

Worldwork in Town Meetings: A Case Description

Punks, Businesspeople, Police, Residents & Addicts and City Administration in an Open Forum in Zurich, Switzerland

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What follows are some highlights of the theory and methodology required for an understanding of the case descriptions. For more on the terms and concepts, please read the introduction Worldwork – Transformation in Organizations, Communities, Business And The Public Space.

According to the Worldwork paradigm, a group can be viewed as being structured by an **organizing principle**, a **field**. The field distributes the various different polarities, or positions in the group. As facilitators, in order to make these positions more visible, we can make **roles** out of them. Think of it as a group of people, who are being directed by an invisible director, something like a group mind, to perform a play.

Roles can be further differentiated into **roles** and **ghost roles**. **Roles** are positions that belong to the central belief system of the culture or group, and thereby are generally accepted within the group. They can be voiced without creating a strong group reaction. In contrast, **ghost roles** are behaviors that we cannot voice, because they are not “acceptable” within a given organizational culture. Although they are not made explicit, everyone feels their presence and suffers from them.

Ghost roles can also be detected in the unintended communication. Roles and ghost roles create some sort of a shadow play together, or relate to one another on a dream level. When we talk about what ‘really’ goes on in a group, opposite to what was being said on the surface, we are in the realm of the interaction of roles and ghost roles. The roles speak the polite or appropriate sentences, but we hear the whispers of the ghostroles in the insinuations and implicit statements.

One reason that groups often avoid changing levels, making unintended communication explicit, or giving voice to the ghost roles, is the fear that the consequences will be irresolvable. From a Worldwork perspective, this makes sense. Roles and ghost roles are non-local in the sense that they really belong to the group as a whole, meaning everyone. This is why if a person who has taken an unpopular role leaves an organization, someone else will often pick up these roles. Although ghost roles are most often spotted in the opposing group, they are also present in one’s own group, but remain marginalized there. This is one of the reasons, why it often takes an emotional interaction to understand fully how these roles are present in one’s own group. The only resolution in that sense is a raised awareness, of how we are the other. No wonder we shy away from direct confrontations.

To achieve this awareness, however, is a highly emotional affair. We have to traverse the period of escalation and confrontation. If we can do that and follow our total experience, we become aware of these roles as being present in the whole system. The total information or knowledge that is contained in them now becomes explicit and can be used by the whole group.

Background:

Stadelhoferplatz – Stadelhofen Square in English – is a popular shopping area in the center of Zurich, Switzerland. It is a buzzing park, lined with restaurants and shops, and an outside restaurant in the summer where many people sit on benches, taking breaks from shopping. In the center, there are flowers and a fountain. There is a train station nearby, which brings a high flow of commuter and pedestrian traffic into the area.

In recent years, Stadelhoferplatz has become a major meeting place for punks from all over Europe. They mix with other marginal groups, such as the homeless 'Alkis', a short slang word for alcoholics, who hang around the square, and often drink. There are also many people with polytoxicomania, a Latin word for those who are addicted to a variety of mind-altering drugs such as heroin, cocaine and amphetamines. The scene can get pretty wild. The members of these marginal groups at times get into conflict, often with violence, or play their portable tape recorders at full volume. Sometimes, the punks beg aggressively, and various mainstream groups who live in or pass through the area have complained, intimidated by the aggressive begging style, the scary looking punks and their big and equally scary looking dogs that roam the park freely. The punks in turn complain of being degraded in a variety of ways by passers-by.

From a wider cultural perspective, Zurich is a town that has become multicultural overnight. Whereas 10 years ago, its diversity was mainly restricted to groups from the neighboring European countries (Greece, Spain, Italy, Turkey), ethnic groups from all over the world have become now a part of the Zurich life. For many of the Swiss people, this change has been difficult. On the other side, countless new immigrants suffer from what they describe as racism and insularity. While some are asking for more tolerance and relationship between the culture and subcultures, others want the government and police to act, and to keep everything 'orderly and traditionally Swiss'.

Against this background, the scene at Stadelhofen has an explosive potential. The City of Zurich has sent the police to keep order, but this has been inherently problematic. For the most part, police work functions well with regard to crimes that are committed and can be tried, or with people who are interested in maintaining a mainstream existence and don't want trouble. However, the punks and marginal groups do not fit neatly into either category. Usually they do not pay the minor fines because they have no money, or indeed have anything that can be taken from them. Even removing them from the area is not a sustainable solution, as they come right back.

The Town Meeting:

Given this explosive scene, Lukas Hohler from SIP Zurich, a special action group for the social department of the city of Zurich, and I planned a town forum to assist the various groups in working on these issues. Lukas had convinced representatives from the main groups -the local business association, the chief of police, the city administration and the punks- to risk coming together to work in on their difficulties publically in an open forum. Two days before the open forum, Lukas and I had separate meetings with all the groups that had an interest in a resolution, listening to their viewpoints and their hesitations about meeting. Everyone was highly skeptical about a possible outcome. Nonetheless, we were thrilled at the result of our networking effort when we saw who of the stakeholders showed up in the tent that took some hundred people. There was the chief of police and his assistant, many business people of the neighborhood, a member of the 7-person city executive council, homeless people who live in the park, the 'alkis' that populate the park, the punks with their dogs, students of the nearby high school, residents who occupy apartments in the area, and many other interested people.

