Jerome Liss

"The space of the Possible:" Summer Camping and Group Experiences in a New Political Tradition.

PART 2

The Self-Regulating Group

One important difference between an authoritarian hierarchical group and a self-regulating group is that in the latter situation there is a continuous *openness* to receive constructive criticisms. This offers the benefit of continuous growth and improvement.

I would like to offer suggestions for The Space as a means to also clarify some of the group processes necessary for "a free and autonomous" decentralised community.

1. A number of people were not aware that the community is based on the principles of group self-regulation: important decisions made by the total group (mutual decision-making); propositions and initiatives may come from anyone (individual initiative); each person is invited to share in the organisational responsibilities of discussion, decision and tasks to be done. (shared responsibilities).

It was only toward the end of the summer that a small group decided to meet once every two days in an "open organisational meeting" to solve particular problems. As a result of this, the following actions took place: 1. The fire prevention facilities were surveyed and improved. 2. A wire fence to surround the pond and protect children from falling in was built. 3. A large sand box for infants was built.

2. Much information based on group discussion or practical experience is lost each week. The Space has not used the tool of "written records", some of which could be placed on the bulletin board on a temporary or permanent basis, depending upon the information. Without these written records the same problem may be faced a dozen times, and this lack of "history" limits the group's evolution.

Therefore my suggestion is that each task group (kitchen, cleaning, caring for children, etc.) has a bulletin board where the suggestions of each group may be written. Also, I suggest that notes be taken at all General Meetings, organisation meetings, or groups which discuss living conditions at the Space, and that these notes be placed on the bulletin board for several days, to be placed afterwards in an open note-book which is available to anyone to read.

These two suggestions, open organisational reunions, and use of the written form in conserving and passing on informaiton, are *structures* to facilitate the decentralised group processes of individual initiative, mutual decision-making and collective action. The point is that an autonomous community of 200 people cannot function with a totally "laisser faire" attitude where one trusts that good will and spontaneous action will sufficiently cope with every problem. These "open structures" are meant to bring together and canalise the information, discussion, and action plan , and directly *encourage* and *support* the process in which everyone participates.

At the same time, with the use of "open structures" at the Space, such as the sign-up sheets to suggest new spontaneous groups and the open rota which permits each person to volunteer for the collective tasks, the result is to eliminate the need for a centralised authority. No one person is forced to "take in hand" and control a situation or to make unilateral decisions which others must carry out and which the community must passively accept. The "open structures" are the flexible and changeable means to allow each person a voice in determining the material and emotional conditions of the communal life.

## New Political Implications Which Emerge from The Space of the Possible

If one looks for an historical tradition that may lie behind the project of The Space, one important theoretical source is the anarchist position as described by Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin. The positive contribution of anarchism is to clarify the desire to live in a society without hierarchical authoritarian government. One of the negative results has been that certain violent revolutionaries have erroneously justified their destructive actions of bombing and assassination upon anarchistic "anti-government" principles. This has unfortunately confused the public as to the real meaning of anarchism, which is to create a state of *peace* and *non-violence*. Furthermore, this peace and non-violence would not depend upon the coercion of the police or the military, as it now exists, but would emerge from the higher level of freedom and justice that a non-authoritarian society can attain.

Another negative contribution of anarchist theory, and one which is pertinent to the project of The Space of the Possible, is its *lack of development of the theory and practice of group interaction.* The anarchists made the mistake of focussing all of their critique on the power structure of the State, rather than on examining how *every* small group tends to work along authoritarian lines unless the principles of mutual decision-making are conscientiously brought into play. Thus even the anarchist groups themselves, like almost all political groups, were conducted along authoritarian lines with one or more people invariably taking the lead and making decisions which the rest of the members must obey.

