Polycentric unity: governance from the centre of the circle

Paper VII of the Peace Papers, seven papers on one framework; each stands alone. Website version, working draft v0.16, 18 November 2026. Devon Summerhayes, London. Everything below is Interpretive unless marked Experienced or Measured. The figures are images, not evidence.

Abstract

Who should lead a group, and from where? This paper reads the question through the series' figure. A group is a triangle in a circle: the members' feeling its base, its rules and understanding its apex, its norm the circle, and at its centre, in a dimension within the plane, the witness, the one awareness every member has. A ruler is an ego at the apex, direction with one person's felt setting inside it, reached by seizure, which the status literature calls dominance, or by freely given deference, which it calls prestige. The technocratic answer, a neutral understanding at the apex, fails by the series' own account of understanding: understanding serves whatever setting of feeling directs it, so a neutral apex is indifference, or an appetite nobody can see. The apex was always understanding, the ego's framework, and it stays there: the group's rules direct, and only a rule can hold the apex without an ego. The leader belongs elsewhere, at the centre, as the group's witness: the position that sees the members' feeling at the base and the rules at the apex as two, from a dimension within, directed by concern at the other-directed pole for all, inside the circle and out, the impartial spectator, the judge. A person holds the centre only as a hat the group can remove. The paper states the conditions under which the hat stays a hat (appointment by prestige, removability, binding to a public floor), reads polycentric governance as the removal of any seat above the circles, and draws the arrangement it calls polycentric unity: circles of one size each centred on its neighbours' rims, so that what is the edge for one circle is the centre for the next and every norm is met by an eye. Four hypotheses are stated with what would count against them. Interpretive throughout, with the measured literature marked.

In the series, whose Unifying Paper stands outside the numbering, this paper is the closure: the operation at the scale of all circles, and its hyperdimensional form, the witness at the centre in the dimension within, said of everyone at once. It takes paper I's witness, paper II's states, paper IV's social superego and hats, and paper VI's two halves of peace to the group and to the structures that hold groups together. The solution it offers is a structure, and the structure's whole work is to leave room for what it cannot do, since the inner half of peace is arrived at one unividuual at a time.

Position and method

The author is an independent researcher and the founder of a community project, Centricity, about neighbours sharing tools, skills and help, run as small circles with published rules. The project is declared in the Declarations and is used here once, as a case stated and not argued; nothing in the paper's claims depends on it, and every claim is given with what would count against it. The method is the series': every descriptive claim is marked Experienced (a first-person report, judged by honesty), Measured (a published finding, judged by evidence) or Interpretive (a reading, judged by coherence and usefulness), and a reading that names what would change it is used, not believed. The figures are drawn from the series' one figure, the triangle in its circle (paper I, Figure 1), and are images: they show the shape of a claim and are not evidence for it. Generative AI was used as a drafting partner, as set out in the Declarations.

1. Introduction

Every group has a top. A family has a head of household, a club a chair, a firm a board, a nation a government, and the question of who should hold the top is the oldest in political thought: Plato answered it with guardians, Hobbes with a sovereign, the liberal tradition with offices under law, and the anarchist tradition with nobody. This paper does not add a new answer so much as a new

way to read the old ones, through a figure the series has used at every scale from the person to the species.

The figure is a triangle in a circle (paper I, Figure 1; paper IV, section 3). For a person, the base of the triangle is the felt perspective, I1, running from a self-directed pole to an other-directed one through a neutral middle; the apex is the understanding perspective, I2; the centre of the triangle and of the circle is the witness's eye, I3, the place from which both are seen together; the circle is the norm the person has taken in, the social superego; and the point of light at the centre is the one awareness every person has, π, the series' mark for universal consciousness, a mark and not the number, brought to a point in one person. Paper IV reads a group the same way: an in-group is a triangle in a circle, as if one psyche, its members' feeling the base, its rules and shared understanding the apex, its norm the circle, with the edge of the circle the place where the norm makes rivals, the licensed target of the group's harm (Summerhayes 2026d, section 3). The present paper takes that reading one step further and asks where a group's leader sits, and where one should.

Three claims are made. First, that a ruler is an ego at the apex, direction with one person's felt setting inside it, and that the two routes to the seat the status literature distinguishes, dominance and prestige, are the ego's two ways of getting there (section 3). Second, that the technocratic apex, neutral understanding at the top, fails by the series' own account of understanding; that the apex is I2, the group's rules, which only a rule can hold without an ego; and that the leader belongs at the centre, as the group's witness, in a dimension within, which a person holds only as a hat the group can remove (sections 4 to 6). Third, that the arrangement in which no seat is above the circles, polycentrism, has a geometry, which the paper calls polycentric unity, in which what is the edge for one circle is the centre for the next, so that every norm is met by an eye (section 7). The paper then returns to the question that gives the series its name, how a few can change the direction of a group (section 8), and states four hypotheses (section 9).

What is new here is not the praise of offices under law or of polycentric governance, both of which have long literatures. It is the reading inside the figure: the apex as the rules and the leader at the centre as the group's witness, the office as a hat worn on the group's behalf, centrality of office as the measure of its risk, and the geometry in which the edge of one circle is the centre of another. The series' own test applies: a reading that names what would change it is used, not believed, and section 9 names it.

2. Terms

The perspectives at group scale (author's mapping, Interpretive). The letter I in the series stands for the first-person self, and three perspectives are taken from it: I1, the felt; I2, the understanding; I3, the witness's eye, through which the first two are seen together. A group has no first person, but paper IV reads it as if it had one, and the reading is kept here as an image with a measured core: the group's I1 is what its members feel, their settings on the felt range weighted by influence, and it can be measured as the group's climate or morale; the group's I2 is its rules, procedures and shared understanding, and it can be read in its documents; the group's I3 is whatever in the group sees the first two as two, which this paper argues is a position and not a person; the group's norm is the social superego of paper IV, the average of what the group does and expects, weighted by influence; and the centre is the one awareness each member has, which the group has only in its members.

The apex and the centre. The apex is the top corner of the triangle. For a person it is I2, understanding; for a group it is its rules and shared understanding, the place from which direction is given. The centre is not a corner: it is where the witness sits and sees, and it is not in the plane of the triangle at all but in a dimension within, the depth paper I calls further in and not higher up, which paper III draws as the tesseract (Summerhayes 2026a, section 5; 2026c, section 6). The centre is beyond the base's neutral middle, which is indifference, and beyond the apex, which is procedure. The paper's question is where a leader belongs, and its answer is: not at the apex, which was always the ego's framework, but at the centre, as witness.

Ruler, head, office, rule. A ruler is a person at the apex whose own felt setting directs the group's understanding; the seat and the person are one. A head is a person who holds the centre on the group's behalf, as its witness, under terms the group sets; the position and the person are two. An office is the position itself, with its terms, considered apart from whoever holds it. A rule is a piece of the group's I2 that directs without a person: a law, a procedure, a stop rule.

