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Is It Possible To Lift Oneself By The Hair? And If Not, Why Is It Worth Trying

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Abstract

The title of this text alludes to the legend of Baron Munchausen, who reportedly did many impossible things. A change of a system by the same system belongs to such impossible tasks, as shown by Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic systems. Reforming organizational structures and processes is a doomed enterprise, and yet this text suggests that it might be worth undertaking. Various examples of reforms demonstrate that their result is frustration and a host of unintended consequences. Many of unintended consequences might, however, prove beneficial and worth permanenting. Reforms should therefore be treated as periods of purposefully created instability, making the present system transparent and vulnerable. Such an induced instability might lead to innovation and invention, and therefore aid a spontaneous change.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO LIFT ONESELF BY THE HAIR? AND IF NOT, WHY IS IT WORTH TRYING

> On another occasion I wished to jump across the lake. When I was in the middle of the jump, I found it was much larger than I had imagined at first. So I at once turned back in the middle of my leap, and returned to the bank I had just left, to take a stronger spring. The second time, however, I again took off badly, and fell in up to my neck. I should, beyond any doubt, have come to an untimely end, had I not, by the force of my own unaided arm, lifted myself up by my pig-tail, together with my horse, whom I gripped tightly with my knees. (p.36)

> Munchausen, the Baron – or rather King – of Lies, is one of the immortal figures in the world of fantasy (...) R.E. Raspe, a German author, first published the Baron's tall stories in England in 1785. The English welcomed him and launched him on his career of fame. (...) The Munchausen of real life was born in 1720, and it is historically true that he was a hunter and soldier, and helped the Russians fight the Turks. It is this background of authenticity which adds to the humor of his most extravagant tales; they are told with a wealth of precise, serious, scientific detail. (*The adventures of Baron Munchausen*, 1971, back text).

A system cannot change itself

Since 1960s, organization theory has revolved around the open systems theory. Inspired by Floyd H. Allport's post-behaviorist structuronomic conception of social psychology, James G. Miller's loan of cybernetics to psychology and psychiatry, and Talcott Parsons' system theory in sociology, Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn (1966) launched the idea of organizations as open systems:

> Open-system theory with its entropy assumption emphasizes the close relationship between a structure and its supporting environment, in that without continued inputs the structure would soon run down. Thus one critical basis for identifying social systems is through their relationships with energic sources for their maintenance. (p.9)

As Karl Weick (1969/1979) observed three years later, again with the help of F.H. Allport's insights, it is not so much structure as process that it worth noticing; not

organizations but organizing. After Humberto Maturana and Francisco J. Varela used the cybernetic notion of autopoietic (self-reproducing) systems in immunology, Allport's insights could be extended even further. Thus Niklas Luhmann (1986) observed that although social systems (societies, organizations, interactions) are no doubt open in the terms of their energy inputs, as information, or communication systems, they can be more fruitfully conceived of as autopoietic – self-reproducing and self-referential – just like the DNA cells are. DNA cells, like any other part of an organism, depend on light, water, and nutrition for their survival, and in this sense they are utterly dependent on the environment, but their mission is to carry information that will allow for the reproduction of the same organism, no matter what the environment. The idea of functional adaptation (and evolution) has been rejected as fraud in Mendel's times, and it is assumed that evolution happens via random mutation, creating variation which then is reduced by selection. DNA cannot improve upon itself.

Luhmann used Maturana's definition of autopoietic systems:

> ... systems that are defined as unities, as networks of productions of components that recursively, through their interactions, generate and realize the network that produces them and constitute, in the space in which they exist, the boundaries of the network as components that participate in the realization of the network (Luhmann, 1986: 174).

Thus autopoietic systems are not only self-organizing, in the sense of structuring their elements and processes, but also self-producing: they produce their elements and processes. They exist in an environment, but the relationships with this environment – of identity and alterity, sameness or difference – are of their own making. By saying this, Luhmann speaks in parallel with Karl Weick (1988) whose concept of *enactment* is close to Luhmann's idea, although in Luhmann's terms it would be en-communicated rather than en-acted.

