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(liste at March 1, 2004)

EGOS : AN ASSOCIATION WITH A DIFFERENCE

by

Jean-Claude THOENIG

Director of Research, CNRS

Professor, INSEAD

Founding Member and first President, EGOS

November 6th, 2003

Report by Thomas Paris

Translation by Rachel Marlin

Overview

In a conventional world, they dreamed of being different from others. They were teachers and researchers in Europe. They dreamed of a place where they could meet and freely debate the enormous subject of organisational studies. So they created EGOS the European Group for Organisational Studies, an enterprise which had seemed improbable for a long time, carrying out imprecise activities, but with increasing success. In a changing world where the American business school model has become the norm, where economic and sales aspects have become established, and where everyone thinks in the same way, was it possible for EGOS with its individual identity to survive ? In view of the dominant American model, Egos is increasingly proving to be an alternative.

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TALK : Jean-Claude THOENIG

I am going to tell you the story of EGOS. It is an adventure which has lasted for thirty-two years. It is the story of a scientific association which has existed for a long time in an unusual way and which has made mistakes. In other words it has been unique. This is because we, its founders, organisers and members, dreamed of being different in what we saw as a conventional world. In listening to this story, I invite you to discover another way of thinking about the geopolitics of science and an unusual form of management.

EGOS today

EGOS¹ is a non-profit association with Belgian statutes, whose secretariat is located in Denmark and whose board – a chairman and eight members – is made up of different nationalities. It survives financially on the subscriptions of its current nine hundred members, compared with five hundred and seventy-two in the year 2000.

EGOS has a dual *raison d'être*. According to its website, it is first and foremost a professional association of teachers and researchers who act as a network for the promotion of knowledge about organisations, organizing and organized. Note that the word 'management' is not used. Additionally, it is an international academic network based in Europe – but not European only! –, where experiences and ideas can be exchanged. We are not exclusively European, but we have an identity that is based on alternative ways in which we work compared to other continents and notably North America.

In terms of activities, EGOS organises an annual conference and publishes a journal (entitled Organisation Studies) and has done so for the past twenty-two years. EGOS also has six permanent work groups that discuss new topics as varied as the symbolic analysis of organisations or alliances between enterprises. EGOS sponsors ad hoc, specialised conferences and workshops for doctoral students. It manages a website which is user-friendly and which is frequently consulted. Finally, EGOS relies on a set of informal national correspondents.

EGOS people or 'Egosians'

The average age of the members of EGOS (who, with the passage of time, become Egosians) is forty-two. The majority of EGOS are academics such as teachers and researchers (80 %) but also postgraduate students (17 %). Eighty percent of the members are European, 10 % American. Among the Europeans, the British represent the largest group (24 %) followed by the Scandinavians (17 %) and the French (11 %).

Two-thirds of Egosians are linked in some way to business schools², and a third are attached to university departments, principally in social sciences and economics. Ninety-one percent of Egosians read our journal and 50 % of the people who come to our annual conference return the following year. Membership in other organisations is another interesting characteristic ; 98 % of our members are also members of a national scientific and professional association and 40 % are members of the Academy of Management.

The main reason why Egosians come to our conferences is to work with like-minded people. This is different to the Academy of Management, where during the annual colloquium participants move from one group to another. We insist that our participants remain in the same workgroup for the entire duration of the conference. We want human exchange and scientific dialogue or debate to occur. EGOS is not a showplace or a labour market Another

¹ <http://www.egosnet.org>

² Business schools here include French business schools which have the particularity of not being attached to a university department.

reason is the variety of subjects discussed, the large number of countries involved, the openness to diverse paradigms, and so on. A third reason is that all the participants are equal.

The founding myth

Our friends at the Academy of Management have designated EGOS as a professional bureaucracy. However, it is a professional bureaucracy that is not like any other. Importantly, it concerns three thousand people rather than just a few. It is a story about passion which has stood the test of time.