Dominance and prestige (Measured). The status literature distinguishes two routes to rank: dominance, rank taken by force or the threat of it, and prestige, rank granted freely by others for competence and contribution, the deference that follows a skilled person because others want to learn from them (Henrich and Gil-White 2001). The two are distinct and both work; people grant influence along both routes, and both routes draw attention, and they differ in what those below feel, dominance feared and avoided, prestige liked (Cheng et al. 2013). In the series' terms, dominance is the ego at the self-directed pole taking the apex and prestige is the group's I1+ putting someone there; section 3 uses the distinction and section 6 builds on it.

Hats and centrality. Paper IV calls each norm a person carries a hat: the family's, the trade's, the nation's, worn when that group is present. A hat is also how the ego identifies itself, and how much a hat matters to its wearer is not how wide its circle is but how far the ego has taken it in, which the in-group identification literature measures as centrality, how much a membership is part of the self and how often it comes to mind (Leach et al. 2008; paper IV, section 2). An office is a hat, and its centrality to its holder is the risk variable of section 6.

What the members share. What the members of a group share, at every scale, is π, at every centre; what they do not share is the colour: the norm is the circle's, the feeling is each member's own setting, the rules are the apex's. The same holds across the line between groups: an in-group and its out-group share one true thing in common, the witness, π at every centre on either side and the eye that can be taken up at any of them, so the line between them is drawn in colour, in norms, feelings and rules, and never at the centre. That is what each needs to realise of the other; the author holds it to be the most important thing the series says. The sharing is total and it is the only thing that is, which is why a group can hold without a top, since the one thing in common needs no seat to represent it, and why the stance cannot be legislated, since the thing shared is not a norm (Interpretive).

Terms from the earlier papers, restated. The emissary: paper I's image of the ego as the self's envoy, sent into its states to act and return, serving while it remembers it is not the master. I1− has two forms, reactive (fear, hurt) and appetitive (wanting, aggression), and I1+ two, responsive and generative. Paper II's table of states crosses the settings of I1 with the roles of I2: compassion is I1+ directed by I2, indifference neutral I1 with I2, cruelty I1− appetitive directed by I2; love at rest is I1+ at rest, calm with concern present, which indifference, calm with concern absent, resembles from outside. The compassion side of the triangle is the side joining I1+ to I2. The humanity paradox (paper II): understanding other minds lets humans cooperate at scale and lets a few exploit the rest, and cooperation creates the niche in which exploitation pays. The defection loop (paper IV): a norm kept in public and broken in private, or openly rejected, passed on; the pro-order child is the one raised to comply where watched. Transjectuality: the stance from the witness's eye, both perspectives held as two. Purpose against dominance (paper I): esteem riding on a cause beyond the self against esteem riding on rank. The range of beings (paper VI): the stone, the animal, the person and the centre as densities of π, with the machine's place open. A unividuals: one awareness individuated, a single being seen as one consciousness at a point.

The social superego and its edge. The social superego is the norm a group's conduct sets, internalised by its members as a felt penalty at a breach; its edge is where it licenses a target, the out-group, the deviant, the rival, and the in-group paradox is that the norm that binds a group sets it against others (paper IV, section 3). Section 7's geometry is about where that edge falls.

3. The ruler: an ego at the apex

A person is an ego when feeling and understanding are taken for one: I1 and I2 collapsed into a self that acts, the emissary of paper I's image, sent into the states to act and return. A ruler is that collapse at the apex of a group. The group's understanding, its rules and its reading of the world, is directed by one person's felt setting, and the group goes where that setting points. If the setting is at the other-directed pole the ruler is a good king; if it is at the self-directed pole the ruler is a tyrant; and the structure cannot tell which it has until the setting shows, which is the oldest objection to kings and the reason the question of succession has never been settled by any monarchy for long (Interpretive).

There are two ways into the seat, and the status literature has measured them. Dominance takes the apex by force or the threat of force, and holds it the same way; its signature in those below is fear and avoidance (Measured; Cheng et al. 2013). Prestige is given the apex by the group, for competence and contribution, and holds it only while the giving continues; its signature is attention, liking and the wish to learn (Measured; Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Cheng et al. 2013). In the series' terms the first is the ego at the self-directed pole, appetite for the seat, I1− in its appetitive form directed by I2; the second is the group's I1+ placing someone at its apex, concern for the group directing the choice. Paper I's reading of purpose against dominance applies to the holder: in dominance, esteem rides on the rank, so the seat is defended against every rival and every slight reaches the self; in prestige held with the witness, esteem rides on the group's cause, so the seat is held lightly and handed on (Summerhayes 2026a, section 5).

Why seats are defended is then not a mystery. A seat taken by dominance is part of the holder's self-image, and a threat to it is a threat to the self; the holder will fight for it as for their life, and the history of coups is the measured record of that fight. Between 1950 and 2010 there were 457 coup attempts worldwide, about half of them successful (Measured; Powell and Thyne 2011). Whether seats that pass by rule are fought over less than seats that can be taken is H1.

The author's example is the present. An egoic ruler who took the seat is felt from below as fear, which is dominance's signature; an egoic ruler who was handed the seat, or has held it long enough that no one fears losing them, is felt as indifference. An ego at the apex directs the rules from its own setting, and the members' feeling at the base is not what it is looking at, so from below the apex reads as the neutral middle of paper II's table, nothing stirred and nothing defended on anyone's behalf, a form many recognise. Election does not change it when the electors choose from the ego too: a hat voting for a hat, esteem for esteem, which is dominance by ballot, ego elected by ego. Such a leader sits in the middle, but not of the dimension within. In the plane of the triangle the midpoint is the neutral setting of I1, and the egoic ruler who claims the centre sits there, equidistant from everyone and concerned for no one; the witness's centre is the same point seen from the dimension within, the tip of paper I's pyramid, which stands off the plane, further in and not higher up, drawn above it only because a page has no inward; from there the midpoint is not neutrality but presence. Two positions, one point on the page: the middle of the plane and the centre of the depth, and the egoic leader occupies the first and is taken, by themselves and by their electors, for the second. The leader so chosen has not taken up I3 as witness, and the structure never asked them to; it asked them to win. That is why the paper's question is where a leader sits and not only how they are chosen (Interpretive; this would be wrong if voters' choices were shown to track candidates' concern for those outside their own circle rather than the candidates' standing with their own).

The oldest control on the seat is not a rule but a habit. In the forager bands from which every later form of society grew, dominance was actively suppressed: the would-be big man was mocked, shunned, deserted and in the last resort killed, so that the ego's quest for the apex had nowhere to go, an arrangement Boehm calls reverse dominance hierarchy, the group as a whole dominating anyone who would dominate it (Measured; Boehm 1999). That is the structure of this paper in its first form: the group as the witness of its would-be ruler, the apex kept open by the circle's refusal to let anyone sit in it. Everything that follows is a way of doing in a large group, by rule, what the band did by mockery.

