Anarchy for the EMBC

It is time to bid a belated welcome to the new EMBO Director, Maria Leptin, as well as the incoming chair of EMBO Council, Calle Heldin, who took up their offices in January 2010.

In its labyrinthine organizational complexity, EMBO bears some uncomfortable resemblances to the EU. The Director is the figurehead of the executive arm of the organization, but, like the President of the European Commission, she has rather limited executive powers. Some might say her main role is to take the blame when things go wrong due to the mistakes of others. She operates in a sea of overlapping bodies with impenetrable acronyms starting with E that comprise the representational structure of EMBO and its sister organizations.

EMBO has a bicameral system of government. In addition to the Council, directly elected by the membership, there is a body called EMBC, representing national governments that provide funding. EMBC scrutinizes all EMBO activities involving money—that is, just about everything. Unlike the EU, EMBO is not based on universal suffrage. Its members are an academic vanguard that represents and serves the community of life scientists in Europe. However, unlike the EU electorate, EMBO members at least bother to vote in respectable numbers.

In parallel with the financing it receives from EMBC, EMBO enjoys an additional funding stream via its four journals, which also serve as an academic counterweight to the perceived commercial dominance of scientific publishing. Similarly, the EU has its own source of revenue, namely the customs duties it levies on imported goods. Paradoxically, the success of the EU in driving a worldwide movement for trade liberalization is causing a decline in this primary source of income. In a curious parallel, EMBO's mission to place publishing more and more in the hands of scientists similarly jeopardizes its own source of independent revenue, which could even disappear entirely in the not so distant future.

Finally, to the 'molecular biologist in the street', the most visible component of the whole structure is surely its laboratory arm, EMBL. In some ways, EMBL is akin to all those other organizations, parallel to the EU, with an almost but not quite identical membership, and which drive the operational, 'action' side of Europe's defence, monetary policy and internal security. In the same way, EMBL manages and empowers the 'frontline troops' of molecular biology.

This complex structure exists for sound historical reasons. However, it is no more comprehensible to the average European scientist than to those in North America who wonder more generally at our ability to function with so many layers of government in Europe, each with ill-defined, and often intersecting areas of competence. EMBO is clearly better than the EU in this regard: EU bodies typically require 20 or 30 national representatives to reach consensus before any major decision is taken or implemented.

The 'sound historical reasons' would take several pages to explain. However, what really counts is not how the system came into being, but whether it works. Does it serve the interests of science and of the wider society, both in Europe and beyond? In the field of international diplomacy, a fractious and needlessly elaborate organizational structure actually mutes and mitigates Europe's influence on the world. One might therefore ask, given the global nature of science, whether the *mille-feuille* of EMBL is the best way for European biologists to promote scientific values in a world still largely ruled by superstition and prejudice, and to facilitate exchanges of knowledge and expertise globally, for the common good.

Academic molecular biology is not the only minority culture to which I belong—although it is probably the strangest and most antisocial. I am also a member of the tribe of punk rockers. This continues to flourish with absolutely no organizational structure whatsoever. Our major international meeting, usually held in Blackpool, England, is attended by more participants than the largest scientific

congresses. People turn up year after year to see performers they missed on previous occasions, because of parallel scheduling. Old favourites as well as unknown newcomers from places nobody has ever heard of get an opportunity to present, plus a few distinguished representatives from allied fields (for example, the Bay City Rollers, The Animals). The accompanying trade exhibition attracts far more attention than the lonely rows of sponsor stands at most academic meetings. Per capita alcohol consumption is only slightly less than at typical scientific colloquia.

Whereas 'do-it-yourself' record publishing (and clothing) was one of the earliest defining features of punk, we have largely devolved this responsibility nowadays to the commercial sector, which in turn has learned the wisdom of tapping into the core values of the community. The movement itself adheres doggedly to its youthfully rebellious stance and remains largely self-financing. It operates on a very low budget, yet reaches directly into the everyday lives of millions, far beyond its own vanguard of followers. Like molecular biology, most of its protagonists are unknown, at least by name, to the general public, although its impact on cultural and social history is huge and global.

This seemingly anarchic way of running things works fine because punk, like science, commands the passionate loyalty of its adherents. It infuses them with energy and embodies a robust identity and philosophy. While this model can't be adapted directly to EMBO, an obvious lesson to be learned is that content is more important than structure. Success depends on projecting an inspiring message that commands the attention of the target audience. EMBO needs the simplest possible organizational structure, as well as a clear mission to win the loyalty and support not just of scientists, but the wider public whom we serve. We wish Maria and Calle all the best in this endeavour.

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