The Bridges Project Retreat 2016
Who is "We"? New Interpretations of the Collective

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CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE FOR DECISION MAKERS

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Our focus: New interpretations of the collective

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▶ The European collective faces unprecedented challenges. Europe remains one of the most open and prosperous regions of the world; however, the controversial responses that European governments are providing to the so-called "migrants crisis", responses to security challenges and long-term economic stagnation, are a sign that **European openness and prosperity are under threat**.

▶ Europe finds itself at an impasse: having to maintain current levels of security and openness, as well as certain standards of living, in the face of rapidly changing economic, technological, and socio-political scenarios. Europeans need to **re-interpret the relationships between themselves, their institutions, their values, and the forms and rituals of their collective life and endeavours.**

▶ Policy-makers are confronted with the need to **redesign the forms and norms of collective life** that will have a lasting impact on European societies for years to come.

The Bridges Project Retreat 2016 brought together some of the world's top policy-makers and politicians, with cutting edge researchers and public intellectuals to talk about the concept of the collective. We gathered to re-think the collective through a wide range of disciplines, from psychoanalysis to theoretical physics.

Our goal

Moving from a sense of threat to new possibilities

Perceptions of a European collective under threat

Sharing different perspectives on collectives

New understandings of behaviour, institutions, and values that will inform open and progressive policies and move the European collective out of its current impasse

Our goal

▶ To provide alternative frameworks to understand collectives thus opening up possibilities for new, ambitious and far-reaching public policies.

▶ We asked the following questions:

1. What is a collective?
2. What makes us a collective?
3. What dilemmas challenge collectives?
4. Which assumptions are we making about collectives?
5. How do different disciplines challenge these assumptions?
6. What are the key insights for policy-making?

What is a collective?

1. A shared set of **cognitive and moral connections**

"An individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution." (Polletta and Jaspers)

2. An aggregate of people who are **significant for each other**

"We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents for instance – and they disappear from our lives, our conversation with them continues within us as long as we live**.**" (Charles Taylor)

3. An imagined community

"A political community is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them. Yet in the mind of each, lives the image of their communion."
(Benedict Anderson)

What makes us, our group, a collective?

1. Our willingness to share

2. Expectations about each other's significance

3. An imagined community: Europe

1.1 Our shared convictions and interests tend to outweigh our differences.

2.1 Our conviction that *mindful policy-making makes a difference* in fostering more open and tolerant societies.

3.1 Our interest in the European collective, its principles and its values.

1.2 The willingness to negotiate differences as we spend time with each other.

2.2 Our hope to gain *new thought-provoking perspectives* on the questions and problems we bring to the Bridges Project Retreat.

3.2 Our worries that Europe may be disabled or fail.

1.3 Our willingness to hear each other and our hope that by coming together we will come away richer.

Our concerns: The dilemmas facing the European collective

Necessity to give an immediate response to "crises"

Desire to include others

Culture of consumerism

Vs.

Technology as an opportunity for promoting diversity and citizenship

Crafting policies under the "rational/autonomous individual" assumption

Need to set forth long-term strategies targeting structural inequalities

Fear of security threats

Practices of active citizenship

Technology as a force that tends to erase meaningful differences between people

Crafting policies respectful of human beings' existential complexity

Our assumptions about collectives

We tend to operate on a set of **flawed assumptions about:**

 # 1.
The relationship between individuals and collectives

- Individuals **are autonomous agents**.
- Individuals always and exclusively **pursue their own profit**. A society's welfare is the automatic result of its members' well-being.
- **Collectives are made up of independent individual actors**. Collective behaviour is the simple sum of individual action.

 # 2.
The relationship between collectives

- The transmission of values in families (such as honesty, trustworthiness...) is a **one-way process**: parents transmit their values to their children.
- **Local communities have become less relevant** for state institutions in a globalised society.
- Collectives are based on **commonality and harmony.**

 # 3.
The relationship between technology and collectives

- The digital revolution has impacts but it **does not change our psychological and cultural reality.** We do not have to rethink our models of production, expertise, and participation.

 # 4.
The relationship between values and collectives

- Secular cultures have a **closed set of values that all members should conform to.**
- Contemporary **religions** are inherently linked to the cultures from which they stem. Religions are **markers of cultural identity.**

Challenging assumption # 1:

Assumption: Individuals are autonomous agents.