4. The technocratic apex

One modern answer to the ruler is to put no one's feeling at the apex at all: let the group be directed by its understanding alone, by experts, by procedure, by the best available model of the world, with the feelings of rulers and ruled set aside as noise. Weber described the form as bureaucracy, rule by trained officials under impersonal rules, and called it the most efficient form of administration ever devised (Measured as his account; Weber 1922/1978); the iron cage is his earlier phrase for where it leads (Weber 1905/1930). Its modern descendants are the technocracy and the optimiser, and the series' account of understanding says why the answer fails.

I2 is neutral in itself: a tool that serves whatever setting of I1 directs it, as paper I states and paper II builds its table of states on. An apex of pure understanding is therefore one of two things. Either its I1 is neutral, in which case the state is the one paper II's table calls indifference, understanding present with nothing stirred and nothing defended, the administrator who applies the rule to the starving family because the rule says so, correct at every step and concerned at none (Summerhayes 2026b, Table 3). Or its I1 is hidden, in which case the understanding serves a setting nobody can see, the objective set by whoever wrote the procedure, and the group is directed by an appetite that has been declared neutral: paper VI's norm-free agent, bound by structures and by nothing felt, the machine whose objective was set by someone else (Summerhayes 2026f, section 12). A neutral apex is never value-free, because an objective is a setting, and the only question is whose (Interpretive; this would be wrong if an institution run by procedure alone could be shown to produce outcomes that favoured no one, including those who wrote the procedure).

The technocratic apex has a second failure that paper IV predicts: it produces the pro-order group. Conduct required by a rule with no felt concern behind it is effort without felt reward, which the ego resists, so a group run by pure procedure gets compliance where it is watched and defection where it is not, the hidden face of paper IV's defection loop at the scale of an institution (Summerhayes 2026d, section 3). The iron cage is not only cold; it leaks.

5. The witness position

If the apex should hold neither a person's feeling nor no feeling, what should it hold? The series' answer is that the apex holds what it always held, I2, the group's rules and understanding, the ego's framework, and that the leader does not belong there at all. The leader belongs at the centre, as the group's witness: the position that sees the members' feeling at the base and the rules at the apex as two, so that neither is taken for the group, from a dimension within the plane, and that is directed by the group's I1+ at the other-directed pole for all, inside the circle and outside it (Interpretive; this would be wrong if institutions whose directing office is bound to concern for all, including those outside, did no better on structural harm than those whose office serves the group alone, which H4 tests in part). The centre is beyond indifference, which is the neutral middle of the base, and beyond procedure, which is the apex; it is the depth the series' figure has at every scale, the point every circle is in.

Each clause does work. Seeing the feeling and the rules as two is what keeps the leader from being a ruler, whose feeling is taken for the rule, and from being a technocrat, whose rule is taken for the whole; it is the stance paper I calls transjectuality, applied to a group's own two perspectives. Directed by I1+ is what keeps the centre from indifference: the witness position is not neutral, it is concerned, and its concern has a direction, the other-directed pole, the good of those it directs. For all, inside and out, is what keeps the centre from the in-group paradox: a group's norm licenses a target at its edge, and a witness position directed by concern for the group alone would license it too; concern for those outside the circle is what paper IV's edge looks like from the centre, and section 7 shows it as geometry.

The oldest name for this position is Adam Smith's: the impartial spectator, the figure within from whose standpoint one's own conduct is judged, who is not without feeling but whose feeling is not partial (Measured as his account; Smith 1759). Paper I places the witness close to it (Summerhayes

2026a, section 1). The oldest institution of it is the judge: not a person without concern, but a person whose concern is held at the other-directed pole for everyone before the court, including the one in the dock, and whose feeling for the parties is seen as feeling and not allowed to be the verdict. Impartial is not indifferent; the difference between the two is the difference between paper II's love at rest and its indifference, calm with concern present against calm with concern absent, and a legal system that forgets it produces the administrator of section 4 (Interpretive).

The witness position is a position and not a person, and it does not act: the rules at the apex direct, the members at the base feel, and the centre sees and holds the two as two. That is the hinge of the paper, and it is why the leader's place is the centre and not the apex: a leader at the apex would have to act from their own setting, and would be a ruler; a leader at the centre sees, and lets the rules act. A person who holds the centre is still an ego, on a face of paper I's pyramid when they act and at its tip when they see, and can be drawn back to the base by every threat to the position; the position itself does not want, and the question of section 6 is how a person can hold a position that must not want.

6. The office as a hat

Only a rule can hold the apex without an ego. A rule is the group's I2 directing without a person, the rule of law in its oldest sense, and it can hold the apex because it has no I1 of its own to collapse into: it does not want the seat, cannot be flattered, and is not threatened by a rival. Its limit is the limit of section 4: a rule serves the setting it was written with, so a rule at the apex is only as impartial as the concern it was written to serve, and the task of writing law is the task of putting the group's I1+ for all into the group's I2. Where that is done, the apex serves the centre; where it is not, it is the technocratic apex under another name (Interpretive; H4).

The centre is where a person enters, and the form in which a person can hold it is an office. An office is a hat: a norm the group puts on someone, worn while the group is present, and taken off again. What makes an office different from a seat is that the felt penalty attached to it is set by the group and not by the holder. The ruler's seat is defended by the ruler; the office is defended, or not, by the group, which can take the hat back. The office of the head is the centre held on the group's behalf. Boehm's levelling turned into a procedure: the band that mocked the big man becomes the electorate that recalls the head, and the hat comes off without anyone having to be deserted or killed (Interpretive). The Roman form of the ideal is Cincinnatus, called from his field to the dictatorship, doing the work, and returning to the field; the modern form is the term of office, which fixes in advance the day the hat comes off.

Whether the hat stays a hat is the holder's part, and the series gives its measure. Centrality is how far a hat has become who its wearer is (Leach et al. 2008; paper IV, section 2). An office central to its holder, the head who is nothing without the headship, is a seat again: it will be defended, and the group will have to fight to get the hat back. An office held at low centrality, by someone whose esteem rides on the group's cause and not on the rank, is handed back when the group asks or the term ends, which is paper I's purpose against dominance at the scale of an institution (Summerhayes 2026a, section 5). The test of which a group has is the second, better candidate: the holder on a face of the pyramid is glad of them, the holder who has fallen to the base is their rival (Interpretive; section 9, H2).

Three conditions follow for the structure, and they are the conditions under which the hat stays a hat.

First, appointment by deference, never by seizure: the office is given, for contribution, by those the holder will see for, which is the prestige route made a procedure, and it cannot be taken: whoever takes it has made a seat of it, whatever it is called. This is the status literature's distinction made into a rule (Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Cheng et al. 2013).

