

Parochial monologism under the guise of “universal dialogue” (ISUD)

JOVINO PIZZI*

Abstract

The article highlights the importance of intercultural dialogue and the challenges posed to it by the relations of power. Based on the analysis of the crisis of “International Society for Universal Dialogue” (ISUD), it shows that when a learned organization fails to live up to the democratic principles and carry out its declared purpose – and instead falls prey to an internal power struggle – then it disgraces the whole idea of dialogue. Analysis shows the gap between the pretensions of “universal dialogue” and the undemocratic monologic attitude of the parochial group controlling ISUD. Other organizations should learn the lessons from that so that they will be able to protect themselves from being seized by those who are interested in power and money. It is necessary to distinguish genuine dialogue from its fake, demagogical imitations and to defend dialogue as the norm of relationships among individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: democracy, rigged election, demagogy, genuine dialogue.

Our diverse and interrelated while conflicted world needs dialogical relationships as the way toward collaboration for solving social and global problems. Intellectuals and reasoning public contribute to the enhancement of dialogical relationships. There are many organizations and scholars, most of which are devoted to dialogue and its enhancement as a norm of relationships between peoples, cultures, and nations.

For example, philosophers from around the world enjoy the World Philosophical Congresses organized by the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP). The World Social Forum (WSF, Portuguese: *Fórum Social Mundial*) first met in 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, holds its annual meetings in various regions of the world, as a global platform for dialogue and creative ideas in search of solidarity, peace, justice, and human rights. Since 2002 is functioning the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations”, which holds its annual congresses in Rhodes, Greece, and now became DOC Research Institute. In North-South philosophical dialogue, coordinated by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, actively participated Enrique Dussel and Karl-Otto Apel, among other philosophers from different countries. By the initiative of Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, since 1995 every year are celebrated the International Congresses of

* Dr. Phil., Professor at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL) – Brazil.

Intercultural Philosophy, with publication of their papers in edited volumes. These and other examples show great leadership and enthusiasm of participants in fostering intercultural philosophical dialogue.

These efforts are particularly important in the current period, when the ideas of democratic and dialogical relationships are under assault from the reactionary and extremist forces. During the last years, the world has witnessed dramatic changes in the policies and ideologies of Western democracies in the United States and Europe. From the past decades celebrating diversity and multiculturalism 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 sounds bites by the mass media, fake news, pumping up fear, and instigating smear campaigns against the “other”.

Political analysts and theorists are caught by surprise and are scratching their heads trying to explain this phenomenon and find answers to the questions: Why? How could such things happen? What could be the next step?

It is not my purpose in this essay to answer these big political questions. However, since “all politics is local”, my colleagues and I already raised similar questions five years ago, when we witnessed the signs of the troubling erosion of democratic equality and multicultural tolerance even in the crisis of a learned organization, so called “International Society for Universal Dialogue” (ISUD). If an organization that explicitly declares dialogue as its purpose fails to live up to the declared principles and to carry out its purpose, and instead falls prey to an internal power struggle, this disgraces the whole idea of dialogue. A bad apple can spoil the whole crop.

In what follows I will briefly analyze the crisis of ISUD. Why was an organization, which was supposed to be democratic, usurped by a power-hungry group? How can an organization claim to be “international” if it is actually controlled by a dominating group from one country? How can an organization pretend to promote “universal dialogue” as its purpose if it is unable even to hold a civil dialogue among its members and leaders and is torn apart by internal conflict? Why did the disappointed members break their ties with ISUD and demand that the discredited organization be dissolved? This glaring discrepancy between the declared democratic norms and their actual trampling is unacceptable for any organization. It is particularly alarming in the case of an organization which declares as its purpose to promote “dialogue,” but which failed to fulfill its purpose and downgraded this notion to mere clichés.