- Individuals are capable of judging and evaluating others and circumstances fully autonomously.
- The degree to which people make autonomous decisions depends on personality traits: *autonomous personalities* are more fit to make autonomous decisions, whereas *conformist personalities* are more fit and likely to follow decisions others have made.

? WHY do we make this assumption

Capitalism is based on the belief that individuals are autonomous. A whole system of micro-practices and relations spread throughout every social field in our everyday life – family, school, working environments, media – **reinforces the conviction that we are**, or that we should strive to be, autonomous.

People value "autonomy" because **this system convinces** them that autonomy is a perfectly reasonable assumption, and a valuable one.

! What social psychology says about this

An experiment shows that people's decision to act autonomously depends heavily **on the context in which decisions are taken**.
- What is the social norm?
- Who is observing the subject's behaviour (e.g. a person perceived as an authority by the subject?)

See the original study: http://psycnet.apa.org/books/10025/016

Another experiment shows that conformity is not an active decision: neurological evidence shows that people's actual perception of reality changes when influenced by others.

Challenging assumption # 1:

Assumption: Individuals always and exclusively pursue their own profit. A society's welfare is the automatic result of its members' well-being. In order to build well-functioning societies, public policies should therefore simply uphold individuals' freedom to pursue their own profit.

? **WHY do we perceive ourselves as purely interest-driven individuals**

Because for the past three decades neo-liberal ideologies have dominated the political landscape. Neo-liberal ideologies see human beings as essentially mono-dimensional i.e. as agents pursuing profit.
In the last 30 years European governments have operated under the assumption that **individual freedom is to be understood as economic freedom** i.e. that people always strive to maximize their profit.

! **What ethics say about this**

Perceiving ourselves as purely interest-driven is an incomplete view that overlooks the impact of feelings and emotions on human behaviour. We **are empathic beings and thus often act against our immediate economic interest.**

Moreover, the neo-liberal ideologies miss a fundamental dimension of humanity: the ethical dimension.

Challenging assumption # 1:

Assumption: Collectives are made up of independent individual actors. Collective behaviour is the simple sum of individual action.

? **WHY do we think of collectives as a sum of individual actors**

We tend to believe that collectives are made up of separate, individual constituents. We therefore tend to think that collective behaviour is simply an aggregate of individual behaviour.
In economics, for example, the "representative agent model" is based on this assumption.

! **What theoretical physics says about that**

The behaviour of large assemblies cannot be understood as the simple sum of isolated individual behaviour. Interactions between members create feedbacks that contribute to a self-sustained, self-validated, **different state**. Such **collective states may respond disproportionately to minor changes.**

There are **"collective phenomena" that pertain to crowds and not to any of its single constituents**. **Small changes at the individual level can trigger dramatic effects at the collective level** – for better or for worse. The animal world is full of examples of this relation between the individual and the collective: 10,000 starlings can collectively change direction in ~ 0.5 secs with no leader in the crowd!

Challenging assumption # 1:
Insights for policy-making

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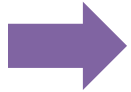
➤ We normally assume that our values inform our practices. We tend to forget that **practices** *shape and can create* **values**. If we want to change people's values, *we need to change their everyday practices and habits, their actual lived reality*. Policy-makers therefore need to **identify such practices and habits** and start from there to change or nurture certain values.
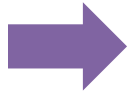
➤ Micro-engineering the "collective" is more about **managing social pressures** ("excitatory" vs. "inhibitory"), than about influencing individual choices. Working together on common tasks and shared practices can override the sense of different identities in collectives. If policy-makers want to create strong collectives, they should invest in creating opportunities for collaboration. Collaboration and practices will eventually create the shared identity.
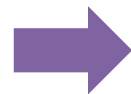
➤ Collectives are important because, as we saw in the social psychology experiment, collective behaviour has a strong influence on individual choices. **Collective behaviour sets a pressure to conform** i.e. if a collective behaves more openly and tolerantly, **a single individual *feels* pressured** to behave more openly and tolerantly too.

Challenging assumption # 2:

Assumption: The transmission of values in families (such as honesty, trustworthiness…) is a one-way process: parents teach values to their children

? **WHY do we think of the transmission of values as a one-way process from parents to children**

We tend to think that families are hierarchically structured. Parents therefore transmit their value systems onto their children. We tend to forget that the family is a system with relations and interdependences between its members. Rather, we look at the individual beings and their characteristics.

