

## WHAT SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS DO

*Ephraim Ben-Baruch*  
*Haim Marantz*

## I

There was a time when it was popular to conceive of social organisations as being social analogues of either biological systems or mechanical systems. As there is nothing strange in saying what it is that a particular biological system (say a man or an animal) does, or what a particular machine (e.g. an aeroplane) does, so analogously there *appears* nothing strange in saying for example, that the particular social organisation that we call a bank engages in banking activities; the social organisation we call a school engages in educational activities; while the social organisation we call a political party engages in political activities. When the analogy between social organisations and either biological systems and/or mechanical systems was called into question, so was the linguistic activity of saying that social organisations do things. Social organisations do not do things, it was claimed, only people do, and sometimes they do them within the framework of social organisations. Banks do not engage in banking only people acting within the framework of banking organisations do; schools do not engage in education, some people who teach and learn within the framework of the schools do; political parties do not engage in politics, rather their members do.

While we believe that it is a mistake to conceive of social organisations on the model of either biological systems or mechanical systems, we also believe it is a mistake to conclude from this that social organisations do nothing. What type of things social organisations do do is what we shall make clear in the course of this paper.

## II

To conceive of social organisations as being social analogues of either biological systems or mechanical systems is to misconstrue their nature. Whereas biological and mechanical systems can meaningfully be said to possess both an anatomy and a physiology, social organisations can meaningfully be said to possess only a physiology. The point is that where all biological and all mechanical systems are composed of a relatively fixed number of organs or parts — i.e. their anatomy — which are organised in a certain pattern — i.e. their physiology — social organisations are not so composed. The basic difference between a social organisation and either a biological system or a mechanical system is that there is nothing fixed about the number of persons (their so-called organs or parts) which make it up. For many social organisations their status as organisations is not affected in the sense that they are able to function whether they have 50 or 5000 members. That is to say the social organisation known as the Beersheva Football Team Supporters Club functions if it has 50 or 5000 members. If there are 5000 members it is able to give its team more effective support. However, it continues to function even when there are only 50 members. Now if you take a few organs away from a particular biological system, say a human body, or a few parts from a mechanical system, then you do not have a functioning system. You have a corpus or a piece of junk.

## III

The word “organisation” is used in social discourse to refer to many seemingly different types of entities. We talk about “the organisation of the family” as well as of “international organisations”; “business firms” are referred to as organisations, while the people who work in them are members of organisations known as trade unions; employers have their own organisations; people who supply particular services have their own organisations (e.g. medical doctors), then again people who make use of the services of particular organisations have their own organisation (e.g. the Health Service Users Association), and so on. What seems common to all these users of the word “organisation” is that the entity referred to as an organisation possesses a system of rules which at once defines membership and the ways in which the members, in point of fact do, and/or should, interact both with each other and with non-members in their capacities as members of these organisations.

## IV

It is the rules which define membership and the ways in which members should and/or do act in their capacities as members that constitutes the physiology of social organisations. That social organisations have no anatomy as biological and mechanical systems do, is often denied, but this denial seems to have no valid basis. Take for example the problem of locating social organisations in geographic space.

Theoretically there is no special problem about locating, at any particular moment in time, *the* place where a biological system or a mechanical system is to be found. They are to be found within the area of geographic space defined by the boundaries of their own anatomies. Now if social organisations had anatomies, presumably there would be no theoretical problem about locating *the* place they occupy in geographic space. However, there is such a problem concerning social organisations. The problem is not that it is difficult to say where they are found. The problem is to decide which of the many places one can plausibly say they are to be found, is *the* place they are to be found. Are social organisations to be found where their members are, where their offices or where they were founded? We are not saying that the problem is unsolvable. What we are saying is that if social organisations had anatomies in the sense in which it makes sense to say that biological systems and mechanical systems do, there would not be a problem to solve in the first place.

Then again the physiology of social organisations is a different kind of physiology than that possessed by biological and mechanical systems. Where the parts that make up biological and mechanical systems are put together in a relatively fixed and unchangeable way, this is not so with social organisation. For example, in any biological system, say a human body, any organ, say the heart, interacts with the other organs in a fixed way. The heart cannot take the place, of say the ears. Similarly in a mechanical system, say an automobile, a part, say the carburetor, interacts with the other parts in a fixed manner. In a social organisation the rules which define both the criterion of membership and the ways in which members ought, and do interact, are more or less fluid. For example membership to the organisation of the Fellows of Balliol College was once confined to male members of the Anglican Church, now females and non-Anglicans are allowed to become, and some are, fellows of Balliol. Then again the fellows who acted as Tutor for Admissions and as Dean could exchange jobs. There is nothing strange or impossible about this as there is about replacing a carburetor by a

battery in an automobile or a heart by a nose in a human body. Then again where people are members of many organisations simultaneously; parts of machines or organs of bodies belong only to one machine or one body at any one time.

