

A new policy for Mathematics Inc.?

As Chairman of the Board I must apologize for having called this meeting at such a short notice. I trust, however, that you will excuse us because without actually taking positive action we couldn't have predicted the sudden death of Jean-Paul Sartre the usual three months ahead of time. His untimely death marks the end of existentialism, and as a company we shouldn't close our eyes for the fact that this philosophical movement has been indispensable for the creation, maintenance, and extension of our market.

Right from its inception, Mathematics Inc. has known that the successful industrialization of the development of mathematics would be tantamount to the Second Cultural Revolution and the Third Industrial Revolution rolled into one. Moreover, Mathematics Inc. has always known Man's general tendency to resist change even when it constitutes progress. We all know the great subtlety the selling of our products has required, and it is to the everlasting credit of our Sales Department, our Public Relations Department, our Publicity Department, and our Department of Educational Services that so many millions of customers could become fully dependent on our products without at the same time losing their feeling of human dignity. We should never underestimate the moral, cultural, intellectual, and philosophical stress to which the wholesale adoption of our products has subjected our more enlightened customers. The existentialist philosophy has been indispensable for the success of our company: during the emotionally difficult transition period it has provided our customers with the jargon that seemed to salvage the vestiges of personal initiative and individual responsibility. Sartre's untimely death has drawn this period to a sudden close, and we are here to discuss the possible courses of action lest the subtle balance in the love-hate relation between the company and its customers shifts.

Let me repeat: our professional pride in the spectacular progress of mathematical technology is fully justified, but this pride will fail to save the company when the very success of our products rebounds on us. Already structuralism, which invests symbols with a mystical appeal similar to the one numerology once gave to numbers, provides our current (and future!)

customers with a verbalization of the point of view that first and foremost depicts them as a product and even as a victim of modern technology. More than ever we have to face and fight the paradoxical situation in which the unavoidable mathematization of industry and the equally unavoidable industrialization of mathematics go hand in hand with violent anti-mathematical feelings in the substrate of our culture.

In this preliminary discussion I shall present you with two possible courses of action

One of them is to face the problem squarely and call as loudly as possible attention to the main problem our culture faces, viz. the social impact of the mass production of cheap mathematics. The rough structure of the argument is clear: we depict the progress of technology as an autonomous force, and after having shown with enough examples from the past how progress of technology cannot be stopped, an appeal to "historical necessity" will do the rest. We build up the case that "society will have to learn to live with it", and, from thereon, leave the soft scientists with the baby. In your evaluation I ask you to take into account the following factors.

Pro is the circumstance that by founding committees and sponsoring conferences Mathematics Inc can get relatively inexpensive publicity in which the sponsoring company will be presented as a socially responsible organization and more as an ally or potential saviour than as the villain in the piece.

Contra is the circumstance that, if the argument of the historical necessity is going to work, we have to dissociate our company from existentialism as quickly and as rigorously as possible. (Just in case we decide to need it, a 300-page booklet with maxims from Claude Lévi-Strauss is in preparation for our sales force, and a series of two-day seminars has provisionally been planned for next month.) Contra is also the serious possibility that we cannot find enough soft scientists we can rely upon; in short, we face the danger that after a fully successful start the whole project will be messed up in its second phase.

Finally I would like you to know that, if this course of action is followed, a number of activities on a national scale in the different countries we operate in is deemed to be more effective than activities on an international level. In a situation like this, national activities have two great advantages. Firstly, by presenting it as a national problem, it is easier to make people "accomplices" of efforts at "solution". Secondly, in each country the seduction can be tuned to the national needs as perceived by the respective citizens: in the industrialized world we can argue that mathematics is the technology of the future, since it uses no energy and causes no pollution, whereas in the developing countries we can promote mathematics as the cheapest and most effective way of developing, etc.

The second course of action is almost orthogonal to the first. (Taking both, however, is not excluded.) It would essentially be not to accept Sartre's death and to continue to capitalize on existentialism and, since we are now "on our own" so to speak, to do so even more actively than we have done before. (Also for this course of action philosophical training material for our sales force is in preparation.) Whether this course of action can be recommended for the developing nations is still under investigation. In the industrialized world, however, we can promote the abundance of mass-produced cheap mathematics as The Great Equalizer. We can argue that prior to this breakthrough of mathematical technology insight, knowledge, and hence power, were the prerogative of the happy few from the upper class, whereas now the intellectual self-realization has come within the reach of all. In view of the diversity of J.-P. Sartre's political views we can promote "Mathematics for Democracy" under all meanings of both terms; for a truly international company like Mathematics Inc., such multi-interpretability is an advantage that should not be underestimated. In evaluating this second course of action I ask you to take the following factors into account.

Pro is the circumstance that under the second course of action the company need not redesign its image. In our advertising we can stress the continuity of our tradition and the stability of our products, on which our customers can rely for many years without the danger of expensive conversions

to meet problems of incompatibility between proofs of our whole range. Mathematics Inc. as the Solid Rock amidst the swift currents of fads and fashions, etc. For the company it avoids the need for extensive retraining of our personnel, since we can proceed as before, only much more so.

Contra is the risk that we underestimate the strength of the structuralist movement and that what we present as stability will be misinterpreted as inflexibility: our proofs may need more than just restyling in order to continue offering a timely product. I would like all of you to take into consideration that any policy that appeals to the older customer but fails to establish our company firmly in the minds of the younger generation is in the long run a dangerous policy.

As your Chairman I am looking forward to your considered opinions on the best policy to follow. I expect your recommendations to be conflicting, but such confusion should not disturb anyone. We should never lose our faith in the eternal Laws of Logic, and, hence, we should never lose our faith in what we have founded on them: Mathematics Inc. Semper floreat et crescat!

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