Like any undertaking of this nature, EGOS has its own founding myth. At the start of this European enterprise, there was an American, Michael Aiken. Having spent a year in Europe, he noticed something which seemed to him absurd: as an American, he knew more people in Europe than the Europeans knew themselves. It was these same Europeans who regarded American research as second rate and ignored European research, which, according to Aiken, was first class. It was in his office at the University of Minnesota that European scholars met each other. Europeans had made several attempts in the 1950s and 1960s to set up meetings between people who were important in our area. Michael Aiken was the catalyst. He toured Europe for several months, meeting and consulting people in Belgium, Germany and France. In Paris, he met Michel Crozier and myself. Together, we went to see the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* (Human Sciences Centre), which was trying to organise a conference. We met its administrator, Clemens Heller, who had been an extraordinary entrepreneur of scientific initiatives all his life. He showed interest and agreed to give us his support. At the same time, but under different circumstances, EDF (Électricité de France) offered to use its *château* at Bréau-sur-Nappe if we wanted to host a two-day meeting outside Paris. This is where it all began.

We really did not know what we wanted to do! In essence, Michael Aiken told us that he felt the Americans were in the process of 'stealing' Max Weber and his work on organisations from us Europeans. He said that Weber's work was only translated from German into English – and not into French or Italian – and if Europeans wanted to know what was going on in Europe, they had to go to Stanford or Cornell to get the information from American colleagues. He said that we Europeans were in the process of being marginalised, since in order to be recognised on an international scale we had to publish in English. The struggle against the hijacking of our heritage and marginalisation was all we needed to motivate us. We decided to form ourselves into a network of 'organisation studies', a term which had not hitherto existed, and to keep an open mind on business schools. We wanted to show that we were academics, working in sociology and political science departments, and that we were had nothing against colleagues and their research which was more 'action-oriented'

The temporary status which lasts

EGOS' story and survival are hard to believe. For the first twenty-three years of its existence, we have never had statutes, money or elected officials. The network was absolutely informal, we lived in a temporary situation where we always had to improvise. Every one-and-a-half to two years, someone suggested organising a conference, and it was in this way that our conferences took place. For the very first conference, fifty people came, and then one hundred, then two hundred but there was no programme. Obviously something had to be done. So we started discussing our activities. There was virtually no co-ordination. It was a real mess, at the opposite of the big annual conferences of major American associations ! We also became quite creative.

In the same way, there was a newsletter that gave out information but on a very irregular basis. It existed thanks to the resourcefulness of people who generously gave of their time while having a day job, initially those from the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*, and later those at the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations*.

We did not really know in which direction we were heading. We simply wanted to be together, discover our colleagues and their research projects operating around Europe, etc. And yet EGOS stood the test of time and it worked. It has already existed for twenty-three years, organised twelve conferences and involved three thousand people.

There is always one overriding principle, namely the freedom to set the tone. We were opposed by American journals which, since the 1970s, had adopted an editorial policy emphasizing one particular paradigm, for example 'resource dependence' theory or later network theory over a number of years. By opposing this model, we extolled the virtues of transparency and the discovery of people who thought like us. We thereby became a forum for open discussion where people did not feel confined to mainstream ideas. Another characteristic which emerged was that our conferences involved three generations, leading figures in their fields, 'up and coming' young people, and the very young. Lastly, we were primarily driven by altruism: everything we did was free as militants operate.

In terms of a scientific programme, we were sloppy. There was no explicit platform or scientific project, it was still in the process of being created. We did not want to become involved with aspects such as elections of our leaders or budgets. Excluding schools of thought was the error not to make. We had a relative and not an absolute approach to unusual events : on the face of it, there were no 'bad' ideas. What counted a great deal more than having a programme was to have a unique style : being able to talk about science in a free and open manner. Gurus, 'true believers', quantification freaks, and all sorts of narrow-minded colleagues found this kind of discussion difficult to get used to

The world changes

The world changed suddenly in the field of organisational studies in its broad sense, which range from organisational theory in its traditional definition, to psychosociology.