Second, removability. The hat must come off by term or by recall, and the procedure must be cheap enough that defending the office against it is visibly absurd. An office that can be defended will be, by

someone, eventually; an office that cannot be defended, because the group's taking it back costs the group nothing, is not worth collapsing into. Ostrom's design principles for commons that last include collective-choice arrangements in which most of those affected can take part in changing the rules, and monitoring by people accountable to the users or who are the users themselves (Measured; Ostrom 1990); removability is those two principles applied to the centre.

Third, binding. The office is bound to a public floor, the things it cannot do to anyone, and to stop rules, the conditions under which it stops, both written before the holder is chosen, so that the holder serves the group's concern for all and not their own setting of I1. This is the rule of law kept at the apex: the centre sees, the rules act, and the hat is worn inside the circle of the group's I2, not above it.

Under those three conditions the appointed head is the centre held by a person on the group's behalf, with the group as the witness of the person. The person sees the group's feeling and rules as two; the group sees the person's office as a hat; and neither is taken for the whole (Interpretive).

7. Polycentric unity: no seat above the circles

The conditions of section 6 keep a single centre honest. There is a further step, which is to have no seat above the circles at all, and it is the step that gives this paper its title.

Ostrom's work on common-pool resources, the pasture, the fishery, the irrigation system, the resources that are hard to exclude people from and used up by use, found that communities govern them for centuries without either a central state or private ownership, and that the ones that last share a set of design principles: clearly defined boundaries; rules fitted to local conditions; collective-choice arrangements; monitoring by or accountable to the users; graduated sanctions; cheap and rapid conflict resolution; recognition by higher authorities of the community's right to organise; and, for larger systems, nested enterprises, governance organised in layers from the smallest unit up (Measured; Ostrom 1990). The name for the pattern, polycentric governance, is older than that book and comes from the study of how metropolitan areas are governed by many overlapping authorities (V. Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren 1961; E. Ostrom 2010): many centres of decision, each with its own authority, none the top of all the others.

Read through the figure, polycentrism is what happens when no seat sits above the circles. Each circle keeps its own apex, its rules, and its own centre, held under section 6's conditions; the wider circle's centre is appointed by the circles within it and removable by them, so that the head of the ward is the streets' witness and the head of the borough the wards'; and the geography nests, each circle a smaller region of the next, as in paper IV's figure of six circles around one person. That is Ostrom's eighth principle drawn: nested enterprises, with each layer's centre the witness of the layer below, held by delegation and removable from below (Interpretive).

Nesting is not the whole geometry, because resources and people do not nest. A river runs through several wards, a skill is shared across two streets, and a person wears several hats at once, so circles also overlap, through their resources and through their members. Nesting gives the centre above; overlap gives the edge between. Paper IV says the edge of a norm is where it makes rivals, and in a commons the edge is the shared resource, so the overlap is exactly where conflict comes from and where a witness position is needed that belongs to neither circle: not a head above both, but a joint rule between them for what neither owns, the two circles' seeing of their shared edge. Ostrom's sixth principle, cheap and rapid conflict resolution, is that rule, and her cases of failure are, on this reading, cases where the seam had no rule and the edge was met as an edge (Measured for the principle and the cases; Ostrom 1990; Interpretive for the reading). The seam, the joint rule, is what the overlap needs.

The figure that follows is read at two scales, and the mechanism at each is stated here in words before the drawing, since the drawing holds the argument in one image and is not the argument. Within a group, the circles are its members. Each member shares the witness of the group, as being of the group, while each is a univídual of that group, with an individuated ego that contains the

group's superego: the same norm in every circle, the same witness at every centre, since the group's witness is not a thing apart from its members but their shared seeing. One member's edge running through another's centre then says that the norm each carries is seen by the others from the centre, and that the seeing is one seeing; no member's norm is unseen from outside itself, which is what keeps a group's norm a hat and not a cage. The overlaps are the social dynamics of the group's people, what passes between two members, bounded by their two witnesses rather than by two edges. Between groups, the circles are groups, the edge is the out-group paper IV names, and the mechanism is overlapping membership and office: the neighbouring circle's centre is a person the first circle's norm would license as a target, who holds an office the first circle must deal with, so the norm meets at its edge someone it cannot license without cost. The overlaps are then the shared resources and the seam rules. The two readings are not alternatives but the same model at two scales, and the model gives every scale at once: a circle is a group of the circles within it and a member of the circle around it, so the member of one reading is the group of the next, and what holds within a group holds between groups by the same drawing, which is how one model yields the scalar perspective (the author's point). Both mechanisms are claims about people and offices, and both would be wrong if a group whose members did not share the witness, or a pair of groups with no overlapping membership or office, held their edges as well as those that do (Interpretive).

There is a tighter arrangement, and the author proposes it as the ideal the rules approach. Let the circles be of one size and let each be centred on its neighbours' rims, so that the edge of each circle runs through the centre of the next. Then what is the edge for one circle, the place where its norm makes rivals, is the centre for its neighbour, the place where its witness sits. The licensed target of one circle is the very point from which the next circle sees, so the edge is never met as an edge; it is met as an eye, the neighbouring witness seeing the norm as a norm, a hat and not the circle, which is what takes the rivalry out of it. The shared lens between two such circles has both centres on its boundary, so the shared resource is bounded by two witnesses and not two edges. Six circles fit around a seventh in this way, each through its neighbours' centres, and the pattern is an old one in ornament and in several traditions, though its popular name, the flower of life, is a modern coinage and is used here only as a name; the seventh, at the centre, is the one every other edge runs through (Interpretive).

