



Separating Genuine Dialogue from Simulacra – The “International Society for Universal Dialogue” as a Parody of Itself

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Abstract

The essay addresses the recent rise of violence, hegemonism, and right-wing extremism assaulting the foundations of democracy and intercultural dialogue. This deterioration of democratic and dialogical relationships has affected even learned associations. Within this context, the article examines the case of the crisis of the “International Society for Universal Dialogue” (ISUD), as described in Jovino Pizzi’s article in *Topologik*. The ISUD was seized by an authoritarian parochial group interested in power and money, including the money provided by the Jacobsen Trust, disgracing the idea of dialogue. The disappointed members subjected to this attack demanded the dissolution of hijacked organization and broke their ties with it. This hijacking and its detrimental consequences created a dangerous precedent. The analysis of this concrete case helps us to better understand the more general tendencies of anti-democratic and hegemonic monologic deterioration. It also helps us in the search for remedies to counter this regression and to strive for genuine democracy and dialogue.

Keywords: democracy, dialogue, rigged election, hegemony, ISUD.

When people feel nostalgia about the past, it is an indicator of regression and of how bad things have become. In the second decade of our twenty-first century, facing a globalization of violence, wars, hegemonism, and right-wing extremism that assaults the foundations of democracy and peace, there is a concern that the achievements and hopes of the end of the twentieth century are vanishing. The current regressive tendency is blocking the path to solutions to social and global problems that threaten the future of humanity. Among these problems, “there are two grim shadows that loom over everything that we consider: environmental catastrophe and nuclear war” (Chomsky 2017, 196). In-depth analysis is required to understand the causes of the regressive shift in politics and social consciousness, to learn lessons from the past, and to determine the methods of resistance.

A hallmark of the end of the twentieth century was the rise of the movement for recognition of cultural diversity, which was supported by a wave of publications. It correlated with movements for human rights and democratization of societies and

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international relations. However, attempts to interpret the cultural diversity in terms of liberal “multiculturalism” were quite limited. The conceptual limitations of multiculturalism were criticized by progressive philosophers. They began to rethink matters of identity/diversity and relationships among cultures and to develop theoretical alternatives, such as intercultural philosophy (*Topologik* 2016; Fernet-Betancourt 2017).

In the precepts of liberal multiculturalism, mere lip service was given to the recognition of diverse cultures. Halfheartedly acknowledging the other’s culture and “right to exist” was mostly a politically correct gesture, while one’s own culture or truth was considered to be superior or absolute, and the dominating culture retained its control. The homogenizing hegemonic globalization undermined unique cultural traditions. The policies of liberal multiculturalism were soon dismantled by the political leaders of the West, opening the door for antidemocratic nationalistic fragmentation and militaristic hegemonism under the banner of “America First.”

Not only are democratic institutions like nation states and international law and institutions like the United Nations under right-wing populist and hegemonic pressure, challenging the rule of law, but so too are organizations promoting cultural development and intercultural dialogue, such as UNESCO (Alvarez, 2017; Byers and Nolte 2003; Krisch 2005; Irish 2017). Unfortunately, this deterioration of democratic and dialogical relationships has affected even nongovernmental non-profit organizations, such as learned associations.

An analysis of this deterioration is presented in an article by Jovino Pizzi titled “Parochial monologuism under the guise of ‘universal dialogue’ (ISUD)” in *Topologik*, issue 21/First semester 2017. The article addresses important issues concerning the conditions for genuine dialogue and some of the factors which hinder such dialogue in today’s conflicted world.

For me as a lawyer concerned with international law, human rights law and democracy generally and as a student of philosophy it was distressing to learn that the general deterioration of basic principles of democracy and fundamental or natural justice in the world has also affected or perhaps infected even a philosophical society, which one would think would be the last place to experience the dark shadow of power hovering over enlightenment and reason. As a participant in many international meetings and scholarly conferences I have witnessed how respect for others, for differing viewpoints and opinions, can produce positive advances in understanding between peoples and societies and groups within societies. Free expression can only be free when the conditions necessary for free expression and dialogue exist. But the worldwide rise of the reactionary forces opposed to dialogue and free expression of ideas are gaining ascendancy in governments, the media, and non-profit organizations and in some ways has become the fashion.

Pizzi’s article draws a contrast between, on one hand, the efforts of progressive philosophers to promote the theory and practice of intercultural dialogue through publications and conferences, and, on the other hand, the reactionary forces that work

against these efforts. As he writes, from the past decades of celebrating diversity “the policies have shifted to hegemonic exceptionalism, nationalistic supremacism, and populist authoritarianism. In the predominant political culture, a rational argumentative discourse seems to be supplanted by propaganda sound bites by the mass media, fake news, pumping up fear, and instigating smear campaigns against the ‘other’” (Pizzi 2017, p. 44). Less evident but equally damaging is the demagogical abuse of humanistic notions, downgrading them to mere platitudes in political rhetoric or pseudo-philosophical sophistry.