How do social systems reproduce themselves? They use

> communication as their particular mode of autopoietic reproduction. Their elements are communications which are recursively produced and reproduced by a network of communications and which cannot exist outside of such a network. (...) Their unity requires a synthesis of three selections: namely, information, utterance and understanding (including misunderstanding). (...) It is the network of events

> which reproduces itself, and structures are required for the reproduction of events by events.
>
> The synthesis of information, utterance and understanding cannot be preprogrammed by language. It has to be recreated from situation to situation by referring to previous communications and to possibilities of further communications which are to be restricted by the actual event. This operation requires self-reference. It can in no way use the environment (Luhmann, 1986: 174-175).

In other words, a system cannot understand anything that exceeds its frame of reference; any novelty is created in a hermeneutical circle when a comparison of a new event to previous event does not produce a perfect result (in other words, by error). Even information is not taken from the outside, but created inside. This creation, however, requires an (at least hypothetical) environment in order for the system to distinguish among various bits of information: in Luhmann's words, "If such a system did not have an environment, it would have to invent it as the horizon of its own hetero-referentiality" (p.175). In other words, a communication system needs an environment to be aware of itself ("I differ therefore I am"), but this environment can just as well be a fantasy.

Luhmann differentiates between action and communication (and Nils Brunsson follows this lead), where action belongs to the energy exchange pattern. Although some type of action is necessary for communication to occur, communication makes sense of action. Action is not autopoietic; communication is. Communication belongs to an observer, not to an actor. Thus, "[c]ommunication never becomes self-transcending. It never can use operations outside its own boundaries. The boundaries themselves, however, are components of the system and cannot be taken as given by a pre-constituted world" (p.179).

This "cognitive constructionism", as Karin Knorr Cetina (1994) described it, has been criticized for its idealism, as seen in the possibility of an invented environment and the neglect of "materialities of communication" (see Luhmann's, 1994, defense of his stance against such accusations). Nevertheless, it certainly helps to understand otherwise puzzling developments in work organizations which, it seems, constantly attempt to reform themselves without achieving the desired results (see Brunsson and Olson, 1993, for a review of such studies).

The illustration of Luhmann's theses that I find most telling is the classical study by Warren et al. (1974). Roland L. Warren, Stephen M. Rose, and

Ann F. Bergunder set out to study the US Model Cities program, which, since its start in 1966, was aimed at improving the quality of urban life by rebuilding or revitalizing slum areas. They focused on what they call "community decision organizations" (CDOs) – public agencies with the right to make decisions or undertake actions in specified matters on behalf of the community. The researchers observed that these agencies with a dramatic if necessary mandate to enforce urban renewal, soon allocated themselves into separate domains where they did not interfere with each other's actions. Furthermore, their mutual interactions were patterned along the principle of live and let live, which was, in turn, facilitated by a common *institutional thought structure* that formed the basis for their individual or joint actions:

> The CDOs have their episodes of contest or cooperation (...) within a general consensus that what they are all trying to do, respectively, is important and desirable, and fits into a common frame of reference regarding the nature of social reality, of American society, of social problems, and of efforts at social change and human betterment. As a consequence, the interaction norms based on "live-and-let-live" reciprocity and on a common institutionalized thought structure set limits to any possible contest among them and at the same time virtually assure that their viability as organizations will not be impaired (1974: 19).

In other words, the very units that were supposed to renew and, if necessary, revolutionize the system, set out to reproduce it. This autopoietic tendency was in-built into the institutionalized thought structure itself. As Warren et al. characterize it, it was grounded in an assumption that US society, although imperfect, is essentially sound. The social problems such as slums and poverty are caused either by a temporary malfunctioning of some subsystem (e.g. business depression), by wickedness of certain individuals (e.g. criminals), or by that part of the population that cannot or will not cope with the standard demands of the society. These problems are being solved by means of democratic pluralism, progress in science, and organizational reforms. "Problems of bureaucracy and unresponsiveness must be acknowledged, but there is a constant process of organizational reform taking place which inevitably improves organizational performance." say Warren, Rose, and Bergunder (1974: 21). All this is possible through the application of the principle of inducements: if somebody is not doing what they should do, then, unless they belong

to the "problematic" part of population, proper inducements must be created. As we can see, this institutional thought structure is fully recognizable 30 years later.