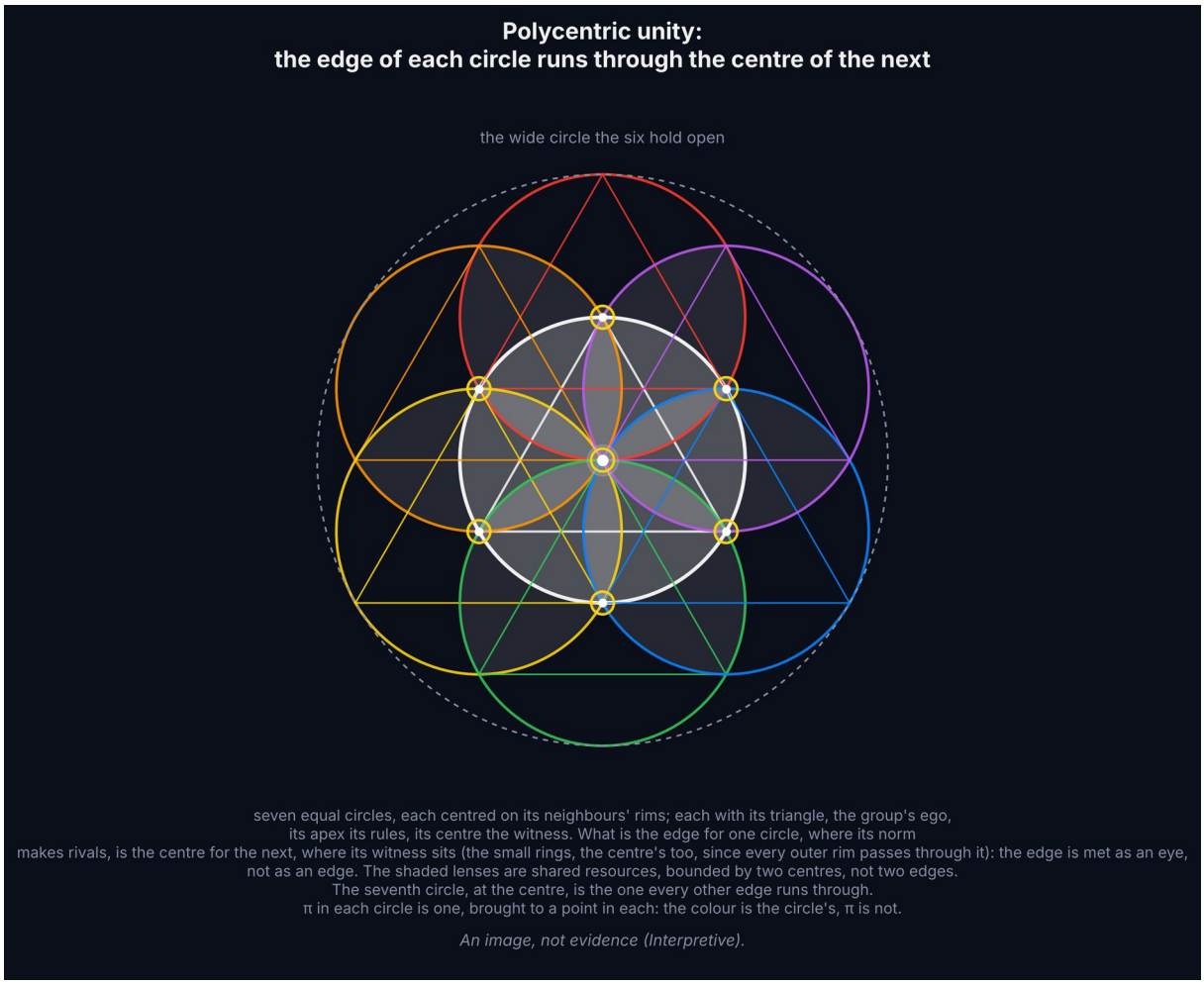


Figure 1. Polycentric unity (Interpretive). Seven equal circles, six around one, each centred on its neighbours' rims, so that the edge of each runs through the centre of the next; each with its triangle, the group's ego, its apex its rules, its centre the witness. The small rings mark where one circle's rim passes through another's centre, the central centre included, since every outer rim passes through it: what is the edge for one circle, where its norm makes rivals, is the centre for the next, where its witness sits, so the edge is met as an eye and not as an edge. The shaded lenses, all twelve, are what passes between two circles, dealings within a group or shared resources between groups, bounded by two centres. The dashed outer circle is the wide circle the six hold open. π in each circle is one, brought to a point in each: the colour is the circle's, π is not.

The arrangement is an image and the author does not claim that any real ward is built to it; real circles are unequal and move. What it fixes is what the rules of section 6 and Ostrom's principles are for: an arrangement in which every edge is some centre's view, so that no norm is left unseen from outside itself. Peace in the figure is not reached by it; the series holds that peace is kept, not reached (Summerhayes 2026f, section 12), and the figure shows the arrangement under which the edges are witnessed, while the witnessing has to be done each cycle, by each centre, or the edge goes back to being an edge (Interpretive).

The arrangement continues. Circles of one size centred on their neighbours' rims fill the plane as a lattice, every circle's edge running through the centres of its six neighbours, with no outer circle anywhere in the lattice continued; the drawing is cut off at three rings (Figure 2, drawn in the same orientation as Figure 1, with a neighbour straight above each circle, which is what makes the corners fall where the next sentence says). Two things that the seven-circle flower only implies become visible in it. There is no centre of centres: the wide circle the six hold open is only the next ring, so the lattice is polycentrism stated as geometry, no circle the widest and none the whole. And the triangles tile: every corner of every triangle falls on a neighbour's centre, the apex of a circle on the centre of the circle above it and its two poles on the centres of the two below, so a circle's rules end at the witness of the wider circle and its members' feeling is held at the witnesses of the narrower ones;

no corner of any ego's framework is anywhere but at an eye, which is what it means for the structure to be the witness (Interpretive).