Since “all politics is local”, Pizzi analyses the process of deterioration using as an example the crisis of a learned organization, the so called “International Society for Universal Dialogue” (ISUD), in which, six years ago, he and his colleagues “witnessed the signs of the troubling erosion of democratic equality and multicultural tolerance” even in a learned association (ibid, p. 44). His analysis of “the anatomy of the ISUD’s crisis” aims to learn lessons from it, to better understand how to defend the principles of democracy and dialogue from distortions and abuse: “we need a serious and frank conversation about dialogue to distinguish genuine dialogue from its fake, demagogical imitations (to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak) and to defend dialogue as the norm of relationships within organization and more generally among individuals with different cultural backgrounds” (p. 45). His article is interesting because the analysis of this concrete case helps us to better understand the more general tendencies of anti-democratic, narcissistic and hegemonic monological deterioration. Consequently, it helps us in search for remedies to counter this regression and to regain genuine democracy and dialogue.

1. Hijacking the organization: cui bono?

Pizzi’s article describes the crisis of the ISUD, which fell prey to an internal power struggle and was seized by an authoritarian group interested in power and money. The disappointed members characterize this seizure as a “staged coup” and “hijacking.” It is an unprecedented case in the history of nonprofit learned organizations. It must be investigated – its perpetrators, motives, and mechanics exposed – so that other organizations can learn and protect themselves from this kind of piracy in the future.

In looking at any case of a breach of ethical or legal norms, we should apply the Latin phrase *cui bono* (i.e., “for whose benefit?”). Finding out who benefited from it can guide us in finding out who has a motive for perpetrating these actions, who was behind the hijacking, and who perpetrated it. Based on Pizzi’s testimony and documented evidence presented in his article, we can analytically investigate this case.

The background context helps us to better understand the root cause of the ISUD crisis: “the ISUD is really neither international nor dialogical, but rather it is essentially controlled by a dominating group interested in power and money from one country, the United States” (p. 50). This problem was addressed by Leonidas Bargeliotes, who was the

last legitimately elected president of ISUD before it was hijacked, in his quoted open letter to the members:

The promising name of the organization attracted some enthusiasts, who took at face value its declared purposes and so contributed to conferences and publications. But beneath an attractive surface there was a serious structural problem: it was controlled by a closed group of self-serving individuals interested in power and money, using the members from the other countries mainly for show, and perpetuating its monopoly of power. While the members from the other countries wanted to be independent and treated as equals in decision-making, they were targeted and discarded as the disposables... The self-interested hegemonic attitude of this group was incompatible with the declared democratic principles and purpose of ISUD, and this contradiction led to the deepening crisis of organization and its lethal end. (p. 50)

This problem with the undemocratic monologic attitude of the dominating group is further explained by Pizzi:

As we can see, within the ISUD there was a sharp contrast between two tendencies: One was represented by those members from different countries who served the ISUD by contributing to the conferences and publications, and who wanted to transform it into a truly international organization built around collegial dialogic relationships of equals. The other tendency was toward preserving the status quo, represented by a closed dominating group of self-serving individuals from one country, who view this non-profit organization as if it were their property to be used as a source of power and money. (p. 50).

Obviously, non-profit organizations must be governed democratically according to their bylaws and carry out their purpose. No particular group or individual should assume a privileged and controlling position, dominating the others, and to use the organization as their “property” for self-serving interest. This would be undemocratic, illegal, and contrary to the purpose of organization. The existence of a group with the intentions to dominate and benefit from using the organization as a source of power and money is a potential cause of conflicts, and its attempts of pursuing illegitimate self-serving goals is a kind of a “time bomb”, which can explode and destroy the organization. This is exactly what happened with ISUD.

The article describes the vicissitudes of those members who wanted to transform the ISUD into truly dialogical scholarly organization and the dominating group interested mainly in power and money. In brief, the summary of this story is as follows: Almost all ISUD presidents were from the US. During the 8th ISUD congress in Beijing in 2010, there was an attempt to change this pattern. Leonidas Bargeliotes was elected as the first president from Greece, which opened an opportunity for the transformation of the ISUD into a truly international scholarly association. Charles Brown (US) from the above-mentioned dominating group was an alternative candidate and lost the election. Instead of respecting the results of the democratic election, he with Kevin Brien, (US) organized the “destructive opposition” and attacked the newly elected president and Board with false accusations, aiming to take over and control the organization. This seemed to result in a betrayal: “In the poisonous atmosphere of intrigues, the newly elected treasurer Andrew

Fiala (US) suddenly resigned. Keping Wang (WANG, Keping — China), who was the vice president and acting treasurer and supposed to be nominated for presidency at the next congress, surprisingly shied away from the expected nomination and quit, which opened the door to the opposition” (p. 45).