Because "small group interaction" was not studied by anarchist and other political groups, people have usually been unconscious of the *political* implications of *who* makes the decision in all social situations: work, education,

506

leisure time and the family. *Whenever one person makes the decision, you have authoritarianism, even if the person acts with the welfare of the others in mind. Whenever everyone involved in the situation makes the decision together, you have a self-regulating, non-authoritarian group.*

I have described elsewhere the capacities required by each *individual* to help the successful functioning of a self-regulating group. These capacities include the ability to: 1) offer a concrete suggestion, 2) discuss the action proposals briefly and constructively, 3) resolve conflicts in a positive manner, 4) take one's turn as moderator, 5) carry out the group's action proposal, 6) give a coherent feed-back report, 7) make positive contact with other autonomous groups. (See *Free to Feel*, Wildwood House, Ch. XX, *"Decentralisation Mean To Create Pockets of Revolution."*
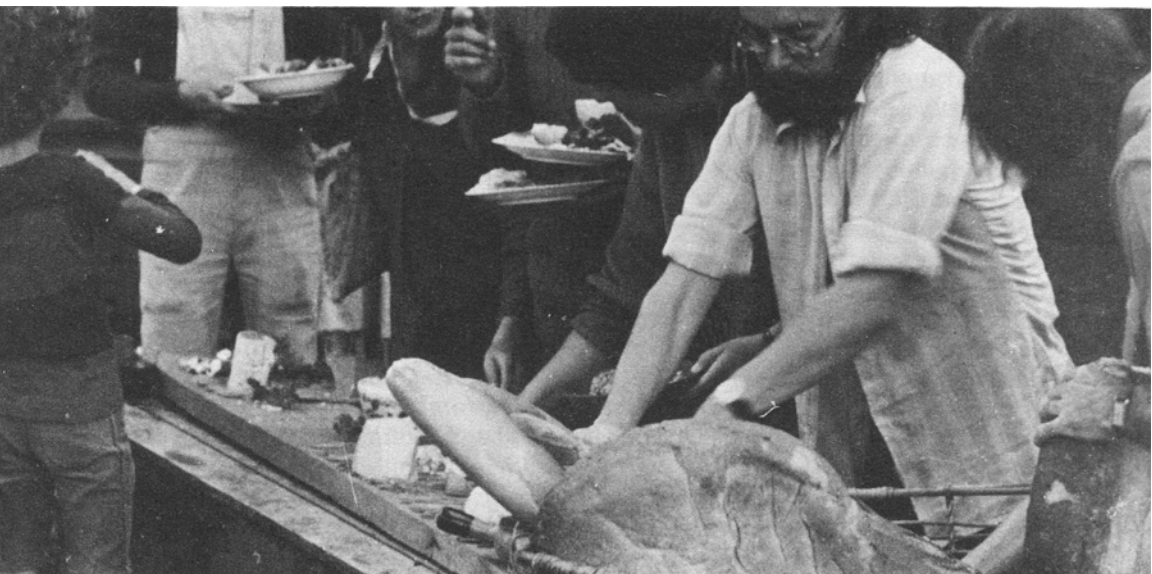
Observations of the group process at The Space of the Possible give us further material for reflection and evaluation.

In regard to the question, "What are the group process dynamics to explain the successes and failures of self-regulating groups?"

1. Positive identification with the group and its goal: People who come to The Space like and respect the Association and its goals. People come voluntarily and are usually in agreement with the Associations' premises of self-regulation and mutual cooperation. Thus there is a fundamental motivation to make the project succeed.

2. Clear and available information is needed by people to make their choices and guide their actions: What spontaneous groups are available, what time, and where? What tasks have to be done? Who is responsible today? Who tomorrow? And so on.

At The Space we have used sign-up sheets on the bulletin board to provide this information. And the method works extremely well. But there are also other means possible: A co-ordinating person can be located at one place throughout the day to note down the proposed groups and to explain to each participant the possibilities available. Another example: A short General Meeting can be held each evening at a regular time in order that propositions for the following day can be announced.

What is essential in all these methods of an "open information and choice structure" is that anyone can offer the information of a proposed group as well as that participants can make a free choice of the groups they want to attend. If we compare these decentralised processes with the authoritarian and hierarchical structures of our educational institutions, the differences are quite outstanding.

3. Regular reunions are sometimes needed to help people confront and plan actions to solve a number of daily problems: We saw how a number of immediate problems such as greater protection for the children or an increase of fire control equipment were recognised by a number of isolated individuals; however, their solution did not come about spontaneously. One or several group meetings were required to define the problem, decide upon an action, and then for several people to act in co-ordination to implement the decision.