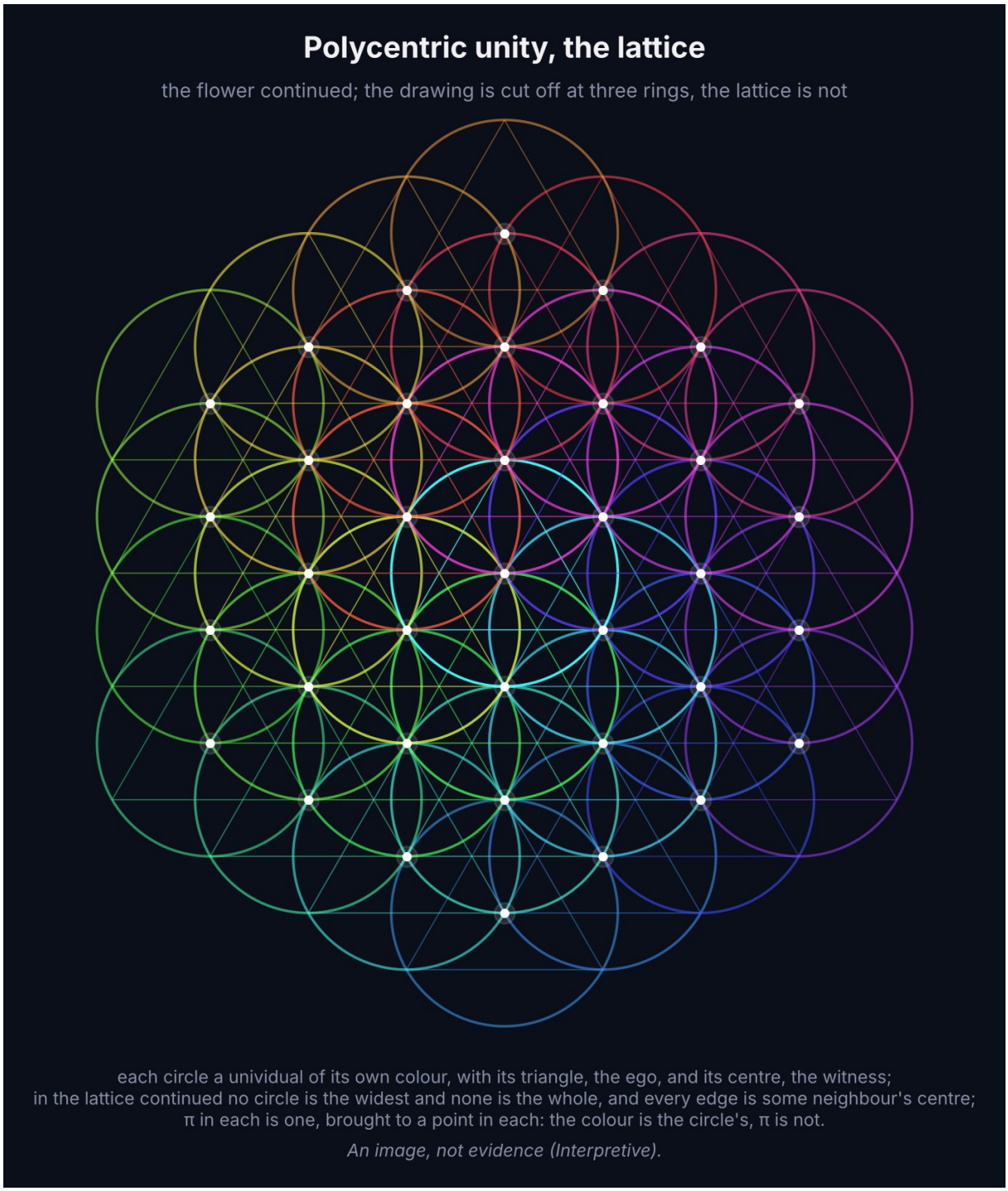


Figure 2. Polycentric unity, the lattice (Interpretive). The flower continued: thirty-seven equal circles on a triangular lattice, every circle's edge running through the centres of its six neighbours, each with its triangle and its point of light, each its own colour; the drawing is cut off at three rings, so the outermost circles have edges that no drawn centre meets, which the lattice continued would supply. In the lattice continued no circle is the widest and none is the whole, and every edge is some neighbour's centre, so every norm is met by an eye; every corner of every triangle is a neighbour's centre, the apex the centre of the circle above and the poles the centres of the two below. Π in each is one, brought to a point in each: the colour is the circle's, Π is not.

The flower, the author proposes, is the structure in which peace is held in dynamic equilibrium: peace is arrived at at equilibrium, but in reality everything is moving, so the equilibrium is not a

state reached but an arrangement kept, cycle by cycle, in which every edge is witnessed, and it repeats at every scale, from the social group to the circle of families, the community of circles, the town and the city, the nation and the world, each a flower of the flowers below it (Interpretive). The author reads the lattice at every scale of the series' table. Each circle is a univídual, the series' word for one awareness individuated (Summerhayes 2026g, "The word"): a person, a family, a group, a polity, each of its own colour, and the lattice is the unity they form without any one of them being the whole. The triangle in its circle is one univídual seen alone; the lattice is the univíduals seen together; they are the same drawing at two scales. Read at the scale of the species, the lattice is what paper VI's species circle looks like when it is drawn: not a circle around all the others, which would be one more hat with an edge, but the lattice itself, every person a circle, every edge some neighbour's centre, and no outer rim at all, which is what it means that the species circle has no human outside it (Summerhayes 2026f, section 12). The lattice does not stop at the species; it continues as far as there are centres, through paper VI's range of beings, the animal, the stone, the machine with its place open, with the density of π in each circle the only thing that changes. Read as species within life, each circle is a species and the lattice is life. π in every point is what makes it one species, and one range, and not a crowd (Interpretive).

Peace and power (Interpretive). The author proposes the following; entropy is used in it as an image, not as evidence. Combatting entropy is required to maintain superiority in a social dynamic: the ego maintaining dominance requires energy, and the contest for rank plays out from the ego's lust for power. Collectively, a dynamic peace yields synergy for the benefit of all, while power serves upwards. Peace, the circle, must contain the power of the triangle, while the triangle of power seeks to break free from the container. The choice is therefore not peace or power but peace and power: the triangle in its circle. The alternative is power alone, the triangle taken for the circle (Summerhayes 2026f, section 7).

The route (Interpretive). Peace is more efficient, but it also requires energy, to check and contain power from overthrowing or disturbing it. For checks and containment there has to be reasonable force, against defection or to deter it. Peace's attempts to do so are cyclic order (Summerhayes 2026d), which may inadvertently turn the very institutions set up to maintain peace into dominant powers. The best route for institutions set up with the intent of peace is therefore a polycentric dynamic, with each circle maintaining a check on each other. This would be wrong if groups run from the top did as well for their lowest members as groups that share the centre, or if circles that check one another were captured as often as circles checked from above.

Evidence at the scale of nations. The evidence supports that route and does not show it to be optimal. In teams, a meta-analysis of 54 studies and 13,914 teams found the net effect of hierarchy on team performance and on team viability negative and small (-.08 and -.11), running through conflict, with task ambiguity the only moderator that strengthened hierarchy's positive effects (Measured; Greer et al. 2018). Holding the top has a cost: in wild male baboons higher rank generally went with lower stress hormone levels, but the highest-ranking males had much higher levels than the second-ranking (Measured; Gesquiere et al. 2011). Checking takes energy and pays over time: where earlier, shorter experiments had found the costs of punishing free riders to outweigh the gains from cooperation, a public goods experiment run over fifty periods found punishment unambiguously beneficial (Measured; Gächter et al. 2008). Ostrom's design principles, monitoring and graduated sanctions among them, were found well supported empirically in a review of 91 studies (Measured; Cox et al. 2010), and Ostrom wrote of the failure of panaceas, of any one remedy held to fit every case (Ostrom 2007). At the scale of nations, democratisations increased GDP per capita by about 20 per cent in the long run (Measured; Acemoglu et al. 2019). Between pairs of states from 1885 to 1992, democracy, economic interdependence and shared international organisations each reduced the probability of militarised disputes, as did power predominance, while the effects of a strong hegemonic power varied (Measured; Oneal and Russett 1999); and across all pairs of states from 1816 to 1965 the absence of overwhelming preponderance was among the conditions of a war-prone pair (Measured; Bremer 1992). Read together, what goes with peace between nations is overlap and shared rules, the seams of this section, and not rivals matched in strength; and since one member's preponderance deters and is also the dominant power the route is meant to contain, the force has to

be the circle's, graduated, bound and removable (Interpretive). Two cases illustrate the route and do not test it. The European Union began as a rule for one shared resource, French and German coal and steel placed under a common authority, with the stated aim of making war between the two "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible" (Schuman 1950). The United States, from whose metropolitan government the word polycentric was drawn (Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren 1961), separates its powers so that each checks the others; it did not contain its dispute over slavery short of civil war, and outwardly it has acted as a dominant power, so checks inside a circle do not settle how the circle behaves at its edge, which is why overlaps are essential, with the commonality as a shared consciousness; otherwise the result is egoic conflict (Interpretive). These are comparisons between countries and single cases: none tests a polycentric order as drawn here, and the tests this paper can name are those of section 9.