At the 9th congress in Olympia in 2012 the “destructive opposition” staged a coup and hijacked the ISUD. The members demanded an Independent Committee be created to investigate the rigged election and other disputed issues, but the group which illegitimately claimed the power rejected this demand. Despite the protests of the members, this group staged in 2014 their illegitimate “10th congress” and then an illegitimate “11th congress”, with a manipulated “re-election of themselves”, including Charles Brown as “president” and Kevin Brien as “treasurer”. The disappointed members demanded the dissolution of the hijacked organization and broke their ties with it.

This is a brief summary of the hijacking, showing the motives of those who benefited from it and the perpetrators. Now let’s look closely at the anatomy of hijacking. How this could happen in an organization which was supposed to be a democratic and dialogic one?

2. The coup, usurpation, and the call for dissolution of ISUD

During the 9th congress in Olympia (Greece) in 2012, the “destructive opposition” took revenge and seized control over the organization by staging a coup and by rigging the elections at the General Assembly on June 26, 2012. Pizzi, a participant of that congress, described some of the details of that coup:

That was a shocking surprise to most of the participants, who could not even imagine that the scholarly conference would become dominated by plotting, intrigue, and a struggle to seize power... At the beginning of the General Assembly, president Leonidas Bargeliotes reported that, despite many obstacles, the Society has achieved its goals in organizing the 9th congress and publishing three volumes of Proceedings prior to the congress. The Society was successful in financial functioning and was in a good fiscal shape, having approximately \$50,000.00 USD left over, more than ever before, for the new cycle... Surprisingly, however, in sharp contrast to those achievements, Charles Brown and Kevin Brien launched into a round of provocative questions and false accusations against the outgoing president about allegedly “missing money”, which Leonidas Bargeliotes categorically denied as totally false and a continuation of their campaign for undermining his presidency. Christopher Vasilopoulos (US), Jane Campbell (US), Martha Beck (US), and Mark Lucht (US) from the “destructive opposition” also participated in this coordinated barrage of personal attacks against the outgoing leadership with the same insults, abandoning any sense of civility, insinuating pseudo-problems and confusing the voting participants. (pp. 45-46)

As Pizzi writes, the General Assembly was anything but a meeting of a scholarly organization: “the oppositionists turned it into an arena of power struggle, full of biased personal attacks and violations of rules”. The meeting was chaotic and uncivil: “The

hostile atmosphere was not conducive to the fair election either. The voting participants could not make an informed choice, free of psychological pressure and manipulation. The electoral process was full of serious irregularities, including manipulations and violations of the parliamentary procedures” (p. 46).

But let us get to the legal issues involved. The ISUD is incorporated according the laws of the State of Maine in the United States of America as a non-profit organization; laws which apply to the legal structure of the organization and legal remedies available to members if the laws are violated. The ISUD is also governed by its Constitution. The Constitution in force at that time in Article II stated in part, “The democratic way of thinking and acting shall be the guiding principle of all decisions which determine the plans and projects of the Society”. Article IV, 2, stated that the fundamental human “needs, aspirations, and capacities cannot be adequately realized under conditions of selfish competition, violence, and exploitation but under conditions of peace, cooperation, and freedom.”

The General Assembly and election that took place in the congress in 2012 demonstrated a complete disregard of the principles expressed in the Constitution for they were neither democratic nor in accord with conditions of “peace, cooperation and freedom” but were instead carried out in an atmosphere of “selfish competition”, personal attacks, manipulation, and violations of the rules and are therefore arguably void ab initio.

The allegation of financial irregularities made by Charles Brown and his group from the floor was a violation of the Constitution, since the Treasurer is required to provide a report to the membership of all credits and debits in the accounts of the organization at each international meeting. Before the election there was a Board meeting, which approved the list of the candidates, and presumably a financial report was discussed as well. The Board nominated L. Bargeliotes for reelection as the candidate for President, which means it was satisfied with the fiscal accountability and the accounts. According to the President Bargeliotes’ report to the General Assembly, “the Society was successful in financial functioning and was in a good fiscal shape”. As it is stated in the article, Charles Brown, if he had a complaint,

could address his concerns in a proper way—to the Board (and in fact during the last two years he wrote his questions to the Board and he received exhaustive and documented answers, showing that there was no “missing money”). Instead Charles Brown engaged in spreading false rumours about the leadership and tried to mislead and influence the voters. (pp. 48-49)

Proper procedure was ignored and Charles Brown et al. made unfounded statements from the floor, since proved to be false, in order to discredit the sitting Board and those who were seeking to stand for election. That demoralized the members causing many of them to leave the meeting.