It was impossible to stop the rise of business schools by contrast with the relative decline of the traditional departments of social sciences and sociology. This can be easily measured by looking at the careers of teachers in this field. Figures from three conferences given by EGOS at the beginning of the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s show that more than 80 % of the two hundred and fifty scholars in the sample left their social science departments to work in business schools. This was particularly striking in the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Great Britain but the same was true in France.

At the same time in business schools, organisational studies became a key discipline in the teaching offered in the departments. When I was recruited by INSEAD in the 1980s, two teachers interviewed me. One asked me if I was a socialist – a sociologist appeared to be equated to a socialist –, and the other asked if, outside of social psychology, whether I thought it was necessary for social sciences to be taught in a business school. Today, there is not so much differentiation between organisational studies and strategy. At the same time, in business schools, as in the departments of social sciences which have survived (and have not become dominated by advocates of moral causes), organisational studies have incorporated themes, scholars and research which range from philosophy to epistemology, by way of history, and so on. We have gone from "light-hearted psychological activity" to strategy and from human resources to philosophy. This phenomenon is particularly striking in Europe, much more so than in American business schools.

Another aspect of this change has been a generalised americanisation, with the diffusion of the business school model, principally in Great Britain and Northern Europe. All the same, this americanisation has been kept under control quite well : the model was adopted in a slightly modified form. The American system of almost automatic evaluation and promotion of teachers based on their publications in the high-ranking journals has so far not been copied to a full extent.

Finally, the institutionalisation of academic communities, of knowledge, of peripheral professions and so on has increased in a spectacular way in Europe in the last twenty years. EGOS had to become adult because the world around required it.

The sudden emergence of an economic dimension

Another change that was a problem for EGOS was the assertion of an economic dimension. In the space of twenty years, organisational knowledge has become a relevant business and an active financial market. Education and executive training have progressed in business schools as well as inside companies. It is also a market in three fields which are very closely linked and which reinforce each other, namely the ranking of journals, the economic value and the citations of journals, the career and money benefits authors published get in return inside their institution. The ranking of journals has an impact on the value of the journal and the value of the authors who write for the journal. No European journal or institution could match the hegemonic influence of the top journals in the profession that all were located in the USA. To remain open and tolerant to a variety of perspectives and to fundamentals was not any longer just a matter of spontaneous good will.

In 1981, we decided to create a journal. David Hickson, one of the pillars of the association (he was one of the founders of EGOS called the 'Superegos'), signed an agreement with a German editor on a private basis. Two or three years ago, we disagreed with this editor on the idea of distributing the journal in the United States. At the end we decided to change our editor. Subsequently, we had to pay a fine that was part of his contract. How much did it cost to have a free hand? We had absolutely no idea because we had never seen the distribution figures. We only knew that the contract stated that we owed five years of turnover. We clubbed together to buy back our freedom and we raised one hundred and fifty thousand Euros. Actually, we owed seven hundred and fifty thousand Euros. Without our knowing it, the journal generated annual receipts of three hundred thousand Euros with expenses amounting to less than one hundred thousand Euros. The figures are similar for other journals in this field. It is an extremely profitable business. Finally, the editor put us up for auction and we were bought for approximately one million two hundred thousand Euros. Therefore journals have a value both for the editor and for the academics.

In addition, one has to say that academia has become a very open labour market in which transfers take place as in the world of football. Scholars get better salaries than before and have much more time pressure to deliver an increasing number of sessions to classes made of people who pay and feel much less attracted by the roots of the discipline than by the latest fad in the domain.

The definition of an identity

These changes meant that in 1996 we had to ask ourselves how were we going to survive, despite the fact that we were not amateurs, that we were not losing our staff, and that we had started to organise a conference every year. What could we do ? We decided to maintain our position and not be like the others. We tried hard to define principles which reflected our *raison d'être*. We found three such principles.

Firstly, our roots are in social sciences. Consequently, our work is not aimed at company managers but policy makers. We study the likely consequences of decisions that have been taken and not just decisions to be taken. As a result, we adopt a general rather than a specialised discipline, one which covers the social sciences in the broadest sense of the term, drawing on aspects of sociology, economics, history, epistemology, and so on.