As a result, the organ created to bring about change "rather accurately reflected the same structure of power that it was ostensibly meant to challenge and change" (p.127). This has become obvious as one of the CDOs set out on a course of actual innovation, locating the source of the poverty problem in the institutional structure and not in characteristics of poor people. The Oakland Economic Development Council's programs and tactics were met first with *blunting* and then with *repelling*. In the end, the organization was destroyed and its (black) executive director accused of all sorts of irregularities. He was even arrested.

In somewhat different terms, it can said, together with Lyotard (1979/1986: 61), that it makes sense to distinguish invention from innovation. The former is actually a break in communication, often perceived as a paralogy or breach against the rules of logic; the latter is under the command of the system, and often used by it to improve its efficiency. Thus we have the seemingly paradoxical observation by Nils Brunsson (1993) that reforms are routines in the Swedish public administration or, in other terms, that reforms are changes introduced in order to prevent (spontaneous) change. Innovation preserves the system; invention threatens it.

Following this reasoning it would be easy to jump to a conclusion that reforms are absurdities and aberrations in organizational life; at the best, they accomplish nothing; at the worst, they prevent change. Such a conclusion might be correct by and large, but not necessarily and not always. Let me now consider possible advantages of reforming.

Why, then, this constant reforming?

Reforms may rarely or never achieve their declared goals, but this does not mean that they have no consequences or that they have only negative consequences. Before I review several potentially positive effects of reforms, let me make my terminology clear. I use the term "reform" synonymously with "planned organization change". Although the notion of planned change is, in principle, much wider (reforms change forms or structures, whereas planned change can concern contents and processes), in

most cases it is a planned change of an organizational form – a structure, procedure or routine.

The first advantage of a planned change is that it problematizes what has been taken for granted. This phenomenon can be described in several vocabularies. Phenomenology, for instance, claims that people "bracket" their detailed knowledge of many things so that everyday action is easier and does not require reflection. People usually brush their teeth in the morning without referring to thick manuals on dental medicine. Studies of science and technology speak about "black-boxing" – sealing detailed information about the functioning of a machine from the attention and intervention of laypeople. Kurt Lewin, the early proponent of a sociopsychological theory of change, talked about "unfreezing" (1958). In his vision, a "change agent" activates a group process aimed at unfreezing the attitudes of individuals, challenging their beliefs, opinions, and ideas. Once this state has been achieved, a change of social structures can occur.[1] Even better, in my view, is the opposite metaphor suggested by Weick and Quinn (1999: 366): "Freeze: make sequences visible and show patterns..."

One result of this problematization, or the removal of brackets, the opening of black boxes, unfreezing, or freezing, is the creation of an opportunity for reflection, especially self-reflection. In Luhmann's terminology, people move from being actors to being observers, from action to communication. The system observes itself: it cannot change, because it observes itself from the same set of categories that constitutes it, but for awhile it stops doing whatever it was doing. The consequence might be a reinforcement of its future functioning. As I pointed out in an earlier text (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993b), when people become employees they are socialized, or rather, acculturated, into working life, with its local norms, customs, and routines. After a time, however, the original message becomes lost or obsolete. A reform is a method of re-training employees other than sending them to a course; the reform is more expensive, but it involves everybody. "Back-to-basics" is often a message of the reformers, suggesting that the main mission of an organization was forgotten in the hassle of everyday management.

In our study of consultants, Carmelo Mazza and I (2003) pointed out that a re-organization, or a reform, puts a work organization into a liminal space: a space to be crossed in a transition from one state to another (before change, after

[1] On traditional theories of planned change, see Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993a.

change). It can be said that the functioning of the system is suspended, if only partially (for everyday production must continue). The problematization and reflection mentioned above are the result of such state and such suspension, but its actual purpose is the divestiture of old routines and the investiture into new ones. These new ones are usually brought in from outside by the consultants, for example. But social memory and bodily recall (Connerton, 1989) are usually stronger than cognitive reframing (Czarniawska, 2002); hence it is unlikely that the ways of thinking and acting will change as a result of the consultants' intervention. What might change, however, is the way organization presents itself to the outside audiences; this, perhaps, is the primary gain from consulting.