During the election there were several violations of the rules and procedures. One of the violations was the nomination by the opposition group of their alternative candidate for president from the floor, bypassing the Board. “According to the traditional practices and procedures of ISUD, only the Board nominates the candidates for president and vice-

president” (p. 46). This procedure was adopted to ensure that suitably committed persons with experience would occupy those posts. The Board had nominated Leonidas Bargeliotes for president. But “in violation of this customary law, at the General Assembly the opposition nominated from the floor their alternative candidates: Christopher Vasillopoulos (US) for presidency” (p. 46). This person was not even a member of the organization before the congress and attended as an invited guest speaker who then turned against his host and purported to advance his candidacy for a position that was not open to him, against L. Bargeliotes—an unprecedented violation of the customs and constitution of the Society and of course completely unethical. It is difficult to imagine that such a person would attend a conference for the first time and then spontaneously present himself as a candidate for the head of the organization that had invited him. He had been paid a 2,000 euro honorarium and so it could be said that he used that money not to advance the interests of the origination by addressing it on a subject of interest but to advance his own interests of taking control of the organization. Anyone with experience knows that no one just decides to run for election out of the blue and it smacks of a conspiracy by the C. Brown group to stage what amounted to a coup in which C. Vasillopoulos was approached by this group and offered the position of President if he would run for that office against L. Bargeliotes.

As it is recorded in the official Minutes of the ISUD General Assembly, June 26, 2012,

Leonidas Bargeliotes raised a question concerning the legitimacy of the results of the elections. In particular, he objected to the candidacy of Christopher Vasillopoulos for election as he considered this illegal. He said that Vasillopoulos was not previously a member of the Board and neither was he even a member of the Society... Vasillopoulos did not meet the eligibility requirement. (p. 46)

As Pizzi concludes. “since Vasillopoulos was ineligible, his election was illegitimate. Nevertheless, [his] nomination and election was rushed through in the chaotic and manipulative atmosphere created by the opposition group which dominated the General Assembly” (p. 47).

There were also irregularities in the electoral process. It is clear from Article VI of the Constitution that only those on the official membership list could vote. But it appears that people voted who were not on the membership list. There were problems with two different sets of ballots and they were not properly distributed, and thus some participants might have received more than one ballot. As Pizzi writes,

there was no list of those eligible to vote, in which the voters would sign. The ballot papers were distributed to the participants of the meeting indiscriminately without verifying whether or not a particular person was eligible to vote... In such a situation, there was a possibility that ballot papers might be issued to non-members, and also some members might cast more than one ballot. There was no control over how many participants were present at the time of voting and the quantity of the ballots cast... Without this, it was impossible to validate the election. (p. 47)

Moreover, “because of both delaying tactics used by the ‘destructive opposition’ in pursuing its own agenda and the atmosphere of chaos in the House created by its constant attacks, the participants were so vexed and angered that many of them left the meeting in protest without casting their votes” (p. 47).

In any event the validity of the vote is a question since of 86 members only 57 cast votes, the rest having left in disgust before the vote. Since the Constitution required that “The election of all the officers of the Society shall be done by a majority vote” (Article VI, 1), a majority vote must mean a majority of the members not just of the members present. Those who are absent have the right to give their proxy to others who are present to vote on their behalf. This was not done. Since, according to Pizzi’s account, the vote was split with a difference of a handful of votes between candidates, none of the new Board officers elected had the required majority vote and so their election was unconstitutional. That is if Bargeliotes had 26 votes and Vasillopoulos had 31 votes, the latter did not have the required majority of the members. In fact, since it appears that about 30 members left the conference before the vote that the entire procedure should have been suspended until it could be determined how the absent members wished to vote. It is noteworthy that a couple of years later, the dominating group which seized power made changes to the Constitution that attempted to validate and hide their violations of the electoral procedure in the election of 2012.

During the General Assembly, “the parliamentary procedures and the basic democratic norms were grossly and deliberately violated by the opposition group. They blatantly disregarded Leonidas Bargeliotes’ presiding authority of the Chair and de-facto usurped the administration of the meeting to rush through their agendas” (p. 47).

The similar testimony of irregularities in the election and the anti-democratic hegemonic attitude of the bullying opposition was expressed by Y.V. Satyanarayana (India) in his open letter to the members:

This well-organized group from one country [the US] occupied ahead of time the seats with microphones at the conference table, thus the other participants were seating behind. This group monopolized not only the space of the General Assembly, but also the whole time and discourse of the meeting, dominating it and imposing their own agenda. The participants from China, India, Russia, Philippines, and other regions were marginalized not only in a physical sense, having the seats left only back at the ‘periphery,’ but also in the participatory sense, because they were deprived of an equal opportunity for participation in the discussion and in the whole process of the meeting. The hegemony of one group made it impossible for the others to express their opinions, ask questions, or make their proposals. This was anti-democratic and shocking for many participants, who were very disappointed, and many of them ‘voted with their feet’ by leaving the room. The reputation of ISUD was severely damaged. (p. 48)

It is astonishing to read the open letters filed by Peter Dumbuya (Shri-Lanka/US) and others stating the conditions of chaos, hostility, abusive language and violation of parliamentary procedures as the C. Brown group formed almost a vigilante committee of their own and proposed and adopted motions on issues to suit themselves while ignoring other members. This is the description of a fascist putsch, not a meeting of a learned society.