Trying to understand the anatomy of the ISUD’s crisis and answer these questions is important for at least three main reasons. First, we need to learn the lessons from that, so that other learned organizations will be aware of the potential risks and will be able to protect themselves from being seized and used by those who are interested in power and money. Second, we need to know how to defend the principles of democracy – as a foundational principle of organization – from their distortions and abuse, and to regain genuine democracy. Third, 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.

1. The congress turned into a staged coup

My attention to ISUD was drawn by its Call for Papers for 9th congress. The promising theme of the congress “Democratic culture”, and its place in Olympia, Greece, looked attractive. However, my expectations were dashed. On the one hand, I enjoyed the hospitality of the organizers. On the other hand, I witnessed an internal conflict within the organization that disappointed its participants.

At the opening of the congress, ISUD president Leonidas Bargeliotis (Greece) informed that after his election as president during the previous 8th congress in Beijing in 2010, Charles S. Brown (US), who was an alternative candidate and lost the election, sent an e-mail to many addresses with extreme but groundless criticism of the congress, negatively projecting his personal frustration toward the Society and blaming the leadership. That scurvy trick of the looser was shocking to the participants and a slap in the face of the Chinese colleagues hosting the congress. Charles Brown with Kevin M. Brien (US) and a few supporters as the “destructive opposition” attacked the newly elected president and Board with false accusations, aiming to take over and control the organization. In the poisonous atmosphere of intrigues, the newly elected treasurer Andrew Fiala (US) had 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 quitted, which opened the door to the opposition.

Those participants who came to the 9th congress to be in dialogue (including myself) enjoyed the warm reception of its organizers and our discussions. But the opposition group came with a different political agenda and brought with them a power struggle. 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 end of the congress, the General Assembly and election on June 26, 2012 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.

At the beginning of the General Assembly, president Leonidas Bargeliotis 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. That was the good news, opening an opportunity for the further growth of the organization.

Surprisingly, however, in sharp contrast to those achievements, Charles Brown and Kevin Brien launched into a round of provocative questions and false accusations against outgoing president about allegedly “missing money”, which Leonidas Bargeliotis categorically denied as totally false and a continuation of their campaign for

undermining his presidency. Their supporters – Christopher Vasillopoulos (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 outgoing leadership with insults, below any civility, insinuating pseudo-problems and confusing the voting participants.

The general atmosphere was uncivil, at times, deteriorating to shouting and inappropriate expletives, which are incompatible with a professional academic meeting of an international association. 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.

One of the “surprises” and irregularities was the nomination by the opposition group of their alternative candidates for president and vice-president from the floor, bypassing the Board. According to the traditional practices and procedures of ISUD, which is a customary law, only the Board nominates the candidates for president or vice-president, who should be the active members of organization and proven by their service in the Board. Prior to the election, the Board had nominated Leonidas Bargeliotis for president and Y.V. Satyanarayana (India) for vice-president.

In violation of this customary law, at the General Assembly the opposition nominated from the floor their alternative candidates: Christopher Vasillopoulos (US) for presidency, and Panos Eliopoulos (Greece) for vice-presidency. Vetting and approval by the Board was particularly important, because they were new, never served at the Board and were unknown to most of the Society members. C. Vasillopoulos was invited by president L. Bargeliotis as a keynote speaker and was paid 2,000 euros honorarium, but he as the guest turned against the host and was running against L. Bargeliotis – an unprecedented unethical case. Another violation of a traditional procedure was that neither C. Vasillopoulos nor P. Eliopoulos presented themselves to the General Assembly, thus, the participants were kept in dark and didn’t have an opportunity to ask them questions about their backgrounds and to make an informed choice.

L. Bargeliotis had raised his objection against the nomination and election of C. Vasillopoulos and P. Eliopoulos. As it is recorded in the official Minutes of the ISUD General Assembly, June 26, 2012, “Leonidas Bargeliotis raised a question concerning the legitimacy of the results of the elections. In particular, he objected the candidacy of Christopher Vasillopoulos to be elected and 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. In response Christopher Vasillopoulos said that this might be ineligible but not necessary illegal.” Therefore, since Christopher Vasillopoulos was ineligible, his election was illegitimate. Nevertheless, their nomination and election was rushed through in the chaotic and manipulative atmosphere created by the opposition group which dominated the General Assembly.