In the beginning, different members stated their positions in a 3-minute expose, including the business people, the punks, the police, and a student of one of the largest Zurich high schools that was nearby, and whose students frequent the park. Out of this, a number of positions were represented as follows:

Business owners: the marginal groups are bad for business, they scare people off, our revenues have dropped, and we feel it is wrong that people get abused when they try to shop here. We hate it if we are being so aggressively panhandled, and our employees are too scared to come to work.

Police: Everybody criticizes us. The business community says we are too lax, the marginal groups call us fascists. The media reproaches us for losing control if something happens, yet accuses us of police brutality if we do intervene.

Punks: Nobody wants us and everybody puts us down. We have an alternative lifestyle and different values, and deserve to live it as we want it, in a free society. You experience us as aggressive; we experience the mainstream advertising and insistence on a profit-oriented lifestyle as aggressive, to say the least.

High School student position: I wish that everyone were more tolerant with each other. Older people often call us young people names.

Right in the beginning, Asi, a punk woman, started to speak, and got interrupted by another punk who stormed in the meeting room, and screamed that she was a traitor, charging her and the other punks in the tent with treason for sitting with everyone, trying to work things out. 'Punks don't negotiate!' he screamed and ran out. The group was shocked. Some of the business people must have felt kinship with the problem she was facing, but there were those among their group that were against the forum, because they thought it would give the alkis and the punks too much legal status. They had even written to the police and politicians to try to ensure that the forum wouldn't happen. The city of Zurich, however, had voted for a dialog, and outlined their belief that one single solution was no longer sustainable these days. Rather, many views had to be taken into account. Thus the next position was that of the city of Zurich, which declared that we all need to learn to live with one another. Solutions based on legal factors alone will not hold if the community doesn't also work out its differences.

Analysis: there are many roles and ghost roles present. The one closest to the surface is a role on both sides that says, 'don't do the other side the honor to talk to them, because it means you will have to give up your position'. The city of Zurich plays the eldership role, which carries the whole process to begin with.

First interaction:

There followed a heated discussion about begging; how hard it is for the mainstream to say no, and how hard it is to make enough money from the beggar's side. In the back and forth, my facilitator colleague pointed out that both sides were on common ground. Both seemed to complain about how hard it was to make a living and blamed the other side for it. To everyone's great surprise, both sides picked up on it and agreed. The business people spoke about the high rents and overheads, the police

about how hard it was to be constantly criticized and left alone with their work, and the punks spoke about how everyone hates and looks down at them.

***Analysis:** the missing role is the eldership role, which can listen to all the complaints. Every one of the groups feels exploited, and not heard with their difficulties. This is why there was so much negativity about coming: all sides were hopeless that they would be heard with their difficulties.*

During this discussion, many amazing moments happened, and spontaneous role switches occurred. The business people, for example, announced that they didn't like that the punks were urinating everywhere. To this some punks agreed and apologized, stating that in the future they would keep an eye on those who did so. Although the tone of voice of some of the punks was one of disbelief, as if not understanding why anyone could focus on such trivial issues, one punk actually got up and thanked the city for putting a mobile toilet in the park. But he then suggested in addition that they should find someone who would clean it regularly, criticizing the city for not keeping the toilets clean enough, so that many punks decided to relieve themselves outside because it was cleaner. My comment, that all Swiss share a common ground in their desire for cleanliness, regardless of the degree of centrality or marginality of their group affiliation, was understood by everyone and brought about a uniting laughter.

As the conversation continued around various different points, members from both sides made comments about what a relief it was to talk together. Then one shopkeeper asked the punks that were present whether or not they would now come forward and intervene if they would ever see other punks giving one of the business people or employee a hard time. 'Yes', said one of the punks, who had been quiet 'I would. Now that we talk together and treat each other as human beings, I feel different about everything.' Some member of the business groups looked touched. Then with some help from the facilitation, the punks asked back: 'And if you see a mainstream person putting one of us down, will you also interfere?' The business people came to an edge. They didn't want to publicly say yes. The punks were obviously hurt by the hesitation. They started to escalate and one punk threatened that they, too, could go back into the 'fuck you' mode. We facilitators framed what was happening by pointing out, that this was an important moment. Both sides had to see that each of them had the power to really complicate the life of the other. It was a moment of encounter with the totality of strength on both sides. Coming together would not be out of weakness or fear, but out of wanting a resolution and better relationships.