Evidence of a broad conspiracy of the dominating group to stop the progressive transformation of ISUD into a truly democratic and dialogical international organization and to degenerate it into a hegemonically controlled and neutered one became obvious right after the coup:

Shortly after that, Kevin Brien let the cat out of the bag and blurted out the scope of the plot in his open e-mail dated July 6, 2012 when he reported about it as “*military victory*” and wrote: “In this connection I am happy to be able to say that three former presidents who *had* drifted away have already told me in writing that they would attend the next ISUD Congress (John Rensenbrink, Steve Hicks, and Al Anderson). This is welcome”. (p. 49)

The events after the ISUD scandal in 2012 are evidence of the fundamental division within the organization between those who took at face value its declared purposes and wanted to be treated as equals and the dominating group interested mainly in power and money and their own cultural and political supremacy. According to the article, several members from different countries, who were interested in dialogue, proposed a solution to the crises through the mediation and the establishment of an Independent Committee for the review of all disputed issues. An Independent Committee is a well proven instrument frequently used for resolving the disputes within non-profit organizations, corporations, and even at the state level in the conflict between political parties. But C. Brown, K. Brien, and C. Vasillopoulos from the dominating group were quick to reject this proposal: “Their unjustifiable rejection of an Independent Committee only confirmed suspicion of a cover up and exposed their fear of a truthful revelation about their illegitimate path to power. Instead of transparency and an honest conversation, they launched a smear campaign against their fellow members who voiced disagreement with the rigged election and the usurpation of power” (p. 51).

Further actions by the junta confirmed the suspicion of the members about the usurpation of power. “Upon rejecting an Independent Committee, the junta unilaterally decided to hold the next, ‘10th congress’ in 2014 in Craiova. This illegitimate group had no authority to act on behalf of the ISUD, to organize its congresses and elections.” That was in violation of the Constitution Article V, 6 of which stated: “The Board, under the guidance of the President, shall be responsible for arranging the agenda of the international meetings of the Society”. But as Pizzi states, “the controversial issue of the 10th Congress was never discussed with the Board” (p.54). It was also contrary to the will of the members: “Only those who were registered and paid their membership fees during the 9th congress in 2012 for the next cycle were considered actual and legitimate members

of ISUD with the right to make decisions regarding its next congress and election of the Board” (pp. 53-54). The purpose of that illegitimate congress was clear:

This group knew that the members who were aware of the coup and usurpation would never re-elect them and would vote them out (and probably even exclude from the Society). Thus, they actually took the ISUD’s name, organizational structure, and funds away from the members and abused them to stage their own congress, outside of the membership, as a trick to avoid accountability and to perpetuate their usurpation of power. (p.54)

Most of the core members boycotted the illegitimate congress and election in protest. In fact, “more than 80 percent of the participants were new, not related to ISUD”, who did not know anything about the coup, and who “were used by this group in manipulated pseudo-election to ‘re-elect themselves,’ and Charles Brown became ‘treasurer”” (p. 54). It was not in fact an ISUD congress. The illegitimacy of its organizers and of the staged election made its outcome and decisions illegitimate. “In a protest, most of the relatively longstanding Society members broke their ties with the notorious organization. That was the end of ISUD” (p. 55). The disappointed members therefore demanded the formal dissolution of hijacked organization.

But the junta continued their grip on power and in 2016 held their “11th congress,” equally illegitimate following the pattern of the previous illegitimate congress, with the same misinformation and manipulation. The junta members again re-elected and promoted themselves: “Charles Brown became ‘president’ and Kevin Brien became ‘treasurer’ (a fox guarding the henhouse)” (p. 56).

The question arises: How can the junta, who were unable to engage in elementary, civilized communication with the members of their own organization and who waged a war by words against their fellow members, now pretend to organize their conferences under the slogan of “universal dialogue”? The gap between their actions and words is an example of blatant hypocrisy. It smacks of Orwellian doublespeak.

3. The best “universal dialogue” that money can buy

In investigating a crime, in addition to the Latin phrase *cui bono*, another key investigative principle is to “follow the money”. This is very relevant in this case, because the ISUD’s funds, including from outside grants, are in the hands of those who control the organization, namely Charles Brown as “president” and Kevin Brien as “treasurer”. Two intertwined motives induced the coup and seizure of control over ISUD: the lust for power and money. The illegitimate and destructive means they used for grabbing power have shown that their real goal was not to serve the organization, but to use it for their own self-serving interests.

The question immediately arises: Who is sponsoring the ISUD? The article states that the ISUD is sponsored by the so-called “Jens Jacobsen Trust” (p. 56). One can make a

google search for “Jens Jacobsen Trust”, where it states that it is “one of the main supporters of ISUD.” This fact sheds light on the nature of ISUD and ulterior motives for its hijacking. The plunder from this act of piracy was the access to the Jacobsen Trust’s coffers. For the junta, hijacking the organization was a means to access this treasure and illegitimately claim the sponsor’s money on behalf of the organization. Those who took the ISUD’ self-glorifying advertising at face-value were grossly misled, since the ISUD is no longer about “universal dialogue” but mainly about extracting money from the Jacobsen Trust under a false pretext and adhering to a hegemonic monologism. This greed explains the meanness of this group: “the relationship of power and money (and the lust for both) can explain the extremely aggressive attitude of this group in staging their coup and viciously attacking their colleagues in order to seize control over ISUD, even at the cost of ruining it” (p. 56).