Last but not least, the relaxed, liminal and open state induced by reforms might facilitate the emergence of spontaneous inventions. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) claimed that liminality fosters deviation and creativity.[2] Whether directed at the problems originally addressed by the reform or not, solutions that emerge as unexpected consequences might become the primary gain of a reform.

The use of the conditional verb form in the previous sentences is not a random choice of terminology: it is by no means certain that a reform will produce a liminal state of openness and relaxation, conducive to creative endeavors. Purgatory is also a liminal condition, and as we will see in the next section, many reforms produce but stress and anxiety, both for the reformers (including consultants) and the reformed.

Harmful traits of many a planned change

Harm is a strong word, but it is difficult to refrain from such strong rhetoric watching the repetitive damage wronged by many a reform. Let me review the most typical problems caused by organizational reforms.

[2] A similar idea is that of Howard Becker (1996), who claimed that outsiders tend towards deviance, and therefore toward creativity. This idea has been adopted by Badham et al. (2003) in their description of culture change.

THE AIM BECOMES REIFIED

The reforms are usually extended in time, so it is not unusual that the aims of a reform are formulated in quite different circumstances than those prevalent during the reform and at the time its effects are supposed to be visible. Common sense would require an adaptation of aims to the changing circumstances, but such adaptation would be seen as hypocrisy or fraudulence. In organizational parlance, pragmatism and opportunism are often synonyms. Such accusations were usually directed at the leaders of such political organizations as public administration units, but considering the fact that companies are increasingly publicly owned nowadays, the demand for transparency and, accordingly, consistency is ubiquitous. Consistency is tested by the procedure of evaluation, where the aims of a reform are compared to its effects.

What are the uses of evaluation procedure? Evert Vedung studied evaluation in the Swedish public administration and came with the following pyramid of uses, where the first is the least common, and the last the most common. Evaluations are used:

- as a tool for improvement,
- for education,
- for legitimating purposes,
- as a basis for an interaction,
- for tactical purposes,
- as a ritual (after Vedung, 1995:50)

Still, one could claim that no harm is being done. Evaluations are least used in the way they are intended to be used, and primarily as rituals – although rituals are an important part of modern organizations (see Czarniawska, 2002, on rituals of modernity). The side effect of an evaluation, however, is that it stabilizes, to a point of reification, the aims of the reform. While the reformers usually claim that it is too early to see the eventual results of a reform, the appreciation of the results is even further removed in time, thus increasing the possibility that its original aims will become even more obsolete. In fact, this is what the reformers may be counting on: that in time, the original aims of the reform will be considered irrelevant.

THE MEANS (METHOD) BECOMES THE AIM

Quite another group of problems is released by the fact that the method, the means, or the device introduced in order to reach the aims of the reform takes the central place in the eyes of the reformers. In extreme cases, an observer might form an impression that it was enchantment with the method that was behind the planned change in the first place.

Andreas Diedrich (2004) has studied an attempt to change and reform a knowledge management system at Engico, a large Scandinavian industrial corporation. The change consisted of an introduction of a Best Practice Tool, a software and a system of practices around it, which should permit the engineers at Engico to share best practices of re-setting across their dispersed factories. For its own reasons, the software did not function, and the system or the best practice community did not function, either. The engineers in the factories pointed out that a "best practice" is always locally situated, and can possibly be translated into another locale by an observer who could grasp the differences and deal with them. The system, however, assumed a translation from a concrete, situated practice to its abstract model, and then back to a situated practice. If the first step was tedious but possible, the second was impossible; one could as well reinvent the practice on the spot. But the engineers-turned-managers who were in charge of the proposed reform did not want to give up; they believed that all the problems would be solved when the system they were putting in place had been improved. Their preoccupation with plans, designs, controls, and standardized documentation made them mistake the improvement in the tool they built for an improvement in the process itself.