The second aspect of our identity is our ability to comprehend and mobilise different disciplines of the social sciences, and the importance of *verstehen*³, in other words, the ability to adopt different points of view. The third aspect is plurality. We deal not only with big subject areas, but also with more precise questions. In our conferences, we are very keen to work on particular subjects in our workshops in order to guarantee this plurality.

We have also defined a certain number of rules to assert our identity. Firstly, we are European. This means that our board and our chairman have to be European, that the editor of the journal should also be European and that the conferences should take place in Europe. But we are not a conservative group. We are global. To emphasise this, we have two deputy editors in chief for the journal, one based in the United States and the other in Australia. At our conferences, we make sure that we keep this global 'European' character, in the division of responsibilities.

Finally, we have a long-term vision. We believe in the possible decline of the business school model and retain an open mind about other models. We want to be prepared for this.

The geopolitics of management

Undoubtedly, knowledge is power. It is significant that one of the first acts that the Bush administration took in liberated Iraq was to grant three hundred scholarships for Iraqis to study for MBAs in the United States. Today, EGOS is faced with competition from different models such as EURAM, the Academy of Management, EIASM and so on. We want to create another model which is different and one in which we believe. We have started to develop a foreign policy with a view to helping regions outside Europe and North America to do the same. We are currently setting up a long-term cooperation with Latin America. There is a strong demand from some of our local colleagues that the annual congress of the Academy of Management should not be the only place that exists for the exchange of knowledge and recognition in the field of organisational studies.

Our 'American friend'

By comparison with the dominance of the model of the professional American associations, we are the minor players. Therefore, it is not up to us to disagree with them or to ignore them. It is a case of proposing alternatives. In these circumstances, it is important that our journal should be ranked among the top ten, while preserving its unique identity. With our 'American friend', we become part of a 'partner - rival' relationship.

³ In Max Weber's work, *verstehen* is the attempt to understand. This is in contrast to the attempt to explain (*erklären*). *Verstehen* supposes that the observer adopts the point of view of what is being observed, in other words, the subject of the action.

DISCUSSION

Is the Academy of Management a fair ?

Michel Berry : The Academy of Management is not a scientific conference. It is more than a market ; it is a fair. One goes there primarily to see what is happening behind the scenes. Notably it is recruitment that is most successful. However, in order to be reimbursed for one's airline ticket to attend, one has to have a paper that is accepted and so one submits papers. They are relatively standardised because there is a selection procedure. The rule is that one in three papers submitted is accepted. However, each paper has three academics who act as assessors, and this often leads to the elimination of those papers which have at least one adverse assessment. Therefore, those papers which are outside the norm are quite likely not to be accepted. Consequently, there are many papers which are suitable, but this is not the key determinant. What matters, is what happens behind the scenes.

Jean-Claude Thoenig : At EGOS, we are always surprised to learn that American colleagues, who do not know that we exist, discover to their astonishment that there is "a conference which is about science"...

The risk of standardising

Question : *Having attended three EGOS conferences separated by several years, I find that the mood of the conference has changed because the size has changed. There used to be a very intellectual atmosphere which in general has disappeared, even though it can still be found in the subgroups. EGOS has become an institution. The standardising and the conformity perhaps tend to come with increasing size. What do you do to avoid this quite natural development ?*

J.-C. T : One never gets perfection in this world. But nevertheless we try to achieve it. For example, from the moment that two people from two different institutions and two different countries suggest an underlying theme, there is a greater chance that it will be accepted. In addition, in selecting papers, we are biased in favour of new entrants which is in keeping with our desire to be always open-minded.

What has happened to critical thinking ?

Q. : *How do you explain that the critical approach, for instance in management studies, has difficulty in expressing itself in France, and particularly that very little research is carried out in this field today ?*

M. B : I do not think that there is any particular difficulty in France. Perhaps there are difficulties in business schools but the critical approach is still flourishing in France, especially in sociology and even in business studies, for example at the CRG (Centre de recherche en gestion de l'École polytechnique). In England, the process of critical thinking develops in business schools. An explanation might be that twenty years ago Mrs. Thatcher cut off substantial funds to this area, resulting in a significant number of philosophers shutting themselves away in business schools.

