

The Nation as a Living Organism – Gordon Nichols

Abstract

This paper takes a fresh look at the living world and examines the assumptions inherent in our place in it. The biological world, which covers all self-replicating entities, from viruses and bacteria to *Homo sapiens*, is examined through the biological sciences. The man-made world in which we live, with all our machines, buildings, and the culture, collaboration and conflict of our everyday lives, lies outside of this classification and is examined through other disciplines (e.g. social sciences, history, economics, sociology, politics, geography, etc.). Nations and organizations are included in a revised classification of life that combines the biological and the man-made. Nations have internal governance, show behaviour within the community of other nations, have boundaries, religions and wars; genetics, growth and reproduction are distinctive; energy, money and control are important in growth and survival of nations; language and culture are distributed across the people within a nation; there are distinctive flora, fauna and agricultural activities.

The living individual league units (LILU) of life (virus, cell, multicellular organism, nation) show a four-level unit structure for all living entities, and this provides a means for comparing the organizational pressures driving evolution at each level. The similarities in organizational processes, but different in bio-mechanics of LILUs, are a product of evolutionary pressures on the survival and reproduction of organisms, rather than simple analogies or metaphors. This comparison is here termed *Funquivalence*.

Introduction

The idea that societies are organisms is not new, having been addressed by Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan* in 1651 (1). Herbert Spencer in 1860 published a paper in the Westminster Review where he hypothesized that societies are organisms, possessing many of the features of other organisms (3). In particular he outlined four points of similarity. These are:

1. They increase in mass,
2. They increase in complexity as they grow,
3. As they grow the parts become mutually dependent,
4. That the life is independent of the birth, growth, life and death of its parts.

However, there are points of difference in that

1. Societies have no external forms,
2. They do not form a continuous mass,
3. The living elements can move around and
4. All individuals are endowed with feeling.

Spencer's hypothesis has had relatively little critical consideration or practical testing in more recent times and interest has come from sociological (4) rather than biological perspectives. The sociobiology debates of the 1990s did not address the hypothesis. In particular there is a need to ask whether nations might be regarded as organisms that are of a similar status to that of all other organisms and, if so, should be included in the classification of all living organisms. The nation seems to be the most natural unit to describe the human social organism (not the nations of ethnic origin but those forming a coherent organizational whole). If so then individual nations could be classified as individuals of a new species. This then leads on to questions about what corporations and other organizations are and where they stand within such a classification. What would be the

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outcome if the hypothesis was not false? Is the current split between biological and cultural classifications an anachronism of too insular a view of the human world? Or should we continue with the fudged current view where any human organization outside of *Homo sapiens* is regarded as part of the man-made world and regarded as a special case.

What within the 19th century schema proposed by Spencer might be changed in the light of 21st Century understanding of biology, ecology, molecular biology, genetics and social, historical, political and economic sciences? Spencer used analogies between organisms and cultures. However, this seems an inappropriate approach to comparing organisms. Rather it might be more appropriate to look for common organizational principles and similarities that underlie all organisms. The categorization of genes within published genomes by the organizational nature of the gene products suggests a common set of organizational principles operate in nations and all other organisms. How to examine the problem? Study nations as individual organisms belonging to a common species.

The life dilemma

A dilemma lies at the heart of our appreciation of the living world. While most of the biological world that is based on cellular life forms has been nicely classified, on the basis of conserved and less conserved molecules, into a series of kingdoms that appear to have a common origin or last universal common ancestor (LUCA) that was probably a proto-bacteria. Three parts of the living world do not currently fit into most of these classifications. The first is the **viruses**, which have been described by some as non-living and have not been viewed as deriving from a common source or having a traceable ancestry. The second is **nations** which, in addition to the populations of people and animals are composed of buildings, machines and culture. The third are the corporations and other types of **organisations** that run much of the world. An obvious question is: Are nations and organisations species that can be regarded as living and can they be examined using methods that compare their organisation with those of other species of organism?

You might, at this stage, think that the idea of nation as organisms is incredible. However, we readily admit that we are part of a nation of people and the cognitive difficulty may lie with us trying to relate our individuality within the nation with the idea that the nation has autonomy and drives that are mostly out of our individual control. Let us step through what our relationship to the nation is.

We are born into a nation and if we migrate into a new one it is noticeably different. We have one or more languages, and learn to communicate using these at an early age by learning the languages from our parents, friends and acquaintances. The language is used to make the nation, with various media acting as ways of amplifying ideas and us people acting as individuals who receive messages interpret and discuss them and then translate the ideas and copy them to others. We act as intelligent nodes within the nations information system. The languages derive from the way past nations have evolved and the origins of languages can be used to trace the ancestry of nations.

Nations have a selection of features that make them more organism like than population like, but also some features that are entirely unlike all current living organisms. There are energy generating and energy consuming parts, that resemble the anabolic (body building) and catabolic (energy generating) reactions of other organisms. There is a sensory system, defence mechanisms, a means of detecting self and non-self, a system of central control and governance, etc. The key value of

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considering nations and organisations as organisms is that, regardless of whether the idea is falsified or not, is that it provides an interesting alternative way of looking at the living world.

What is interesting from a philosophical perspective is that while we regard man as the source of intelligence, it is in reality the nation that provides the real wealth of knowledge that people can use to do clever, logical, useful and intelligent things. We can then ask some of the questions of nations that we previously reserved for individual humans. Is a nation conscious? What is the nature of knowledge? How does a nation arrive at an ethical result? Is there a best form of government? How does a country acquire a language? All countries have some religion so what is the purpose of this and does this provide evidence that religions are part of normal life? Is it indeed an argument against atheism. The heterogeneity of information in the minds of all people within a nation makes a case for the importance of diverse approaches to what is true. While philosophers like to think they know what is true and what is not, much of society either does not know or does not care.

Another philosophical perspective arises when considering organisations as distinct species. Here we are on the margins of credibility, where an individual person can own and run a business that behaves somewhat like an organism, but also has much to suggest it is not an organism. The nature of energy use is interesting. Are organisations parasitic in nations, and do all of them have both beneficial and detrimental aspects? What is the nature of information on which organisations rely? Can we provide a good way of classifying them? How does a person interact with nation, and different organisation types? How does an organisation think? The sum of all our ideas provides a collective sense of how we should interpret the world.

Bibliography

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