Although the junta destroyed the scholarly essence of the organization, leaving only a soulless body, the remaining pseudo-ISUD is still used by them as a formal pretext for milking the Jacobsen Trust’s money. If they dare ruin the organization to grab power and money, it is very unlikely that they would use money for the good of the organization, rather than for their own self-serving interests.

The article says that “this group is trying to put a good face on the hijacked organization and is seeking sponsors and money, including from the Jens Jacobsen Trust.” In masking the real crisis of organization, the junta creates a self-glorifying, saccharine image of the organization under their leadership, misleading not only the public but also sponsors: “That’s not even to mention concocting self-aggrandizing reports on behalf of their manageable, loyal ‘committees’, thereby masking the pseudo-democratic nature of usurped power” (p. 56). Evidently, the junta not only “reelected themselves”, but surely was interested in packing the Board with loyalists to create a semblance of “collectivity” for their unilateral actions. In the junta’s hands, money is used to further corrupt the organization, since it allows the junta to play the role of a paternalistic Santa Clause. The sponsor’s money can be used for “rewarding” the Board members’ compliance and loyalty by paying for their travel, accommodations, and so on. As is stated in the article, “the dominating group’s control over the use and distribution of money (in the form of awarding travel stipends, Jacobsen Awards, and other ways) is used as leverage for its manipulative influence” (p. 56). As a political analogy, a banana republic also has the formal attributes of “democracy” with parliaments and elections, but all of them are manipulated and used only as a window-dressing to disguise authoritarian rule. Just as official “reports” from such regimes should be viewed suspiciously, so too should the self-glorifying information coming from this illegitimate junta. Even if the reports claim to be on behalf of the Board or members, they lack legitimacy and are not trustworthy.

The junta’s obsession with money is also revealed by their wrong accusations of others, falsely attributing to their honest colleagues the junta’s own perverse mind-set. This can be seen in an episode mentioned in the article about Kevin Brien’s groundless allegation about travel stipends as “bribing for votes”:

That was casting a stain upon the recipients of the travel stipends to the congress, mostly from the developing countries. Dilip Kumar Mohanta from India in his October 5, 2012 open letter to the members responded: “Mr. Kevin Brien made personal attacks and character assassination of ISUD members... How can it be a society of universal dialogue if you have all colonial attitude towards the members of the developing countries?” (p. 51)

The junta’s obsession with money can be seen also when, in staging the coup during the 9th congress, they accused others of “missing funds”, which was proven false. After their coup, the junta fixated on allegations that the prior leadership had mismanaged funds; apparently, they assumed the prior leadership had functioned the same way they intended to function going forward. However, because the prior leadership practiced transparency and the travel stipends committee abided by democratic norms, these accusations were proven false. Nonetheless, this monetary fixation reveals the junta’s true nature, and one cannot help but get a whiff of projection coming from their direction. Why else would someone make such an easily disprovable accusation (unless, of course, they cynically wished to disguise themselves as defenders of financial ethics so they could more effectively tear those ethical standards to tatters)?

The junta’s greed for sponsor’s money by all means possible is obvious. What is much harder to understand is the position of the sponsor, the Jacobsen Trust. It is incomprehensible that the discredited organization and those who hijacked it are still receiving financial support from this sponsor. Why does the Jacobsen Trust allow itself to be milked by the junta? The perplexity of the author of the article regarding the Jacobsen Trust’s sponsorship is understandable: “it doesn’t make sense in an abnormal situation such as this, after ISUD has been hijacked by this authoritarian group which controls and uses the organization and its resources for their own self-serving interests” (p. 56). This compromises the entire concept of sponsorship.

Eligibility for grants includes criteria, which require the organization to be in good standing and able to carry out its purpose. But the hijacking of the ISUD is notorious. The Jacobsen Trust cannot hide behind a “veil of ignorance”. The late Jens Jacobsen entrusted his funds for the promotion of noble humanistic ideas. But the pseudo-ISUD is just the opposite, an infamous example of authoritarian demagoguery which has undermined the ideas of international scholarly dialogue. So why is the Jacobsen Trust providing financial support to those who hijacked and ruined ISUD? If Jens Jacobsen were alive, what would he think about this use of his money? Sponsorship is not just a business transaction. The ethics of business requires sponsors to check the status of an organization and determine whether it is in compliance with the norms of nonprofit organizations and with its declared purpose. This implies responsibility. As my open letter to the managers of the Jacobsen Trust, I would like to ask them to publicly explain its policy and criteria for sponsorship and why it is sponsoring such a notorious organization.