## V

The question is "How can something without an anatomy do something?" The answer often forthcoming is that it cannot. Those who make this claim also claim that when people do assert that social organisations do things, they are merely asserting in a misleading manner that certain things are done by members of social organisations or by their representatives. Now while we believe that it is often the case that people do say that social organisations do things when what they should be saying is that the things in question were done by members of an organisation or by people acting in the name of social organisations as their representatives, we also believe that it is possible to say that organisations do things over and above what their members do and what people who act in their name as their representatives do.

## VI

The assertion that social organisations do not do anything is often put forward on the basis of a claim other than that they have no anatomy. The claim is the following: the only way things are done is the way that human beings do them; hence organisations can only be said to do things that those human beings who are their members, or who act as their representatives, do. Organisations as such do not do anything.

Now while it is true that social organisations do not do things the way that human beings do, it does not follow from this that they do not do anything. Birds do not sing the way that human beings sing. However this does not mean that birds do not sing. Birds are birds and human beings are human beings. Birds sing as birds sing; human beings sing the way they do. Even though social organisations do not do things the way human beings do them, our contention is that they can be meaningfully said to do things

## VII

The question is "What is it that social organisations can meaningfully be said to do over and above the things that are done in

their names by those human beings that belong to them or those human beings that act as their representative do ? ” The answer to this question, we believe, is two-fold. On the one hand what social organisations do is to make it possible for human beings to do things. On the other hand they affect the manner in which some of those people who are their members do the things the social organisations make it possible for them to do in the first place.

## VIII

Many of the things that human beings do they are able to do only because there are social organisations that exist that make it possible for them to do the things in question. That is to say if certain organisations did not exist in a society certain actions could not be performed. For example, it is only because there are social organisations known as banks that people are able to engage in banking activities; then it is only because there are educational organisations such as schools that some people can teach while others can learn; then again it is only because political organisations exist that some people have the opportunity to engage in political activities.

It is important to note that we are not claiming that no banking-like activities are engaged in outside the framework of banking organisations; nor are we claiming that no teaching or learning goes on outside the framework of the organisation known as school, nor are we claiming that no political activities go on outside political organisations. What we are claiming is that the existence of banking organisations, schools and political parties make it possible for people to engage in the banking activities, teaching and learning and politics. Secondly, we claim that if certain organisations did not exist people would not be able to engage in certain activities. For example if there were no banking organisations, certain banking activities — like utilising a cheque account — could not take place for there would be no framework for it to take place in. Then again if there were no political organisations it would be more difficult than it is to engage in and to conceive of people engaging in political activities. For example in a world in which no political organisations existed — perhaps because they were not needed for everyone was happy and satisfied with his lot — it would be difficult to conceive of people engaging in political activities for there would seem to be no need for them to do so. Then again some people would not realise that they had political grievances and/or ways of acting to overcome them if there were no political organisations whose very existence

make it possible for people to both air such grievances and get together in a framework to do something about it. While we realise that much teaching and learning goes on outside the schools and would go on even if the schools did not exist, there is no doubt, however, that the existence of schools does make it possible for many who would not otherwise do so to engage in teaching activities they could otherwise not engage in, and for others to engage in the activity of learning some of the things taught in those schools, they would otherwise never have a chance of learning.

## IX

Social organisations not only make it possible for people to do things, they also affect the manner in which the people do the things their existence makes it possible for them to do in the first place. For example, take five individual star basketball players. The team's organisation may be such that it prevents them from becoming a one star team. Then again five mediocre players may be organised in such a way that they are encouraged to become a star team.

We are not claiming that the manner in which people do those things which the existence of social organisations made it possible for them to do in the first place, is only affected by the nature of the organisation itself. We realise that the way they perceive both the nature of the organisation and their own relationship to it is also a causal factor, as is their own psychological and physiological makeup. Our claim is only that the organisational set-up either encourages or hinders people in the way they carry out those tasks their existence make possible in the first place. Just how they do this is an empirical question and varies from person to person in each organisation.

## X

In this paper we have attempted to show that because social organisations have no anatomy is no reason for saying that they do nothing over and above what their members do and what those who represent them do in their name. The main things social organisations do is to make possible the doing of things by human beings and affecting the manner in which these self-same things are done. This may not be a striking claim. However, we believe, contrary to what others have said, that it is true.