! **What psychotherapy says about that**

Current public policies lack an understanding of human beings as **thoroughly relational beings**. Families are essential for developing people's relational capabilities. It is the experience of a healthy family life, rather than the teaching process from parents to children, that fosters values of openness and tolerance. For example, nurturing healthy families helps the development of autonomous individuals by encouraging their tendency for **exploration**. Exploration means confronting what is still unknown, taking risks, and **gaining new experiential knowledge of the social world**. People's capacity to explore is grounded in their basic experience of **secure attachment**.

See Bowlby, J. (2005). A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory. London: Routledge.

See our annex for an illustration of how families are intertwined with institutions.

Challenging assumption # 2:

Assumption: Local communities have become less relevant for institutions in a globalised society.

? **WHY do we think that local interlocutors have become less relevant**

In a more global and interconnected world, we tend to focus more on the bigger, international scale than on the smaller, local scale. Globalisation and interdependence make it less obvious to focus on the local level – the attention tends to be on the big trends.

! **What political science says about that**

Proximity matters because in a more complex and interdependent world, local communities represent a safe haven for people. Local communities encapsulate the everyday lived experiences for their members and they can form the basis for how collectives relate to regional and global institutions (e.g. the European Union). Local communities can be a strong resource for healthy democracies.

Challenging assumption # 2:

Assumption: Collectives are **based on commonality and harmony.**

? **WHY do we tend to see collectives as being exclusively based on commonality and harmony**

Partly because this view simplifies our under-standing of them: we tend to perceive collectives as harmonious entities because tensions make us feel uncomfortable and this feeling interferes with our cognitive mechanisms.

! **What psychoanalysis says about that**

Collectives are always based on harmony and tensions at the same time. **There is no collective that does not contain within itself the potential for violence (physical, verbal, psychological, political) towards its members and non-members.** Human beings use others as mirrors of their own psychic contradictions and tensions. This mechanism is called "violent innocence": we project onto the other, and thereby purify ourselves of what we cannot tolerate. **Our enemy is in fact our intimate companion.**

Challenging assumption # 2:
Insights for policy-making (1 of 2)
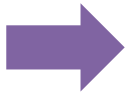
If we understand what human beings and families are, and how they function, we can direct policies more effectively. For example, an effective way to enhance people's autonomy and independence is by way of **encouraging their capacity for exploration**. Exploration is based on secure relationships. Therefore, effective policies need to foster securely attached families rather than focusing on individuals' sense of autonomy.
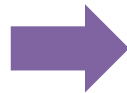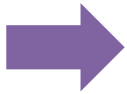
Policy-makers need to craft policies that take into account what the **current role of the family** is, what its dynamics and needs are and, above all, what it could be within the actual configuration of social, economic, and technological relations.
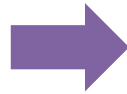
Policy-makers need to focus on and empower local communities. One example of community-empowering policy-making is a quota system adopted in some British schools. Students belonging to a community are taught and mentored by teachers belonging to their community. This approach has resulted in a dramatic improvement of the students' school performances. It also builds stronger local connections within this community.

"Violent innocence" enables us to understand why and how collective violence – be it physical, verbal (hate speech), psychological, or political – emerges, and **above all why it appears acceptable and even justifiable to the members of a collective.** If we want to **think about strategies to counteract violence**, we need to understand the intolerable inner dynamics that group A is projecting towards group B.
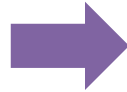
We also need to understand **what is it, in group B, that makes group B "the perfect enemy" for group A.** Often this is the case because group B recognises itself in group A. The fact that our enemy is familiar to us also explains why sometimes there can be surprising apertures from members of a collective towards non-members. The case of Israeli novelist S. Yizhar is a perfect example: in his novel, the supposed enemy, the Palestinian woman, is revealed to him with painful familiarity.

Challenging assumption # 3:

Assumption: The digital revolution makes an impact but it **does not change our psychological and cultural reality.** We do not have to rethink our models of production, expertise, and participation.