Many participants pointed out electoral irregularities. The electoral process was not conducted properly. There were problems with ballots. The Secretary Lilian Karali

(Greece) and her Secretariat, who administered elections, rejected the original set of ballots with the list of the candidates approved by the Board, and instead issued the new set of ballots with different names, which included illegitimately nominated C. Vasilopoulos and P. Eliopoulos. That also created confusion. The ballots were not properly distributed, and thus some participants might have received more than one ballot. I was given three ballots. There was no authorized signature or seal of the election officer on the ballot paper (thus, one could go to the hall with a copying machine and make several copies of ballot). 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. The signatures of the members were not taken when the ballot papers were distributed. 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. Those who counted the votes only announced the result, without confirming who was present and who was actually eligible to vote. Without this, it was impossible to validate the election.

Because of both the 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, and only part of the participants remained for voting. Eighty six members participated in the congress, but only fifty seven votes were polled in the election. Those procedural problems with the contested election were particularly serious given the slight margin of difference (only six votes) between alternative candidates.

There were also serious violations of parliamentary procedures as formalized in *Robert's Rules of Order*, which are required norms for meetings of professional organizations. They stress the role of the Chair presiding the meeting: all the procedure – taking the floor, making a motion, seconding, debating, and voting – is regulated by the Chair and can be done only through the Chair upon his/her permission. Speakers must be courteous and do not disturb the assembly in any way.¹

However, 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 Bargeliotis' presiding authority of the Chair and de-facto usurped the administration of the meeting to rush through their agendas. I was shocked to see Kevin Brien stand with a microphone and, with extremely arrogant and instigating language, shout his personal attacks against leadership and dictate motions; the other members of the opposition seconded these motions and declared their resolutions passed. This was later pointed out by many participants of the meeting. As Peter Dumbuya (Shri-Lanka/US), an attorney at law and a historian, in his October 8, 2012 open letter to the members of the Society wrote: “The atmosphere in the General Assembly was chaotic, unruly, abusive, and hostile toward the outgoing presidency and

¹ *Robert's Rules of Order*, 1, 7, 43: <http://www.rulesonline.com/>

Board. It seems to me that there were no parliamentary procedures in place for conducting election and adopting amendments to the Constitution.”²

The similar testimony of irregularities of election and anti-democratic hegemonic attitude of the bully opposition was expressed by Y.V. Satyanarayana in his September 25, 2012 open letter to the members: “During the process of elections there were violations of parliamentary procedures. There was an unruly and chaotic atmosphere in the House, created by a certain group of members who were using their illegitimate methods for promoting their own candidates and seizing the power... This attitude is incompatible with the norms of an official meeting of the learned society. However, without any permission of the Chair, this group proposed their own motions, seconded them, loudly shouted ‘yes,’ and themselves declared their resolutions passed with claps, completely ignoring the other participants... 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 simply disrespectful. It was 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.”

Even before the General Assembly, during the congress the opposition group was plotting intrigues behind the scene, slandering the colleagues and trying to influence the participants and outcome of the election. As an example of this, L. Bargeliotis in his June 8, 2014 open letter to the members, mentioned a testimony of one of the congress participants from India, who wrote that “the day before the elections at the General Assembly, Charles Brown told him (and most likely not to only one) his fabrication about ‘missing money’. Normally, he 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 exhausted and documented answers, showing that there is no ‘missing money’). Instead Charles Brown was spreading false rumours about leadership and trying to mislead and influence the voters. This smear campaign was a part of the plot to grab the power. Another participant complained that ‘a few individuals one day before elections spread some rumours’ against him saying that he is a ‘fundamentalist’, therefore he should not be elected to the Board of ISUD”.