***Analysis: Framing**-we framed the strength and power on both sides. This is an important moment. The beginning edge is expressed by the nervousness towards dialogue, out of fear of being overwhelmed or manipulated. True dialogue can only occur if all sides are conscious of their strength to make life impossible for the other side. You want to come together from a position of self-confidence and you want to be respected for who you are. From this position, you can listen understand and relate to the other side.*

When the facilitators framed this situation the scene shifted. A businessperson who ran one of the larger shops in that area, came forward and said that yes, she would interfere and defend the punks. Silence fell in the room. 'Really, you would do that?' said a punk, obviously touched by that interaction, and in disbelief. 'Yes, I would', conceded the business person.

***Analysis:** The people present, by saying that they would defend the other groups against mainstream attackers, become a local community. They are no longer part of the mainstream, because they are now different, belonging to a 'we-talk-together' culture. This is the opposite of the mainstream, which functions by keeping up projections on the 'other'. It was this moment that created the basis for a continuous dialogue that was going to happen in the future. On a structural level, the outsider against whom the 'other' is being defended is also a ghost role in this group. From that viewpoint, the promise within each faction to defend the other can be interpreted as a commitment to future dialogue within the group itself.*

At this point, another member of the business community, who had been silent thus far, said that he thought it was time that the forum participants stop using the terms 'them' and 'they', and replace them with 'we' and 'us', since they were all sharing the same space. This brought a big applause from everyone. A punk associate went along the same direction, and made a suggestion. This is what I remember he said: 'we all thought this would bring nothing. Now we realize that the sides have softened and that we got a lot closer. This is so much more than any of us expected. Maybe it's time to call a truce, and everyone can try to do their best for three months, and then we'll see if it worked. If one person flips out on either side,' he suggested, 'the other side shouldn't take that as an excuse to fall back into their own personal prejudice, but rather should remember the feeling of tonight. After three months, everyone should get together again, and check on what happened.'

One of the facilitators asked who would remind the other person of that feeling if they forget. Many hands went up.

The forum was over. All sides thanked each other for their participation, and applauded. There was a nearly festive mood in the tent. Even the police, who had been earlier accused of police brutality, got a big applause for participating. In an earlier interaction, one member of a group of social activists had called them fascists, and said that they had used excessive force. I remember the chief of police answering that they did their best, but that they were not always perfect. Police work can be hard, he added now, giving the example of trying to arrest a person for aggravating the commuters, who then turned out to be a professional boxer who beat up the cops. Both of the police captains who were present admitted that it hurt when someone calls you a fascist. The punks grew silent and listened, and then nodded.

Closing remarks:

Thanks Lukas for the fabulous facilitation, the great teamwork and the fun mood through the whole thing, and the SIP team (Security-Intervention-Prevention a troubleshooting team of the city of Zurich) for their work. The Zurich press hailed the event as a breakthrough. Lukas has continued his work with the groups who have decided to meet monthly for a round table discussion. These round tables have

continued since the summer of 2003 and have created a new model for urban living. These they are open to anyone, and the police, the local authorities and the business community as well as the marginal groups, have usually at least one member present. The atmosphere and problem level around Stadelhofenplatz have radically improved. Thanks also to the progressive administration of the city of Zurich, and especially to the city executive council Monika Stocker, for all the support and openness of the whole project.

Following are a few snapshots, and newspaper clippings to give you a feel for it all.



Open forum in Zurich with a diverse group of participants



Asi and Max after the town forum: Asi was a central and eloquent speaker for the punks during the forum.



The 'expanded' SIP team, who was responsible for putting up the forum, during the debriefing in the local pub after the forum (From left to right Bivoldzic Ibrahim, Gabriela Merlini dos Santos, Lukas Hohler, Michael Herzig, Christian Fischer, and Max Schupbach)

raum der Band befindet, und angewendeten zwei Keyboards, mehrere Lautsprecherboxen, Mikrofone und eine Akustikgitarre. Die Stadtpolizei hofft nun auf hilfreiche Zeugenaussagen.

«Mode». In insgesamt zehn Fällen wurde Deliktsgut im Wert von über sechs Millionen Franken erbeutet. Die Stadt Zürich wurde in den vergangen-

weingesucht, Polizeisprecherin Nicole Fix geht nicht davon aus, dass immer dieselbe Bande am Werk ist. «Diese Methode ist effektiv – deshalb wird sie angewandt.»



Gewerbetreter und Punks gemeinsam in Konflikt-Zeit am Stadelhofen. Maximilian Fischer

Gewerbetreter und Punks verschafften sich Luft

ZÜRICH – Die Punkszene ist den Geschäftsinhabern am Stadelhoferplatz ein Dorn im Auge. Laut einigen Gewerbetreibern machen Kunden wegen der Punks einen Bogen um den Platz. Um die Situation zu entschärfen, lud gestern die SIP (Sicherheit, Intervention, Prävention) des Sozialdepartements beide Parteien zu einem Forum ins extra dafür auf-

baute Konflikt-Zeit auf dem Stadelhoferplatz ein. Rund 50 Personen, darunter knapp ein Dutzend Punks, verschafften sich Luft und machten Verbesserungsvorschläge.

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Press cutting: 20 Minuten, a Swiss newspaper