Q. : There is another fundamental difference : in France, business schools are offshoots of chambers of commerce. Therefore, it is in their nature to conform to business' way of thinking, in contrast to other European countries where they are departments in universities. This is the origin of the paradox that the French are behind with respect to higher education being a market product. And yet they show a greater intellectual conformity than the English. It is true that this is diminishing but it is taking its time.

J.-C. T : In France, conformity also exists in universities or in institutions which do not come under the chambers of commerce, where some teachers not only integrate the American model but sometimes, to exaggerate, prove to be more Catholic than the Pope. However,

ultimately, as teachers in business schools we are not intellectuals, but trainers of future managers. The role of EGOS is to propose an alternative to these institutions.

Strategy with regards the United States

Q. : *You seem to have a real strategy in relation to the United States. You changed the editor in order to establish yourselves there. You want to be among the top ten journals and so on. How do you think you will implement this strategy ? Why would your members go to the United States with EGOS rather than going there as a result of invitations from journals and American conferences ?*

J.-C. T : We want to go to the United States since we are Europeans and also global. The implementation is obviously essential because if we do not take notice of the smallest details, our overall vision will remain just wishful thinking, and inevitably the American model will take over. For example, we know that prospective authors submitting their work to journals, especially young authors, pay a great deal of attention to the names of the editor-in-chief and the deputy editors. In our latest appointment of the editorial committee, we did not change the editor-in-chief and the deputy editors, but we tried very hard to avoid an excessive representation of people from business schools. Similarly, there is always an important lecture during the conferences. Experience has shown us that we have to systematically ask our invited speaker to try to continue our style of thinking and not to give the usual standardized academic address. Informal little rules like this matter.

Q. : *The EGOS example seems interesting to me since it shows a way in which one can play at being European. As you say, one should define oneself not 'with regards to', but 'different to' something. This is essential at a time when European research is trying to be structured.*

The disappearance of whales and the hang-up about money

Q. : *Why do Europeans only ever meet in the United States ? I think it is a problem to do with population density. It is similar to whales : they are disappearing simply because there are not enough whales to meet up and to mate any longer. There are not sufficient numbers of people like you in Europe and you have to go to the United States in order to meet each other. Why are there not more of you in Europe ? Perhaps because of a hang-up in relation to money. You haven't appreciated sufficiently that you were in an economic sector and you have remained in a voluntary work mode.*

J.-C. T : It is no longer true today that Europeans only meet in the United States. Of course, the French still meet at the Academy of Management. But they also meet at EGOS. Four thousand five hundred people have taken part in our conferences in the last seven conferences. Some Americans also meet at EGOS ! As far as the economic aspect is concerned, we developed according to a craftsman's method because we have no financial backer. There would have been subsidies from the European Union if we had been a disciplinary company, based on the model of American associations.

M. B : Europeans meet at the Academy of Management because they are under pressure from their institutions, which themselves are under pressure from the American model. Non-American business schools care about being highly ranked and encourage their teachers to publish in American journals and to adopt the American model.

Q. : *Today, there are times when EGOS looks like the tower of Babel. It is not always easy to find one's way around in such a varied setting which may seem like a maze for those who go to the conferences. We do not always understand what, for instance, the Dutch or any other nationality say or do, but in the long run, this may be very positive. Potentially, we are in the process of creating a cultural hotbed but this may result in the whales finding each other in the end.*

Presentation of the speaker :

Jean-Claude Thoenig is a director of research at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research : GAPP, École normale supérieure de Cachan) and sociology professor at the INSEAD business school. He was dean at INSEAD. He is the author of work on companies and public administrations. His most recent book, written with Claude Michaud, is entitled *Making Strategy and Organization Compatible*, London, Palgrave, 2003.
E-mail : thoenig@gapp.ens-cachan.fr

Translation by Rachel Marlin (marlin@wanadoo.fr)