As a matter of fact, it was revealed that all of the opposition’s allegations against the leadership were proven false, a fabricated slander against colleagues who honestly served the organization. This dirty trick was used by this group to grab power.

² Here and in the rest of this text, I am quoting excerpts from the open-letter e-mails of the ISUD members during the almost three-years long hot public debate about the crisis of the organization, which were sent to many email addresses.

All this raised serious questions regarding the fairness of the election and legitimacy of its results. As an analogy with elections in the countries, if the “independent observers” from European Union or United Nations were monitoring the June 26, 2012 election, and were aware of all irregularities, they would declare the election unfair and its results illegitimate and invalid.

The participants of the General Assembly called it a “scandal”, a “plot”, and a “staged coup”. Particularly grave in the eyes of many participants was that the coup was staged during the conference on the *Democratic Culture* in Olympia, in the City Hall, right in front of the Olympic flame – the symbol of the fair competition, cosmopolitan virtues and friendship. However, it was disgraced by latter-day *conquistadores* who conspired to seize control of the organization.

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.”

2. The rise and fall of ISUD

Philosophers search for the cause to explain things. What happened with ISUD can be essentially understood in terms of the relationship between ends and means. Moral ends can only be achieved by morally good means. Based on what we have witnessed and learned about the organization during the hot debates about its crisis, we can reconstruct the general picture of the rise and fall of ISUD.

“What's in a name?” The name of this organization, founded back in 1989, initially was International Society for Universalism (ISU), reflecting the name of the journal *Dialogue and Universalism*. However, the use of the vague notion “universalism” was confusing (its meaning was not clarified philosophically and it was perceived by many as theological), so that in 2001 the organization changed its name, adding the word “dialogue”, thus becoming the current International Society for Universal Dialogue (ISUD). This, however, did not solve the problem with “universalism”, but instead created another problem: What does “universal dialogue” mean in the name of the organization? Is it a subject of study? It is not. Does it presume to represent a kind of “universal” conversation between everyone? Such a gigantic pretension would be ridiculous, given the parochial nature of this organisation, which is quite small and nomadic; its mostly one-time participants come from the universities hosting each congress and never show up again. 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.

This discrepancy between the appearance and essence was explained in L. Bargeliotis’ open letter to the members with the subject line “ISUD is hijacked and must

be dissolved” dated December 19, 2014: “The promising name of organization attracted some enthusiasts, who took at face value its declared purposes and 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. When 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. I know this very well from my personal experiences: after being elected as the President of ISUD in 2010, I became a target of vicious harassment by this group, which then staged the coup in 2012. 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”.

This background context helps us to better understand the root cause of the internal conflict which exploded at the 9th congress. As we can see, within ISUD there was a sharp contrast between two tendencies: One was represented by those members from different countries who served 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.

After the 8th congress (2010) this “destructive opposition” actively undermined the president, who had a mandate for transforming the organization. During the 9th congress in Olympia the oppositionists took revenge and seized control of ISUD, provoking its crisis. Unfortunately, the progressive tendency toward transformation was torpedoed, sealing the fate of organization.

3. Democratic transparency and an Independent Committee

Democratic transparency is the necessary condition for finding the truth and resolving conflicts. Those who were interested in dialogue proposed the solution to the crises through the mediation and the establishment of an Independent Committee. Several members from different countries, such as Eudora L. Pettigrew (US), Peter Dumbuya (Shri-Lanka/US), Y.V. Satyanarayana (India), Dilip Kumar Mohanta (India), Charalampos Magoulas (Greece), Barrie McCullough (Canada), among others, including myself, made a proposal to establish an Independent Committee. Eudora Pettigrew made the proposal: “I strongly suggest that neither members of the leadership team—past or present—take over the leadership of ISUD presently. I further recommend that an independent committee of five members, none of whom have any commitments to leadership and none of whom wish to become members of the leadership team, be installed to conduct an independent investigation of the charges

being made by each group. I further recommend that a respected and long-term member of ISUD be named temporary president and that he/she appoint a temporary committee to conduct the organizations business... Following the review, the membership can then proceed with the election of officers of ISUD... and hopefully the disagreements, that are so negative for ISUD will end.” The proposal was endorsed by many members of ISUD.

