**Social Organism Theory:**
**An argument for a better framework of understanding in the genesis of emergent civic intelligence & collective action**

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When I was first exposed to the term civic intelligence, I was captivated by how much it did to encompass the social phenomena I was interested in studying. I wanted to understand what made some groups of people able to work together to accomplish amazing changes in their communities, and why other groups continued to endure suffering. The journey over the past year, unfolding the concept of civic intelligence and pursuing my question, has brought me a long way towards my goal.

Through real world experiences in independent learning contracts, through classroom experimentation with the Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory, and through scholarly reading in a range of fields and topics, I have come to see that the dynamics of why some groups behave in civicly intelligent ways is incredibly complex. While Schuler has identified six dimensions along which civicly intelligent organizations align, orientation, organization, engagement, intelligence, products and projects, and resources, (2008) these do not answer my question of why some groups organize this way and some do not. In thinking of how I can cultivate civic intelligence in my own community, this question of the genesis of collective action and civic intelligence seems very important to any future work I may do in community development.

Fortunately this quarter I have been exposed to two very important topics which have greatly advanced my thinking. First is the theory of social capital which has quickly become its own field of research in the social sciences. The focus of the theory is on understanding how groups solve what are called collective-action problems. Ostrom and Ahn describe these situations stating, "collective-action problems arise whenever individuals face alternative courses of actions between short-term self-regarding choices and one that, if followed by a large enough number of individuals in a group, benefits all" (2007).

What struck me the most about the research into these collective-action problems was how focused on the individual perspective the approach was in dealing with a group phenomenon. This is not to say that some of the key components of social capital identified by Ostrom and Ahn, such as networks and rules, are not shared by a group. But social capital is seen as belonging to individuals and allowing them to act collaboratively.

The second topic which moved my thinking forward was the worker cooperatives that have developed in Spain and Argentina. These powerful examples of collective action which have brought great benefit and strength to their communities pushed me even harder to understand why they happened and how to replicate it. In both of these cooperatives there is evidence of civic intelligence and social capital. Yet these theories do not explain why collective action was adopted by either the compañeros in Argentina or the Basques who formed the Mondragon Cooperative.

Through the lens of civic intelligence we can only catalog the six dimensions of the two cooperative networks and note the similarities. Social capital is also poor at describing emergent phenomenon like these. The case in Argentina (and possibly Spain) was weak on both the elements of trust and rules when the first worker cooperative was founded. With two of the three primary components missing, it would seem that social capital is not a likely explanation for how this collective-action problem was initially solved.

The more I thought about this problem of explaining the emergence of collaborative problem solving and civic intelligence, the more often another idea that had not been a focus of my study kept returning. I had heard the term social organism in passing several years ago. The idea was most notably put to use over 150 years ago by Herbert Spencer in his essay “The Social Organism” in which he compares the development of societal structures to biological evolution (1884).

As this idea cropped up more and more in my thinking about collective action I began to piece together a theory which would answer my question of how civic intelligence and collective action can be generated in a group. I can’t at this time make a case for social organisms falling within the parameters of biological superorganisms, like ants or naked mole rats. But, even if social

organisms are just an analogy, I can show that this framework has descriptive and predictive functionality as a theory that civic intelligence and social capital do not.

The basic definition of an organism is an entity “capable of response to stimuli, reproduction, growth and development, and maintenance of homeostasis as a stable whole” (“Organism”, n.d.). The ways in which an organism responds to stimuli from its environment will most likely be to guard the other functions of its existence. This relationship between organism and environment is the key insight in understanding how social organism theory works to explain emergent increases in civic intelligence and collective action.

The events leading up to the political revolution in Argentina on the 19th and 20th of December 2001 certainly represent a massive change in the environment of the country. If we look at the social organism of compañeros (factory wage workers) it becomes clear how this environmental change directly affected its ability to maintain homeostasis. As more and more workplaces were shuttered due to the recession and capital flight from the country and people could no longer provide food to their families, the compañeros were forced to respond (Sitrin, 2006).

In this case the radical environmental shift is causing the social organism to alter its behavior. The way in which the behavior of the social organism changes is directly related to the previous conditions of homeostasis. In other disciplines these would be called social norms or cultural values. For the compañeros these conditions of homeostasis included lifelong or extended employment at single factories, pride in labor sustaining a family, and living knowledge of indigenous subsistence practices (Sitrin, 2006). For this social organism that had been pushed out of homeostasis by the shift in environment, returning to the factories that had sustained it and developing techniques for running them without bosses was the clearest path back to homeostasis.