Centricity, the author's project, is stated here once as a case and not argued. Its design is polycentric: small circles of neighbours, each with its own rules, a public floor of things no circle may do, published stop rules, visible reputation, and no circle at the centre of the others. Its first pilots are running, and the series' claims about it are hypotheses with the pilots as their test; the project's own documents keep the pilots apart from the vision, and this paper does the same. The vision, stated apart from the pilots: the intent of an initiative like Centricity is to develop a way of living for people that inherently possesses these understandings, so that as it emerges in scale, from its smallest form onwards, it can dynamically evolve into a way that we as a collective can inhabit more harmoniously (a statement of intent, not a finding; the project is the author's own).

8. The few who swing a circle

The series is named for peace, and its question at every scale is how a loop that runs one way can be made to run the other. Paper IV's answer at the scale of the family is cyclic nurture: the loop that hands harm down the generations hands nurture down as reliably, and each has exits (Summerhayes 2026d). This section asks the question at the scale of a circle: can a few nurturing members turn a circle into a nurturing one?

On the series' models, yes, and the geometry of section 7 says where they sit. The social superego is the average of what the group does, weighted by influence, so a few members whose nurture carries influence shift the average, the average becomes what the circle expects, and the next cycle hands it on. The weighting is why it can be a few: influence in a circle is prestige, deference given freely for contribution, and a nurturing member who is visibly useful is weighted far above their headcount, while a nurturing member nobody deals with shifts nothing. The measured threshold for a minority that can change a convention is about a quarter: in online groups that had settled on a convention, a committed minority of about twenty-five per cent tipped the group to a new one and smaller minorities failed, with one person making the difference in one trial (Measured; Centola et al. 2018). The convention there was arbitrary and the group small, and the threshold in that model moves with group size and memory, so the figure is a threshold for the mechanism in that setting and not a forecast for a street (Interpretive).

Three conditions follow, and each is a place where the attempt fails. First, repeated dealing: the loop needs cycles to compound, so a circle that meets once a year has no loop to swing. Second, containment of the other direction: cooperation creates the niche in which defection pays, paper II's humanity paradox, so a circle swung toward nurture is a better place to defect in, and without visible reputation and fair rules the few defectors swing it back faster than the few nurturers swung it, since harm compounds as reliably as nurture (Summerhayes 2026b, section 5). Third, the nurturers must be exits and not enforcers: nurture required by a norm becomes effort without felt reward, which the ego resists, so a circle whose nurturers police it gets the pro-order member, compliant where watched, and not the nurtured one (Summerhayes 2026d, section 3).

The nurturers do not stand outside the hierarchy. They are egos acting, on a face of the pyramid and not at its tip, and they sit on the triangle at a place, the compassion side, I1+ directed by I2 with the witness joined; and the place is a rank, since prestige is rank. What the series claims is narrower

than that they are above it: that their place is held differently. Esteem rides on the cause and not on the rank, the hat "the one who helps" is seen as a hat, and so the rank is not defended when it is threatened. The test is the arrival of a second nurturer who is better at it: the one on the face is glad, the one who has fallen to the base is a rival. And the trap paper I names applies: "I am the nurturer" is a label, labels are I2's act, and the nurturer who takes the label for themselves has made a rank of it (Summerhayes 2026a, section 5). The witness does not take the nurturers out of the hierarchy; it keeps the hierarchy from being taken for the self (Interpretive).

9. Hypotheses

Each hypothesis is Interpretive in origin and stated with a design, a prediction and what would count against it. None has been run.

H1. Removable offices are defended less. Prediction: offices that pass by term or recall are the target of coups and succession violence at a lower rate than seats that are hereditary or were seized, controlling for wealth and regime age. Design: the Powell and Thyne coup dataset (2011) and its successors, coded for the mode of succession of the office attacked. What would count against it: no difference in attempt rates once regime age and wealth are controlled, which would mean that removability does not lower the cost of losing the seat.

H2. Office centrality predicts resistance to recall. Prediction: holders of an office who score high on centrality for that office, the office as part of who they are, resist its removal more, and respond to a stronger successor with more hostility, than holders who score low, controlling for tenure. Design: a measure of office centrality adapted from the in-group identification scale (Leach et al. 2008) given to office holders in clubs, associations and councils, followed over a succession. What would count against it: no relation between centrality and resistance, which would mean that seats are defended for their rewards alone and not for the self.

H3. A nurturing minority with rules holds a circle's direction; without rules it does not. Prediction: circles with a committed nurturing minority of about a quarter, plus visible reputation and fair rules, hold a cooperative direction over several cycles; circles with the minority alone drift back. Design: any small sharing group with published rules, with a state measure each cycle and the structural features recorded. What would count against it: circles with the minority and no rules holding direction as well as circles with both.

H4. A stated concern at the apex does less harm than a neutral rule. Prediction: institutions whose founding rules state the concern they serve, and for whom, produce less structural harm, on Galtung's concept of structural violence, the harm an arrangement does with no one striking (Galtung 1969), made operational as an outcome the institution controls, such as the rate of wrongful refusals, evictions or deaths while waiting, than institutions of the same kind whose rules are stated as neutral procedure. Design: paired comparisons of institutions of one type, welfare offices or housing authorities, coded for whether their rules state a concern and for structural outcomes. What would count against it: equal or lower harm in the neutral institutions, which would mean the technocratic apex of section 4 is not indifferent in effect, whatever it is in form.

10. Objections and replies

"This is Plato's guardian under another name." No. The guardian is a person at the apex, chosen for wisdom and trusted to stay wise; the whole of sections 5 and 6 is that the leader does not belong at the apex at all, that the apex is held by the rules, and that the person at the centre holds an office the group can empty. Plato answered the question of who should rule; this paper answers the question of where a leader sits so that the first question matters less.

"Prestige is dominance with better manners." The two are measurably distinct in how they are gained and in what those below feel (Cheng et al. 2013), and the paper's test keeps them apart in practice: the holder's response to a better successor. Where the response is rivalry, the paper agrees that the prestige was dominance, and says so.

"Polycentrism dissolves into no decision." Ostrom's cases are the reply: communities have governed shared resources for centuries by nested and overlapping arrangements without a top, and the ones that lasted had the principles of section 7, including cheap conflict resolution for the seams (Ostrom 1990). Polycentrism is not the absence of centres; it is centres without a centre of centres.

"The author runs Centricity, so the paper is advocacy." The project is declared, used once as a case stated and not argued, and the paper's claims are falsifiable without it; none of the four hypotheses names it, and the author's own pilot is set aside as a conflicted case (section 11). The reader who distrusts the case can strike section 7's last paragraph and lose nothing from the argument.

"The geometry is numerology." The figures are images and the paper says so at every one. What they show is the shape of a claim, that every edge should be some centre's view; the claim stands or falls by section 9, not by the drawing.