Nevertheless, C. Vasillopoulos, P. Eliopoulos, C. Brown, and K. Brien from the group claiming the power 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. Kevin Brien in his September 28, 2012 open letter spread a 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?”

To cover up the rigged election, this group not only rejected an Independent Committee, but also declared that instead they will “investigate” their opponents. Charles Brown, in his October 21, 2012 open letter to the membership, objected the establishment of an Independent Committee and on the same breath repeated the libel about allegedly “missing money”, which was proven false. However, the question arose: What is the grounds for this group, whose claim to power is illegitimate, to assume a role of self-styled “judges” in evaluating their opponents in this conflict? Obviously, this cannot be impartial or trustworthy. Their claim was unjustifiable morally and legally, because the process was corrupt from the very beginning. Only an impartial Independent Committee would have the authority to review the Society’s function.

Many ISUD members, characterizing the group in power as “junta”, voiced serious concern that under their control a “review” would be nothing but a weapon of vindictive “witch-hunt” against the previous leaders in order to frame them.

4. “The Emperor's New Clothes”

Illegitimate power needs a window-dressing. The poorer the substance, the more pretentious is its bombastic, grandiloquent demagoguery. Just like in Andersen’s “The Emperor's New Clothes”, where two swindlers mime dressing the naked emperor with fine clothes, so too did the junta to cover the naked truth of the broken organization by spinning a self-serving story about a “glorious” ISUD under its leadership.

Just a year after the coup at the 9th Congress, and in the midst of the organization’s crisis, when its members protested against the junta’s usurpation of power and

demanded an investigation of the rigged elections, the junta and its supporters used the journal *Dialogue and Universalism* for publishing an issue titled “Universal Dialogue” with papers by Charles Brown, Kevin Brien, Martha Beck, Emiliya Taysina, and John Rensenbrink.

If a curious reader attracted by the ambitious title would take a look at the content of the issue, he/she most likely would have been disappointed, because 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 ISUD, in a misleading way. Contrary to an honest conversation about the reality of the deepening crisis of the organization, its causes, and the possible solutions, their papers ignored “inconvenient truth”. Instead, they presented a false rosy picture of the organization, trying to convey messianic ideas that 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”.

C. Brown in his paper wrote about “the pluralist ethos of today’s world”.³ The irony is that these grandiloquent words about global ethos are penned by a leader of “destructive opposition” ruining ISUD, trampling ethical norms and libeling the colleagues, thus undercutting any dialogue. The failure to practice what he preached made these words hypocritical.

Only two papers had titles in which “universal dialogue” was mentioned (while not saying anything about it in substance). One was K. Brien’s piece, in which, instead of a scholarly analysis of a subject, he proudly presented a self-aggrandizing persona advertising his accomplishments in the form of an autobiographical meditation “about some milestones along my philosophical journey that concern universals, universal definitions, claims to universal moral principles, and universal dialogue”.⁴ ISUD members already witnessed K. Brien’s “universal moral principles” in action in his extremely unethical role during the coup in Olympia and aftermath, trampling elementary moral norms by slandering honest colleagues. Another was M. Beck’s piece, claiming that “the ISUD can nurture the process of the development of reflective self-consciousness in the formation of an international culture, an emerging suprasystem”.⁵ The gap between the reality of the organization in crisis and its glorified image was so abyssal that it ought to belong to a product of fiction.

