Indeed, challenges to the legitimacy of such structures may be counted as treason. Thus, challenges to founding constitutions and legal precedents are few and changes fraught with conflict.

Government in a World of Uncontrollable Assembly

While structures of government are developed within particular socio-historical conditions, their adequacy across time and circumstance is moot (Applebaum 2020). Especially problematic is the adequacy of stabilised, functionally organised, and tradition-based governments in the global conditions of today. Here we must recognise the dramatic developments of the past century, now thrusting us into conditions of increasingly rapid, unpredictable, volatile, and potentially lethal change. Such conditions radically reduce the ordering capacities of any governmental institution. They spell the end to our reliance on such institutions to maintain the social/moral order.

To expand, consider alone the impact of innovations in communication technology. The emergence of the automobile, telephone, radio, and air transportation early last century, followed later by television, and mobile phones, represent a dramatic and unprecedented increment in the capacity for human interchange. The barriers of both time and geography gave way to unceasing opportunities to associate. The subsequent development of the internet and efficient computational technologies – along with ancillary websites, email, and social media – has enabled vast populations from around the world to communicate both continuously and instantaneously.

In principle, every interchange sets in motion a process of self-organising, variously extending, transforming, or subverting existing orders. Thus, within any dialogue lie the seeds of a new agenda, direction, value, goal, project, or innovation. Every conversation may be the origin of a new political movement, religion, cult, network, or conspiracy, along with newly hatching feelings of alienation, difference, or animosity. And for every emerging order, there are those who will resist, exploit, or attempt to destroy it.

In effect, the common beliefs and values that once supported stable institutions of government are not only eroding, but they are also being replaced by a vast sea of micro-orderings. As these micro-orderings emerge, conflict, and variously merge with each other, we approach a condition that is infinitely chaotic and simultaneously suffused with attempts to order – a continuous and dynamic condition of *chaordering*. While governments attempt to govern, direct, and assert controls, this continuous and globally extended process of micro-ordering cannot be contained. Structured institutions are both clumsy and slow; micro-ordering is instantaneous, continuously adapting, creative, and rhizomatic. Governments are over-extended, under-funded, and encumbered by resistance within and without. In effect, structured institutions of government are increasingly subverted in their attempts to sustain a civil society.

Dialogic Challenges to Future Well-Being

If it is through dialogic process that governments are erected, flounder, or fail, it is also to dialogue that we must turn for viable alternatives. Given the crippling of governmental power, the critical question becomes how dialogue can be employed to bring about *sustainable chaorder*. What are its potentials? What are the impediments? Dare we think that within the incessant and globally distributed micro-orderings lie potentials for global flourishing? While complex and profound in implication, glimpses into possible answers are also surfacing. Presently I see four significant domains of departure, areas in which attention to the positive potentials of dialogue may be – and are being – realised.

Enriching the Practices of Governance

Given the decline in the governing capacities of institutionalised government, the most promising alternatives would seem to be practices that contribute to coordinating the sea of coordinations. Such practices would reduce the ruptures and frictions inherent in the multiple micro-orderings, while enhancing the potentials of these orderings in contributing to the common good. The attempt would not be that of controlling the flows of meaning making but entering into the flows so as to positively inflect their direction. Effectively, this would be to set in motion dialogic micro-processes that serve the more general function of governance.

Significant movements in this direction now emerge in multiple locales. Here I would include, for example, developments in co-governance, collaborative governance, commons-based decision making, cooperative governance, participatory democracy, direct and deliberative democracy, dialogic policymaking, New Public Governance, public value co-creation, relational welfare, the relational state, inter-

active governance, decentered governance, shared governance, and multi-party collaboration among them. By governance, in this case, I would not only include practices nominally concerned with governing, but any practices that successfully bring divergent parties together to achieve greater public welfare. Illustrations and insights into the potentials of such movements are numerous, including for example, Ansell and Torfing (2016), Batory and Svensson (2019), Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), McGuire (2006), Osborne (2010), and Thomassen and Jensen (2021). The content of the present issue also offers detailed expositions. However, brief amplification of significant domains of application may be useful:

At local or communal levels of action, for example, I draw inspiration from Hilary Cottam's (2018) innovations in practices that enable communities to develop their own capabilities, thus compensating for the incapacities of public services. In community meetings, for example, inhabitants share their experiences, and develop networks to help each other find meaningful work, health supports, services for the elderly, and so on. In contrast, relational welfare advocates in Denmark attempt to replace the top-down organisation of public services by implementing collaborative relations with the communities they serve (Von Heimburg, Ness, and Storch 2021). For example, welfare agencies work with community members to help in supporting the needy in their communities. Through this collaboration, government services are more finely attuned to local needs. At the same time, it is important to underscore the value of ancillary initiatives contributing to dialogic-centred governance. To illustrate, Marilene Grandesso and her Brazilian colleagues have developed a practice of *integrative community therapy,* bringing residents together for **mutual support** (Grandesso 2020). Drawing from reservoirs of wisdom, experience, and understanding within the community, public meetings enable broad sharing on topics such as substance abuse, discrimination, and family violence.