In this example we see the merging of individual initiative and collective reponsibility. Certain problems were brought to light by the concern of individual members, and the group co-operated to bring about the solution. *In self-regulating groups, individual initiative is as important as collective responsibility, and the two forces work hand in hand for the successful outcome.*

4. People can participate in "direct sharing" in groups of 6 to 10 people: With more than ten participants, there is a greater feeling of isolation and non-involvement by each person, there is less listening time available for each person, and people will tend to speak more abstractly and in a manner less in touch with their direct experience. In addition, the tendency toward monopolisation by several members and passive withdrawal by the rest, which is always a potential problem in a free discussion group, is accentuated by groups with more than ten people.

The first few General Meetings were held with everyone participating in a single circle, and there was a problem of achieving satisfying, direct personal communication. Therefore, a number of participants decided to initiate the method called, "Break-Up Into Small Groups." The large general meeting, after several minutes of introductory exchange, would break up into small groups of 6 to 10 people, and after 45 minutes each small group would present a summary of its discussion to the reconvened large group.

A "to-and-fro" process between large group and small group discussion is of the best ways to allow each person to share his experiences and viewpoints with others (in the small group), and yet to leave time for opinions and discussions

which everyone can hear at once (in the large group). Like other group process methods, the small group/large group sequence originates from people's experiences in the human potential movement. In fact, just as experience in the "human potential movement" has been drawn upon to aid The Space of the Possible, it may be that other projects will draw upon The Space as a source of practical and theoretical knowledge.

5. *One can have a group leader in a self-regulating group:* This idea goes against many people's assumption that a self-regulating group based on mutual decision-making must necessarily be without a leader. This is not at all the case. And, in fact, I have found from direct experience with both leader-led and leaderless group, and others that I have talked with have come to the same conclusions that if a group does not want to limit itself to discussion but has the goal of an action, such as for theatre games, bioenergy, dynamic relaxation, etc., a group contract to use a leader is generally more helpful than a leaderless group. The reason is that sequences of action work out best when there is a certain fluidity and momentum in proceeding from one action to the next. To develop this fluidity and momentum in which the group's energy has a "rolling snowball" growth, a single person (or sometimes two or three) must have the responsibility to initiate each exercise *without hesitation or discussion.* To break this fluidity with a discussion before each exercise, or to wait in idleness before there is a volunteer to initiate the next exercise, as happen in leaderless groups, undercuts and limits the group's growing energy and therefore its effectiveness.

A counter-argument claims that a self-regulating group based on mutual decision-making cannot rely on the decisions of a leader. But this is not so. A group can decide to use a leader on a contractual basis. When the leader is chosen by the group (and thus the group can reject the leader and find a new one if it so decides), or if people come voluntarily to one leader's group while other leader's groups are also available, then the basic free choice of the individual is not denied by the presence fo the leader. The leader is chosen.

An important aspect of group self-regulation comes at the end of the meeting when the leader or participants can initiate a "feedback" on the group process: For this to happen, a leader must have the courage to face criticisms without defensive justification. My own point of view is that each leader can learn a great deal about the consequences of his work by listening attentively to the final feedback. A participant's criticisms are not necessarily "right for everyone" (and usually aren't), but they reflect one person's conclusion to the group experience, and the leader thus receives a specific information as to how his work affects another person. I find that criticisms which relate to specific moments of the group experience are more valuable than general impressions, and also, that feedback on what is liked is as important as feedback on what is not liked. But in regard to these specific preferences, each group leader can formulate and express his/her own.

The feedback is also important to re-establish the existential equality between

509

the leader and the participants. Because a person plays a special role as leader, the participants can lose the sense that they are basically equal with him or her and that all differences are only due to the temporary differences in role. The leader shows that he is human and not perfect in asking for and receiving criticisms, and the group members show that they have the right of independent judgment in offering criticisms and suggestions during the feedback.

If we compare the processes described above with what happens in usual social groups with a leader, such as at work, at school, or in certain families, we see that we are talking about "two different worlds." The Space of the Possible and other autonomous communities are "another world." That is why they are so valuable to live in and to learn from.

6. *A moderator can play a useful part in group discussions.* The presence of a moderator for group discussions is consistent with group self-regulation so long as the moderator is chosen by the group, and if the moderator's way of facilitating the group discussion is not favourably accepted by the partici- pants, the group can always ask him to step down in order to find a replacement.