J. Rensenbrink’s essay mostly reviewed the history of ontologies, saying that “dialogue emerges from being itself”.⁶ It described dialogue in terms of substance and essences, ignoring an interpersonal character of dialogue and its ethical dimension. E. Taysina’s essay did not say anything in substance about dialogue and was rather about

³ Charles S. Brown, “Identity and Difference: Overcoming the Master Self through the Cultivation of a Dialogical Self-Identity”, *Dialogue and Universalism (D&U)* 3/2013: 83–94.

⁴ Kevin M. Brien, “A Meditation on Universal Dialogue”, *D&U* 3/2013: 35–62.

⁵ Martha C. Beck, “Systems Thinking and Universal Dialogue: The Creation of a Noosphere in Today’s Era of Globalization”, *D&U* 3/2013:123.

⁶ John Rensenbrink, “Dialogue and Being—an Ontological Investigation”, *D&U* 3/2013: 7–22.

“semiotics of globalization”.⁷ J. Campbell in her article about “global stewardship” of caring for the entire globe (and in a surprising non-sequitur), she strangely attributed this unbelievably gigantic role to “ISUD as antidote to global despair”.⁸

If that was all the authors were able to say about “universal dialogue” it is not much at all. Upon reading these papers, a reader cannot find any clarification of what they mean by “universal dialogue”. The words “universal dialogue” are being used as an attractive marketing name, but without underlying substance.

But the main problem with these papers was misrepresenting the broken ISUD as a center of “universal dialogue” and, consequently, this group in power as self-styled leaders of “world 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 ambitiousness juxtaposed with poor performance looked 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. As at the end of Andersen’s tale about the Emperor’s new clothes, a child cries out, “But he isn’t wearing anything at all!”

5. The call for dissolution

The 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 ISUD, to organize its congresses and elections. This arbitrary decision, bypassing the will of the members, was illegitimate.

The members could decide the time and place of the next congress and election only after an Independent Committee’s review of the unsettled questions regarding the election at the 9th congress in Olympia. 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. The congress and election should only have been organized by an independent and trustworthy committee, so that the conditions for free discussions concerning the Society’s issues and a fair election would be guaranteed.

Instead, contrary to the will of the members (and in a dictatorial manner), the junta simply imposed its will and political agenda on the membership. The junta took away

⁷ Emiliya A. Taysina, “Semiotics of Globalization as a Subject of Philosophical Reflection”, *D&U* 3/2013: 137-152.

⁸ Jean A. Campbell, “Global Stewardship—ISUD as Antidote to Global Despair”, *D&U* 4/2013:187.

de facto control from the members and abused the organizational structure and funds for organizing its illegitimate “10th congress” and election.

The outraged members protested, questioning the purpose of such a congress organized by the illegitimate junta. I resigned from the Board. In my open letter of resignation, dated June 28, 2014 I wrote: “The controversial issue of the 10th Congress was never discussed with the Board... There were no discussions on scholarly matters, but only an obsession with power and money. This group simply imposed its political agenda over the membership. Their attitude was undemocratic and an antidote to dialogue”.⁹

The purpose of that 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. After the coup in Olympia in 2012, they cheated the members second time in 2014.

Their congress – bypassing the membership, with the glaring absence of the vast majority of the relatively long standing actual members, who were registered during the 9th congress in 2012 and who were aware of the crisis of organization – was not a legitimate ISUD congress. More than 80 percent of the participants were new, not related to ISUD, from the local university hosting the conference. Participants did not know anything about the coup and the leaders who plunged the organization into crisis, and they were misinformed. The misled freshmen participants were used by this group in manipulated pseudo-election to “re-elect themselves”, and Charles Brown became “treasurer” and Emiliya Taysina “secretary”.¹⁰

That was anything but the ISUD congress. It was rather a political show. The illegitimacy of its organizers and of staged election made its outcome and decisions illegitimate. Most of those who were registered as members in 2012 expressed their rejection of this illegitimate congress and usurpation of power by “voting with their feet” and boycotting it.