On the regional level, collaborations bringing together public, private, and voluntary sectors of society are now becoming a major lever in the movement toward shared governing (cf. Haug and Baldersheim 2016; Schroeder and Dann 2019). Such collaborations have been successfully employed to protect the environment, boost regional economies, coordinate transportation systems, resolve disputes, and much more. One innovative and inspiring effort is the attempt of the Spanish province of Gipuzkoa to institute collaborative governance as its central governing process. In this effort, over 120 projects have been launched, with a major focus on such issues as climate change, minority employment, health, cybersecurity, and social tensions. In every case, the attempt is to increase the participation of the citizens in political deliberation, and to ensure that such deliberations are reflected in public policies.

In the context of national politics, one of the most promising signs of a shift toward governance, is represented in the emerging range of citizen assemblies. Here common citizens may deliberate on issues of common significance, with their resulting opinions and decisions entering government decision making. Now functioning in some 500 locales around the world, such assemblies – variously termed 'people's assemblies', 'citizens' assemblies', 'citizens' councils', and 'popular assemblies' – take many different forms. Many also function in local and urban settings. Most interesting, both in terms of its origins in the non-profit sector and the scope of its activities, is the Mehr Demokratie initiative. The German-based organisation has operated for over thirty years to generate and support citizen-based referenda and other direct democracy initiatives, with the ultimate aim of decentring policy making. Gradually, its focus of change has shifted to governance at the European Union level.

Because relations among nations are typically treated as if nation states were autonomous persons, we can also view international relationships through the lens of governance. In this vein, an organisation such as the United Nations functions as an institutionalised form of government. The challenge, then, is to open informal alliances for the greater good – a shift toward governance. Inspiring, for example, is the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, a collaboration of governments, movements, and individuals working towards a well-being economy and ecological well-being. More specifically, the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo) brings national and regional governments together to share expertise and policy practices. The driving concern of the alliance – now including New Zealand, Finland, Scotland, Iceland, and Wales – is the replacement of the prevailing goal of monetary wealth with that of human and environmental well-being. The governments work with both businesses and civil society to achieve these goals. Also at the international level, the potentials of people's assemblies are now being explored. Issues of sustainable development, social justice, and poverty occupied discussions in the first Global People's Assembly in 2022.

This glimpse into the copious efforts to coordinate multiple voices in the process of governance is both hopeful and innervating. However, the efficacy of such efforts ultimately depends on the form or quality of the dialogic process itself. We turn, then, to the challenge of designing dialogue.

Designing Dialogue

Political dialogues are often fraught with mutual criticism, blame, and derision. In democratic governments, competition among parties almost guarantees mutual acrimony (Moghaddam 2010). In public gatherings where political issues are at stake, dialogue often deteriorates, and rancour prevails. Practitioners working with dia-

logue-centred governance are aware of these dangers, and the elements of their practices are carefully considered. However, as Louise Phillips argued in her book, *The Promise of Dialogue* (2011), the vision of dialogue as an unquestioned good for achieving inclusive and democratic forms of life is unwarranted. As she demonstrates, power dynamics can be subtly at play even in the most congenial collaborations. We are invited, then, to view dialogic practices – their elements, forms, and potentials – as a focus of study, from which knowledge may be gleaned and shared.

Movements in this direction are indeed under way. As realised in such broadly successful practices as restorative justice (Wachtel, Costello, and Wachtel 2019) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005), forms of dialogue can be systematically developed, studied, and improved. Within the field of organisational studies, we thus find a movement toward *dialogic organisational development* (Bushe and Marshak 2015), specifically oriented to developing practices that bring people together to achieve particular ends. Innovation by design (Gaynor 2002) is perhaps the most widely known exemplar, but experiments now move in many directions (cf. Lipmanowicz and McCandless 2013; Kaner 2014). When dialogic practices in peace building (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009; Coleman, Deutsch, and Marcus 2014) and mediation (Monk and Winslade 2013) are added to the mix, one begins to see the enormous potentials of systematic study and global sharing of dialogic practices.