Good discussions can sometimes happen within a leaderless group. But in my experience with the two methods, I have found that the presence of a good moderator can be a great help: 1. The moderator introduces the agenda and asks for revisions. The group goal is thereby clarified immediately. (The moderator can also ask that a bulletin board be made available to record the agenda and the propositions raised during the meeting. These "devices" greatly facilitate the group's concentration.) 2. The moderator provides a model of "good listening," and by his manner helps develop an attitude of good listening by the other group members. 3. The moderator facilitates the dialogue, asking participants to clarify their general points with examples, to keep to the subject by responding to the previoius speaker rather than to introduce prematurely a new subject, etc. 4. In every meeting there is a tendency for some people to speak out more than others on a particular subject. The moderator can help prevent this gap among participants from becoming too large by asking periodically, and especially toward the end, if some of the people who had still said nothing wish to contribute to the discussion.

In general it would be advantageous to have a moderator who does not need to express too many opinions on the subjects discussed. In this way he keeps a more neutral and receptive position. This encourages the group participants to fully express their views. If a moderator has too much to say on a subject, it might be better for him to voluntarily "step down" and let another person act as moderator.

In addition, the group members can also contribute to these specific functions. It is not only the moderator's responsibility to "facilitate the group process," but all group members can comment on the group process in order to dissolve its snags and catalyse the dialogue. A good self-regulating group works

510

"organically." That is to say that principles act as facilitating guidelines
rather than as rigid rules. And there is "something which happens" in a good
group, "something in the air," "something in one's bones," or a "circulation
of energy" which makes the group work to satisfy its goals and the personal
needs of its members.

One can read these ideas as a body of suggestions to help participants at
the Space of the Possible, improve still further their very important and
exciting project.

But I would also like to present these ideas as a contribution to "the politics
of self-regulating groups," and in so doing, offer a criticism for other "political
theorists." My criticism is that "political thinking "has usually limited its
focus toward an analysis of "large structures" and propositions for their
change. For example, anarchist groups have spent countless hours of debate
and then divided into warring factions over questions such as whether "the
general strike" should be used as a method of social change, or whether
"trade unions" should be supported (the anarchosyndicalist position) or defied
because their organisation is too authoritarian. Or in today's controversies,
there is the question of whether "workers' councils" within factories are
"revolutionary" or "reformist."

I would suggest that political analysis "misses the boat" when there is an
exclusive focussing on "large structures." The above contribution on the
qualities of self-regulàting groups (known as "groupes en autogestion" in
France) is to demonstrate what differentiates a hierarchical and authoritarian
group from a group conducted by the principles of mutual discussion and
decision-making. Once these differences are clarified, then the rigid argument
for or against certain large structures become irrelevant. We have seen
how the socialistic structure in countries like the U.S.S.R. have become
exceedingly authoritarian despite the original communist model of a "withering
away of the State." This demonstrates that no large structure guarantees
group self-regulation.

In addition, *group self-regulation is an evolutionary process which cannot be brought about with the single stroke of a revolution. Education, practice, discussion, re-evaluation, new attempts, co-ordination with other groups, experimentalisation, local variation, and so on, are all features of the decentralised process*

Decentralisation never means "take-over" and never even "threatens" the centralised power structure. The decentralised process of group self-regulation is too subtle and complex to presume that "forcing" can attain its goals. Meeting, discussion, dialogue, conscience, and so on, are its tools and also its ends. And group self-regulation is never perfect, though it can always be improved, and never fully defeated, because every conversation and communication attests to its presence. Therefore there is no need for "parties," "enemies," "ultimatums," or "menaces." There is only a need for continuous self-education and or mutual education, for conversation and for writing, for practice and evaluation leading to new practice. And the piace of application is not limited! This is how "group self-regulation" runs around, through and past all barriers. Every dialogue between husband and wife or within the family, every conversation among friends, every transaction at school, at work, at an ecology group, at a woman's liberation meeting, can increase people's practice and conscience of group self-regulation. Its possibilities are unlimited and everywhere. And the lessons in these pages can be over-turned as quickly and as easily as people turn over the pages themselves.

Flesh is cheap

Flesh is cheap today
buy, buy;
compared to things.
Shining glittering
lovely things,
Aural, Oral anyway
you want. Gratification
possession, sadistic
degradation of the secret
self; it only costs
money.

Anne Kahn