By that unilateral, dictatorial action, this group burned the bridges of communication with the ISUD members. This group cynically showed their anti-democratic nature and abuse of power, thus discrediting themselves in the eyes of the members and alienating themselves from the Society. Their continuing control over the organizational structure and funds was used for their own self-serving interests and was

⁹ This politics was in a sharp contrast to the democratic principles of non-profit organizations. I mentioned somewhere the norms of democracy and dialogue as criteria for evaluation of relationships at intersubjective, social, and intercultural levels. See Jovino Pizzi, “Top-down and Bottom-up Democracy: the new Political Configuration”, in: *Skepsis*, XXII/III, 2012, p. 262-280.

¹⁰ Emiliya Taysina published an article about the “10th congress”, ecstatically glorifying the current ISUD and its leadership while concealing the real crisis of the organization, and this half-truth was a deception. She further promoted the next ISUD congress and called others to participate and “to become the members of this international philosophical society in order to help to form universal world consciousness for the gradual construction of a decent world order.” Emiliya Taysina, “The jubilee X World Congress of the International Society for Universal Dialogue”, *Vestnik of RPhS* №3 (71) (2014):43.

tantamount to usurpation. In a protest, most of the relatively long standing Society members broke their ties with the notorious organization. That was the end of ISUD.

The situation was summarized in L. Bargeliotis' open letter to the members with the subject line "ISUD is hijacked and must be dissolved", dated December 19, 2014: "On behalf of the like-minded members of ISUD, who take at face value its declared purpose and stand for the genuine principles of the international dialogue, but who cannot accept the trampling of these principles by the usurpers who hijacked the organization and degenerated it into something not worthy of its name, I requested the *dissolution* of the ISUD... This organization actually ceased to be ISUD anymore, it is unable to carry out its purposes and therefore needs to be formally dissolved. The latest development with the illegitimate '10th congress' in which the junta 're-elected themselves', perpetuating its usurpation, confirmed *the urgent need of its dissolution*".

The junta was unable to say anything of substance and responded with a new wave of libellous personal attacks. Kevin Brien sent his February 8, 2015 email and letter to many addresses with the subject line "The ISUD must be dissolved" /A Response", which had no valid arguments but was extremely instigating in tone, viciously attacking past leaders and repeating his and Charles Brown's already refuted lie about allegedly "missing money". The libelous "war by words" wedged by junta against the fellow members came in conflict with the law. This was not only a violation of the rules governing organizations, but also a breach of the law.

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. Thus, the former president sought legal protection from that defamatory attack through the State of Maryland judicial system. 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 from Baltimore sent the official letter to the ISUD members confirming that all allegations were groundless and untrue and that they were "categorically and absolutely rejected, in the strongest possible terms".

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.

Instead of dissolving the broken organization, the entrenched junta continues using it for their interest of power and money. In 2016 it held its "11th congress" in Warsaw, following the pattern of the previous illegitimate congress, with the same misinformation and manipulation. The junta members again re-elected and promoted themselves, perpetuating their control over the organization. In any normal organization, the perpetrators of the coup would be expelled from it for this. But in the abnormal environment of an organization controlled by usurpers, they promoted themselves. Charles Brown became "president" and Kevin Brien became "treasurer" (a fox guarding the henhouse). They achieved their coveted goal and paved the way to power through intrigue, slander of honest colleagues, and a staged coup, thus ruining the organization. By doing so, however, they also disgraced themselves.

What remains is a pseudo-ISUD, a simulacrum. It has degenerated into a “pocket club” of the junta, interested in power and money. Nevertheless, it continues posing as if it were a dialogical organization, advertising and self-glorifying itself, misleading, using, and then disappointing those who take at face value its idle talk about “universal dialogue”. It disgraces the whole idea of dialogue.

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. This compromises the entire concept of sponsorship. Money is power, and its outcome depends on who is using it and for what purpose. Normally, external funding is helpful if it goes to the right hands in democratic, transparent organizations in good standing. But 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. Grants can be a magnet for those who are interested in personal profit. 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. In this situation, receiving grants looks like an undeserved reward for this usurpation, and it is counterproductive.