? **WHY do we underestimate the impact of the digital revolution**

We underestimate its impact because the rules and the stakes of the digital revolution are unclear. Our traditional ways of thinking (see next column) prevent us from asking more adequate and complex questions about the digital revolution. For example, we are not reflecting on how technology links with morality: The Google car ethical puzzle shows how technology cannot integrate morality. Google provides a straight, non-negotiable, un-problematic solution: the driver saves him/herself (and the Google car). Is this an acceptable solution for human beings?

! **What digital design says about that**

Social models relying on centralised production and distribution, and on concentration of means of production have failed. These social models are based on:

(1) Humans being at the service of factories and bureaucracies rather than the other way around

(2) People's trust in intermediaries (institutions, brands, professions);

(3) Collective identities grounded in class, companies, countries.

The centralised model has been challenged by the digital revolution, which creates more complex and temporary collectives. Our current social models do not reflect this complexity.

Challenging assumption # 3:
Insights for policy-making

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➤ Digital technology is encouraging a **shared-practice and shared-expertise form of engagement with the social world.** This should be mobilized to enhance democracy.

➤ The key task of governments should be to **prevent monopolies and set rules**.

➤ Use digital channels and **open government platforms**.

➤ Invest in open, civic infrastructures and institutions for the digital economy and society.

Challenging assumption # 4:

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Assumption: Secular cultures have a **closed set of values that all members should conform to.**

? **WHY do we think of secular cultures as closed sets of values**

We do not negotiate our value systems because they have become invisible to us:

1. Values are imbued in our everyday practices, and they operate on a deeper level.
2. We have become used to them without questioning them because they surround us and we were born into them. We take them for granted.

! **What do cultural studies say about that**

No culture is a closed set of values**; only sub-groups (political parties, faith communities, and professional corporations)** might share the same systems of values. **Any society is based on conflicts, tensions,** and debates **about values.** No society is based on consensus. Hence, **values can and should be debated** and negotiated. The health of a society depends on the questioning of values, both apparent and hidden ones.

Challenging assumption # 4:

Assumption: Contemporary **religions** are inherently linked to the cultures from which they stem. Religions are **markers of cultural identity.**

? **WHY do we think of religion as linked to their original culture**

Because, in cultural understanding and everyday discourse, religion and culture (e.g. a set of values) are not separated out. Religion is thought of and treated like a part of culture.

! **What do cultural studies say about that**

In fact religions are less and less associated with the cultural systems or civilizations they originally stemmed from. What is often presented by the media, political leaders and the public as "religion", **is in fact a mobilization of religious symbols and values to discriminate against certain cultures.**

Salafism, for example, is replacing traditional Muslim cultures with a set of non-negotiable norms that can be implemented in any context, and thus be easily globalised. None of these norms was part of traditional Muslim cultures.

See: Roy, O. (forthcoming). *Rethinking the Place of Religions in European Secularized Societies: the Need for More Open Societies*.

Challenging assumption # 4:
Insights for policy-making
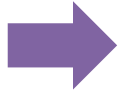
➤ The condition for a true religious freedom in a democratic society is to understand and construct society NOT as a culture, **but as a system of rights**.
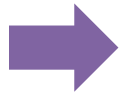
➤ **In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,** religion is always associated with other notions (freedom of thought and beliefs; etc.). Religion is defined as an opinion and as an identity among others. In fact **religion is far more than that**: it is also a set of practices and non-negotiable norms associated with a stable community of faith and a transmitted tradition. **Freedom of religion is not just an individual right: but the recognition that there is a "religious sphere".**
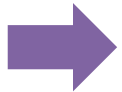
➤ **We should also drop** the permanent advocacy for religious reform. A reformer is not necessarily a liberal (were Luther and Calvin liberal, feminist, philo-semite and democrats?). A theological reformation often only arises from within a given religion through the evolution of the interaction of its members with the surrounding society.

Conclusions

▶ Our new interpretations of the collective showed how different perspectives on collective behaviour, sentiment and choice can change our perception of where the actual challenges lie for policy-making. The best solution to a problem often comes from looking at it from a different angle.

▶ The different angles we adopted helped us identify key points and challenges for policy-making, including:

- Nurturing local communities and small-scale collectives, such as the family
- Modifying lived realities, routines and everyday practices of collectives, to change or nurture certain values
- Fostering active collaboration to create shared identities, both "online" and "offline"
- Understanding and addressing the inner dynamics and tensions of groups and collectives
- Questioning the everyday reality in which collectives live: rising "above the chessboard" to understand and question what we take as given (such as the value systems we live in).