In the case of governance process, there are certain challenges at stake. Much needed are practices for building trust across otherwise competing or antagonistic enclaves. What forms of dialogue will enable us to move beyond a hermeneutics of suspicion? There is also the major question of decision making in a pluralist world. How is a unified decision to be derived from an incoherent multiplicity? What should be affirmed, what excluded? There is no principled means of judging among multiple proposals except by embracing criteria for which there are also alternatives. What dialogic practices will recognise the richness of the multiple voices, without reaching a final conclusion that will leave most of them silenced? Dialogic design and sharing are essential.

Developing Dialogic Skills

While forms of dialogic-based governance are numerous, they are also site-specific. They are developed to enhance the process of governing within circumscribed domains. At the same time, however, the intensive, globe-spanning process of conversation continues, and with it the continuous generation of difference, alienation, and antagonism. As conflict proliferates and intensifies, so is the success of dialogic-based governance impeded. In this context we must ask about the capacities of people in

the ordinary course of their daily lives to converse in ways that avoid, reduce, or dissolve differences. This is essentially to ask about the level of dialogic skill that people bring into their relations. Frequently noted in this case is the decline of conversational skills – variously resulting from immersion in television, social media, and the internet more generally (Turkle 2016). Much has also been said about the loss of civil discourse in political deliberations (Cohen 2023). But where are the contexts for acquiring the kinds of dialogic skills essential for capillary coordination? There is indeed a growing awareness – even at the international level – of the need for the *soft skills* of relating. Requisite programmes are infrequent. Public education would seem to be the more obvious direction for development. Ideally, such skills should figure prominently in the learning goals of our schools. This possibility raises the further question of dialogic scaffolds.

Transforming Dialogic Scaffolds

The qualities and directions of dialogue are many, and while their forms may be designed for specific purposes, many are shaped or curtailed by cultural tradition. In the case of public education, for example, the potentials for building dialogic skills are thwarted by traditions of testing and grading (Gergen and Gill 2020). Because these assessment techniques invite standardised curricula, both student learning and pedagogical practices are narrowed to test attainment. Further, students are set into competition, thus limiting mutual sharing and support. In effect, the assessment tradition serves as a scaffold for the shape of dialogue within public education, to the detriment of its potentials. As we have proposed, this scaffold can be transformed through the implementation of relationally based forms of evaluation. Alter the scaffold, and the direction of dialogue is turned.

The emphasis on cultural scaffolds is especially relevant to the challenge of governing. It is 'just natural' in many countries, for example, to organise political debates between candidates. While other forms of interchange could be designed, political debate in such countries is essentially 'our tradition,' and candidates who refuse may be sanctioned. In effect, the tradition serves as structural scaffold that favours a certain form of dialogue over others. It is also a dialogue that is often contentious and alienating; ambiguities and nuances are sacrificed, along with information on the many ways in which candidates might agree. As quickly recognised, however, the use of debate is closely related to the more general structuring of democratic government. If we presume a structure in which political parties compete for power, a scaffold is thus erected for mutual rancour, manipulation, and concealment. One may argue that it is precisely the failings of this structure that cry out for a shift toward governance processes. However, the major challenge lies in transforming the political structure itself.

Much the same arguments apply at the international level. The existing scaffold for international relations is that of competition, with each nation state primarily invested in its own well-being. The result is an all-against-all race for power, severely restraining the forms of dialogue and possibilities for collaboration (Hale, Held and Young 2014). In the meantime, the environment is destroyed, and mutual mistrust among nations precludes their sacrificing for global survival. Transformation in this structure is imperative; shifting the weight toward governance is only the beginning.

Conclusion

Centralised governments are losing their capacity for effectively ordering and serving society. At the same time, we move toward a world of broadly distributed and uncontrollable micro-orderings, now threatening both societal and global chaos. Proposed here is a shift from a dependency on governmental institutions toward processes of collaborative governance, that is, forms of micro-ordering that soften the boundaries among otherwise antagonistic centres of order and facilitate coordination for the common good. Dialogic process stands as the critical fulcrum to their success. A broad range of collaborative governance initiatives is currently in motion, from the local to the international level. However, the ultimate success of these efforts depends on the concerted design of dialogue, the fostering of dialogic skills, and developing structural scaffolds of support. In a significant sense, the world's future depends on our forms and capacities of dialogue.

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