Since the junta usurped control over the organization, any changes within the organization became impossible: democracy was trampled by the dictatorship. Thus, the last resort was to legal action. When the disappointed members demanded the dissolution

of the hijacked ISUD, Kevin Brien and Charles Brown responded with a new wave of libellous personal attacks. The article gives an example:

Kevin Brien sent his February 8, 2015 email and letter to many addresses...viciously attacking past leaders and repeating his and Charles Brown’s already refuted lie about allegedly “missing money”... Those who honestly served the organization, but became the target of defamatory attacks by this group, have had no choice but to defend truth and dignity and to seek justice through legal means. (p.55)

Thus, the former president sought legal protection from that defamatory attack through the State of Maryland judicial system and won his case:

Kevin Brien had no leg to stand on. Thus, after almost a year-long process facing the potential lawsuit for defamation, Kevin Brien was forced to retract his statements. On April 19, 2016 the attorney at law [for the former president] from Baltimore sent the official letter to the ISUD members confirming that all [Brien’s] allegations were groundless and untrue and that they were “categorically and absolutely rejected, in the strongest possible terms”. (p. 55)

It was a legal and moral victory, publicly providing also an additional, legal proof that the accusations by Charles Brown and Kevin Brien about allegedly “missing money”, used during their coup to frame the past leadership and to grab the power, were blatant lies and defamation. This confirms the illegitimacy of the putschists’ claims to power. They should have been expelled from the organization to begin with.

Also, as the article states, “those events have shown how dangerous the attitude of those who usurped the power through coup and then used it for a defamatory vendetta can be. Now the only means of ‘universal dialogue’ is through attorneys at law and the judicial system” (p. 55).

The continued existence of the hijacked organization is an injustice, a farcical and unpunished breach of ethical and legal norms. What will be the consequences of this? The time should be up for this undissolved, soulless body; last rites and interment are long overdue. Yet the corpse remains, continuing to offend the senses of any who are near enough to smell its corruption.

The ISUD, incorporated in the State of Maine, is governed by the Maine Nonprofit Corporation Act, which has provisions for the removal of officers engaged in dishonest conduct or gross abuse of authority, and for dissolution of the organization if it does not carry out its purposes. The hijacked ISUD is a clear case for applying these provisions for its dissolution. The FISP also has provisions for the exclusion of members, and the notorious pseudo-ISUD obviously does not belong to it.

4. The hijacked ISUD as a parody of itself

According to Pizzi’s article, this parochial group hijacked not only the organization, but also tried to monopolize the idea of “dialogue”, pretending to be the leaders of a “world dialogue” (sic!). As an example, the article refers to the issue of the journal

Dialogue and Universalism (3/2013) titled “Universal Dialogue”, which Charles Brown arranged for publishing the papers of some of his accomplices in seizing ISUD, such as Kevin Brien, Martha Beck, Emiliya Taysina, and John Rensenbrink. As the article goes:

the papers were quite weak. Most of them were off-topic, did not say anything new, and failed to explain what they meant by “universal dialogue”. In lieu of a theoretical analysis of the announced topic, it was instead reduced to the ISUD, in a misleading way. Contrary to an honest conversation about the reality of the deepening crisis of the organization they presented a false rosy picture of the organization, trying to convey the messianic idea that the ISUD, under the current leadership, was a locus of “universal dialogue” or “world dialogue” nurturing a world consciousness as a kind of a vanguard of the solution to global problems. These authors tried to present themselves as self-styled leaders of “universal dialogue”... Upon seizing the organization, the junta tried to appropriate the idea of “universal dialogue”. However, behind an idle talk about “universalism” and “dialogue” there is nothing but sophistry. When altruistic words are uttered by those obsessed with power and money, it is mere doublespeak. They are exploiting noble notions to act ignobly, thus disgracing the notions themselves. This grandiose ambition juxtaposed with poor performance looks farcical. The abysmal gap between the pretensions of “universal dialogue” and the paltry self-serving attitude of this parochial group is glaring, like a clown car in a circus. (pp. 52-53)

Indeed, the blatant hypocrisy of this parochial group, pretending to represent a “world dialogue”, is pathetic. These messianic pretensions of leadership in “dialogue” and in a solution to global problems look like narcissistic grandiosity, as if they are intoxicated with the euphoria of seizing and abusing the ISUD. This is a circus which the clowns of the hijacked ISUD are staging under the name of their “congresses”, misleading a credulous public and milking money from the Jacobsen Trust. What a profitable scheme! It would be funny if it weren’t so sad, because the damage caused by this charlatanism is real. How long will these clowns continue this shameful farce? The author of the article is right, saying that “the hijacking of a learned association and its detrimental consequences created a dangerous precedent, which is deeply troubling and unacceptable in the eyes of the international scholarly community” (p. 57).