11. Limits and risks

The figure is an image and not evidence, and the series' recurring risk applies: a reading taken for a finding. The specific risk of this paper is that a governance paper is read as a programme. It is not; it is a way of reading the old programmes, offices under law and polycentric commons, through one figure, and the four hypotheses are its only claims to be right. The group-scale perspectives of section 2 are an image with a measured core, and a reader who rejects the image can keep the core: climate, rules, norm, and the measured distinction between dominance and prestige. The hypotheses are coarse, and H1 in particular depends on coding modes of succession across regimes that differ in everything else. The author's own pilot in Penge is a conflicted case for H3 and is not its test; H3 needs groups the author does not run. And the paper says nothing about how the conditions of section 6 are reached from where most places now are, which is the question of transition, and belongs to a paper with evidence this one lacks.

12. Conclusion

A group is a triangle in a circle, and the question of who should sit at its apex has a shape. A ruler is an ego at the apex, and the seat is defended because it has become the self. A neutral understanding at the apex is indifference or a hidden appetite. The apex is the group's rules, and only a rule can hold it without an ego. The leader belongs at the centre, in a dimension within, as the group's witness, seeing the members' feeling and the rules as two and directed by concern for all; a person holds the centre only as a hat the group can remove, appointed by prestige, removable by term or recall, bound to a public floor, with the office's centrality to its holder the measure of the risk. Polycentrism puts no seat above the circles, and its ideal geometry, polycentric unity, is the arrangement in which every edge of one circle is the centre of another, so that every norm is met by an eye and no circle is the widest; continued, it is a lattice with no outer rim, which is what the species looks like drawn, and in every circle of it π is one. Peace in the outer half, at the scale of a polity, is a structure that keeps its own centre removable; peace in the inner half is still arrived at one unividuals at a time, and the structure's whole work is to leave room for it (Interpretive).

Declarations

Competing interests. The author founded Centricity, a community project about neighbours sharing tools, skills and help, run as small circles with published rules; it pays the author no income. It is named in section 7 as a case stated and not argued, and the paper's hypotheses do not depend on it.

Funding. No funding, grant or employer support was received for this work.

Ethics. No new data were collected from human participants. No ethics approval was needed.

Use of AI. Generative AI (Claude, from Anthropic: Claude Fable 5.1) was used as a drafting partner: to draft and edit text from the author's statements in discussion on 9 and 10 November 2026, to find

and summarise literature, with every source then checked against its publication record, to render the two figures from the author's descriptions, and to check references and internal consistency; it also produced a cold read of v0.4 by a fresh instance that had not seen the drafting, whose findings shaped v0.5. The model proposed, in discussion, the mapping of the few who swing a circle onto Centola's tipping point and the three conditions under which a nurturing minority holds a circle's direction (section 8). On 10 November 2026, in a session configured as Claude Fable 5.2, the model found and summarised the studies set out in section 7 under "Evidence at the scale of nations", each opened at its abstract or official text, proposed, in that paragraph, the reading that the force has to be the circle's, graduated, bound and removable, and proposed the two tests that close "The route". The model had first placed the witness position at the apex, which was corrected; the paper places it at the centre (sections 5 and 6). The author reviewed all content and takes full responsibility for it.

References

Acemoglu D, Naidu S, Restrepo P, Robinson JA (2019). Democracy does cause growth. Journal of Political Economy 127(1):47-100.

Boehm C (1999). Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior. Harvard University Press.

Bremer SA (1992). Dangerous dyads: conditions affecting the likelihood of interstate war, 1816-1965. Journal of Conflict Resolution 36(2):309-341.

Centola D, Becker J, Brackbill D, Baronchelli A (2018). Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention. Science 360(6393):1116-1119. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aas8827

Cheng JT, Tracy JL, Foulsham T, Kingstone A, Henrich J (2013). Two ways to the top: evidence that dominance and prestige are distinct yet viable avenues to social rank and influence. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 104(1):103-125. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030398

Cox M, Arnold G, Villamayor Tomás S (2010). A review of design principles for community-based natural resource management. Ecology and Society 15(4):38.

Gächter S, Renner E, Sefton M (2008). The long-run benefits of punishment. Science 322(5907):1510.

Galtung J (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. Journal of Peace Research 6(3):167-191. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301

Gesquiere LR, Learn NH, Simao MCM, Onyango PO, Alberts SC, Altmann J (2011). Life at the top: rank and stress in wild male baboons. Science 333(6040):357-360.

Greer L, De Jong B, Schouten M, Dannals J (2018). Why and when hierarchy impacts team effectiveness: a meta-analytic integration. Journal of Applied Psychology 103:591-613.

Henrich J, Gil-White FJ (2001). The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission. Evolution and Human Behavior 22(3):165-196. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138(00)00071-4

Leach CW, van Zomeren M, Zebel S, Vliek MLW, Pennekamp SF, Doosje B, Ouwerkerk JW, Spears R (2008). Group-level self-definition and self-investment: a hierarchical (multicomponent) model of in-group identification. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 95(1):144-165. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.1.144

Oneal JR, Russett B (1999). The Kantian peace: the pacific benefits of democracy, interdependence, and international organizations, 1885-1992. World Politics 52(1):1-37.

Ostrom E (1990). Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. Cambridge University Press.

Ostrom E (2007). A diagnostic approach for going beyond panaceas. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 104(39):15181-15187.

Ostrom E (2010). Beyond markets and states: polycentric governance of complex economic systems. American Economic Review 100(3):641-672. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.100.3.641

Ostrom V, Tiebout CM, Warren R (1961). The organization of government in metropolitan areas: a theoretical inquiry. American Political Science Review 55(4):831-842. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055400125973

Powell JM, Thyne CL (2011). Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: a new dataset. Journal of Peace Research 48(2):249-259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310397436

Schuman R (1950). Declaration of 9 May 1950. Text published by the European Union, european-union.europa.eu.

Smith A (1759). The Theory of Moral Sentiments. A. Millar, London, and A. Kincaid and J. Bell, Edinburgh.

Summerhayes D (2026a). Arriving at the centre of consciousness: a transjective framework. Working draft.

Summerhayes D (2026b). Empathy, compassion and the humanity paradox: a transjective account. Working draft; preprint, Zenodo, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23600418.

Summerhayes D (2026c). Two perspectives taken for one: paradox and the transjective stance. Working draft.

Summerhayes D (2026d). Cyclic reinforcement and the social superego: a hypothesis on how family and culture sustain harm, order, nurture and defection across generations. Unpublished manuscript.

Summerhayes D (2026f). Unified peace: a transjective account of peace among all conscious beings, with artificial intelligence as the mirror. Working draft.

Summerhayes D (2026g). Transjectivity: The Peace Papers, seven papers on one framework. The Unifying Paper. Working draft.

Weber M (1905/1930). The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Translated by Parsons T. Allen and Unwin, London.

Weber M (1922/1978). Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Edited by Roth G, Wittich C. University of California Press.