As this approach to using social organism theory as a descriptive tool is applied to similar cases its predictive capability becomes clear. The Mondragon cooperative in the Basque region of spain also had a labor pool with strong work ethics and underwent a dramatic shift in the social environment when the Franco government punished the region for its participation in the civil war (Flessati, 1980). The similarity in environmental shift and original conditions of homeostasis

allow for the construction of a testable hypothesis -- this paring of conditions and environmental change produces an increase in collective action and civic intelligence from the social organism.

I want to make it clear that I am not discounting the theories of civic intelligence and social capital. What I am saying is that, for understanding how civic intelligence and collective action emerge where they weren't present before, the theory of social organisms has greater utility in research. As more work is done with social organisms a picture will emerge of what types of social environments are best suited for social organisms with high levels of collective action and civic intelligence.

The work on complex adaptive systems has strong synergy with the idea of social organisms. In examining how organizations change an article in the Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems explains:

> Self-organization is a process typical of the complex adaptive systems in which components of the system communicate with each other in a way that can be described as spontaneous. These phenomena occur in practice in real organizations. Parts of the system are adapted and coordinated to produce certain common behavior. Creative organizations are developed through the crisis and no-stability phases and they create a new, more complex form of inside order in an unexpected way. In this context, new strategic directions to a greater extent emerge and to a lesser extent are planned (Fabac, 2010, p.38).

This systems approach to examining organizational change seems to share many similarities to the social organism process of maintaining homeostasis that I have described. In developing the theory of social organisms the work on complex adaptive systems may provide useful tools for understanding the emergence of collective action and civic intelligence.

Potential criticism of the social organism theory include: arguments that social capital and civic intelligence do include the environment and can explain the genesis of collective action and civic intelligence, claims that a lack of proof for social organisms being real organisms invalidates the analogy, and general uneasiness at the thought of something other than the individual having agency in modifying the behavior of individuals.

Defenders of Ostrom might argue that the elements of trust, networks, and rules within social capital do account for the growth over time in the ability to solve collective-action problems, and the interaction of these elements are the heart of what accounts for a group's ability to act collectively. In terms of the genesis of collective action in a group I believe we can apply Occam's razor -- either the group had enough individuals who were trusted enough, and sufficient networking, and the proper interaction of formal and informal rules to allow for collective-action to commence; or, the group functioned as a social organism reacting to external stimuli in an effort to return to homeostasis. The latter is less dependent on a series of circumstances.

Both social capital and civic intelligence do a good job of accounting for group dynamics that explain why collective action works when it is already established in an organization or social group. The Liberating Voices pattern language even shows many techniques that could support the development of civic intelligence in places where it was not highly cultivated. The piece that is missing is what will cause an organization or social group to adopt these practices in the first place.

The second criticism of social organisms, that without proof of social groups as scientifically verifiable organisms the theory is invalid, addresses whether social organisms can exhibit agency in changing behavior. Like any scientific theory, social organisms must be tested in an effort to prove it wrong before it can gain any sort of credibility. But, as classification of social groups as biological organisms is not necessary for social organisms to describe how these social groups respond to environmental changes, that criteria alone can not be the basis of discounting it.

Perhaps the biggest factor in why the notion of social organisms has languished since Spencer wrote of it in 1860 is that it challenges the view that individual human consciousness is the pinnacle of existence. Just as the heliocentric model of the solar system was considered heresy 400 years ago, the idea of an order of entity greater than individual humans with agency over our action is a radical notion indeed. The key to working through this is in realizing humanity has always identified outside forces at work in our lives.

Social organisms are simply the next step in our progression from spirits and gods, to the aether, to cultural mores and memes, as identification of what shapes our lives. Perhaps the hurdle of accepting social organisms is that they suggest a potential loss of individual identity. While more a philosophical question than a scientific question, how are we individuals if we are components of a higher organism, is one of the most challenging parts of social organism theory to address.

Closely related difficulties in understanding social organisms as a coherent notion are the boundaries of where one social organism ends and another begins. How can one individual be a part of multiple social organisms? What are the largest and smallest social organisms? A coherent view of social organisms might very well be as big a shift in understanding of the individual's place in the ecosystem as was viewing the sun as the center of the solar system rather than the earth.

It is clear to me that there is much work to do in research and testing if the social organism is going to survive and grow in the public consciousness as a valid theory. I do know that the more I have applied it to my own examination of the dynamics of social organization and interaction the more application I see beyond just understanding the genesis of civic intelligence and collective action. It is my hope that this paper can be a jumping off point for a much more in depth examination of the social organism.

The need for a unifying theory of social interaction and social change is apparent throughout the public sphere. If the framework of social organisms can gain the same traction that social capital has it may be able to fill this role. With this perspective there would be a reasoned viewpoint for making needed social change to better support the functioning of these social organisms. In my book, anything that could take our cultural narrative off of the track of endless financial growth as the pinnacle of social achievement is well worth a closer look.

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