Evidently, the pseudo-ISUD is not an independent, democratically governed scholarly association promoting “universal dialogue”, as feigned by the junta. Since being hijacked, it has degenerated into a sort of private business – a “pocket club” that only serves the interests of this group. Charles Brown, Kevin Brien and other junta members have already shown their nature by staging a coup, violating election rules, trampling the norms of democracy, usurping power, showing hegemonic arrogance to the members from the underdeveloped and other countries, and slandering those who disagree with their usurpation. Actions speak louder than words. Their idle talk – about “the democratic culture” during the congress in Olympia when they staged the coup, about “universal dialogue” after they usurped the power and unilaterally staged their illegitimate congress despite the protests of the membership, about “values and ideals” when they deployed their slanderous attacks against honest colleagues, and so on – is all worth less than nothing. With this demagoguery, they disgrace the noble notions of “democracy” and

“dialogue”, undermine the trust in intercultural scholarly dialogue, and instead de facto impose their hegemonic supremacism as a kind of “new normal”.

The hijacking of the ISUD killed the constructive potential promoted by the progressive members and betrayed its declared purpose. The pseudo-ISUD lost its credibility and became a megaphone of this authoritarian group. It became a gift to the antidemocratic forces which hinder intercultural dialogue. It is not an independent scholarly association, but rather it is now similar to neoconservative think tanks sponsored by corporate money and promoting their ideologies.

It struck me that the individuals who took over the learned society were from the United States and acted in the bullying manner. But what are their objectives? Is it just about personal ego and money? Not only. The consequence of their assault on the Society and its purpose indicates that the reason behind it was to sabotage any attempts to engage in true international dialogue as equals. Behind the “benevolent” mask, the hegemonic attitude is reflected in different levels of relationships, from the manner of treating the fellow-members of an organization to dominance over other nations.

The hegemonic power does not want there to be any dialogue of cultures, dialogue between peoples, because dialogue leads to knowledge, to awareness, to tolerance of others and real understanding of conditions and needs. Peoples armed with understanding do not want conflict, do not want wars, do not want to be dominated. But this is precisely what the ruling factions in the hegemonic superpower do want and so they see any group, even a learned society concerned with philosophy as a threat to be eliminated or degenerated into a soulless body. And since as Pizzi says “philosophers search for the cause to explain things”, philosophers are considered a danger to its hegemony. And so, this learned association has been degenerated from a society dedicated to critical reflection and dialogue into a neutered, splintered, ghost, or perhaps zombie is a better world, dead but still walking, pretending to be alive. The result is the effective elimination of this society, its suppression by other means. This technique of infiltrating organizations and world bodies whose stated purpose is justice, protection of human rights or dialogue, is seen in the control the United States influences even in various United Nations bodies a prime example being the Human Rights Council. Instead of openly destroying these bodies they take them over as if by a virus and then use their structures and reputations for the benefit of its geo-strategic interests.

What can be done? The author of the article makes some suggestions about lessons to learn from this case and some precautions for preventing its repetition. He rightly states that the adherents of genuine democratic dialogue need to be able “to separate the wheat of genuine dialogue from the chaff of pseudo-dialogic simulacra”. He suggests that the bylaws should be clear and detailed to prevent any loopholes for abuse or usurpation of power. The unwritten rules and traditional practices, as customary laws, should also be a part of the bylaws. Democratic principles of transparency and accountability should be implemented at all levels of the organization. “Those who are providing grants should keep high standards of eligibility for their recipients, be careful and scrutinize the real status and activities of any given organization to prevent possible abuses.” Members of

such organizations must be committed “to stand for the practical realization of the declared ethical, democratic, and scholarly principles and values of the organization.” Learned associations declaring as their purpose the promotion of dialogue or other humanistic ideals “are expected to demonstrate much higher standards and must practice genuinely democratic relationships within the organization itself, prior to preaching them to others” (pp. 57-58).

I can't agree more with all of this. I can also say that perhaps the main lesson from this case is to be aware that dialogue cannot be taken for granted. It is practiced in a conflicted world with different political forces and interests, where those devoted to dialogue and peace are confronted by those who are obsessed with power and money, and who try to exploit even noble, humanistic ideals for ignoble purposes. This struggle between progressive and reactionary forces is particularly visible in today's increasingly polarized world at all levels – international, national, political, and even within learned organizations. This struggle is a litmus test of who we are.

Scholars need to maintain democratic transparency about their organizations and shed light on the dark corners in which the demagogues operate. The public needs to be informed about breaches of ethical and democratic norms within their organizations. In the theory and practice of dialogue, its adherents need to be able to critically separate genuine dialogue from deceptive sophistry. Honest scholars should boycott fake organizations, such as this, and be united in solidarity in defending their ethical and democratic principles and mutually respectful relationships as equals within learned organizations.

In the current struggle between positive and negative tendencies potentially shaping the world, progressive scholars and movements need more than ever cross-cultural dialogue and solidarity to promote the mutual understanding and collaboration of peoples in search for the possible mitigation of social and global problems.

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