Many organizations that do not receive any external funding depend on the contributions of their members and thus are motivated to attract more members through creative scholarly activities and genuinely democratic and dialogical relationships. But in this case, the junta (with Charles Brown as “president” and Kevin Brien as “the custodian of the treasury of ISUD”) is milking the Jens Jacobsen Trust and monopolizes both the organizational structure and outside money, so it is not interested in the independent members who would hold the junta accountable. 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. They can do whatever they want, regardless of and unaccountable to the members, including staging their own shallow, tourism-like congresses that are put on for show and as justification for seeking more grants. 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. In this case, external funding became incommensurable with a broken organization which should have been dissolved, artificially prolonging the agony of a soulless body.

6. To separate the wheat from the chaff: in defense of genuine dialogue

Those members who know the reality about the broken organization have expressed their opinion. As, for example, Xenia Georgopoulou in her e-mail to the ISUD members wrote: “And you call that a society for UNIVERSAL DIALOGUE? HILARIOUS!” Paul Gallagher called it “a parody”. Robert Jacobs from Hiroshima Peace Institute, in his April 21, 2016 message, in response to the demagoguery spread by ISUD email list, requested: “Please remove my email from this pathetic list. I think I’ve learned all that I need to know about the value of universal dialogue.” Indeed, the glaring hypocrisy of this parochial group, pretending to represent a “universal dialogue”, is pathetic.

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. 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 FISP also has provisions for the exclusion of members.

From the notorious scandal of ISUD there are several lessons to learn: It shows the “technology of power” used by those who are interested in seizing a non-profit organization and using it for their self-serving appetites as a source of power and money. Those who want to protect and preserve the normal functioning of an organization should be aware of these threats and take all the necessary precautions for preventing them. The bylaws, written rules, and procedures for governing the organization should be clear and detailed regarding all aspects of elections, accountability, and removal from office 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, so that the spirit of law will be explicitly spelled out. The members of organizations should keep high professional and ethical standards in relationships within the organization, particularly regarding the leadership.

Democratic principles of transparency and accountability should be implemented at all levels of the organization and its activities, internally and externally. Any organization should be kept accountable to the laws of the States of their incorporation. The organizations which are members of larger associations should also be kept accountable to the rules and principles governing such associations. These organizations frequently seek funding from outside sources (such as foundations, trusts, and charitable funds). Such external funding, however, can be attractive to unscrupulous individuals who are interested in profiting from such an 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.

Making the rules and their implementation ultimately depends on people – on members of organization – and their honesty, integrity, and readiness to stand for the practical realization of the declared ethical, democratic, and scholarly principles and values of the organization. These criteria are particularly important in learned associations declaring as their purpose the promotion of dialogue or other humanistic ideals. They are expected to demonstrate much higher standards and must practice genuinely democratic relationships within the organization itself, prior to preaching them to others.

Dialogue is a noble ideal, inspiring many of its adherents. However, it cannot be taken for granted. As anything which has value, including great ideals, it can be (and is) a magnet attracting opportunists with hegemonic instincts who may cynically exploit it for their self-serving interests. The practice of dialogue involves the relations of power. Thus, the adherents of genuine democratic dialogue need to be aware of this, to be able to separate the wheat of genuine dialogue from the chaff of pseudo-dialogic simulacra.

While the degeneration of an organization such as ISUD is disappointing for many, nevertheless there is something bigger than that. As long as scholarly and democratic principles and values remain in our hearts and minds, guiding us in our research and communication, the genuine dialogue will remain vivid, alive and normatively invincible, practiced in relationships at all levels – from intersubjective to social and intercultural. The spirit of dialogue will be shared by those who create their personality in dialogue with the others, who are loving and giving, and who work for the common good. This gives us a hope.