Why, asks Diedrich, didn't they drop their "tool" in the face of continuous defeats? And he answers as follows:

> Perhaps the project had to continue, because to abandon would be to label it a failure, an event that is usually avoided if possible (...) More and more financial resources were invested, more and more people were engaged, the project members became more and more personally involved, and all of these sacrifices were made without achieving the goal of moving BPT from a prototype to a piece of equipment used routinely in the daily work activities of the engineers and managers in the factories. After more than three years of trying to introduce the process in the organization, the BPT project can be understood as a surviving failure when

> compared to goals and visions established by the project members and senior managers at the start of the project (2004: 224-5).

The equation between the aim and the means is not specific to the industry. In the case of a municipal reform I studied (1993b), the sub-municipal committees were seen as the means to increase democracy in municipalities. It was possible for a municipality not to initiate the reform, but it was unthinkable to drop the sub-municipal committee tool during the process. As Karl Weick pointed out, "(d)ropping one's tools is a proxy for unlearning, for adaptation, for flexibility, in short, for many of the dramas that engage organizational scholars. It is the very unwillingness of people to drop their tools that turns some of these dramas into tragedies." (1996: 301). He lists an unwillingness to admit failure, also quoted by Diedrich, as one of the main reasons for reluctance to drop the tool.

The stubborn replacement of an aim by a means is perhaps not so surprising if one becomes aware of the limited range of aims of organizational reforms, at least in modern times: increased efficiency, increased profitability, increased effectiveness, or increased democracy. Some novelty – and tension – can be achieved by combining those. Still, it is the new means, and the shiny new tools, that attract the attention of reformers and reformed alike, awakening new hopes of fulfilling old dreams. An appeal to drop such tools certainly falls on deaf ears.

SPONTANEOUS INVENTIONS ARE IGNORED OR REPELLED

As mentioned above, the liminality condition caused by a reform could be conducive to creativity, deviation, and invention. This does not mean, alas, that such inventions will be recognized and appreciated. Partly as the result of the two phenomena mentioned above – the reification of aims and the unwillingness to drop the tools – many such inventions might be ignored or even forbidden.

Carina Löfström (2003) studied the changes made in Sweden Post after the long-established public utility was turned into a company in 1994. Sweden Post was no novice to reformation: according to Löfström, it had been constantly reforming itself since its inception in 1636, using somewhat the same arguments and initiatives. It had become a habit, or as Löfström says, "[r]eforms became the 'natural way' to organise activities'" (2003: 231). In this, Sweden Post turned out to be a stanch representative of Swedish public administration, where reforms are routine

(Brunsson and Olsen, 1993). Nevertheless, Löfström was able to observe and document an interesting development in this particular reform. The first preparations for the transformation began in the late 1980s, when the new CEO took his post. The annual report of 1990 contained the first mention of the "21st century work organization", which was to consist, in brief, of "companies within a company": autonomous and accountable regional units within Sweden Post. The message was repeated and concretized each year, and found a programmatic expression in 1996, in a "Project 21st century work organization".

It seems, however, that the message had reached the employees before 1996, for in 1994-1995 one region developed an innovation called *Close Service*. They filmed their own organization and made the film accessible to the world; they were interviewed by local newspapers and were contacted by one other interested region. The corporate headquarters did not react. When "Project 21st century" started, however, the region introduced Close Service to its all offices, certain of fulfilling – in advance – the wish of headquarters. Not so – because the project did not have the same name, it was not recognized at headquarters. Only after its proponents were able to demonstrate that it had produced economical gains, did headquarters become interested and officially recognized it – 10 years after the original idea was launched and had materialized. In all fairness, one could say that routine reforms usually include a period of resistance – headquarters could not possibly imagine that the idea can be materialized immediately. "Yet another reason why management in organisations repeatedly initiates reforms", concludes Löfström, "can be that they do not see the development that has actually taken place." (2003: 232).

REORGANIZATIONS BECOME COMPULSIVELY REPEATED

Maria Tullberg (2000) has studied planned change in yet another public giant, Swedish Rail. If reforms have become a natural way to organize work in Sweden Post, organizing has become a way of preparing reforms in Swedish Rail. Looking at the change from a psychodynamic perspective, and comparing SR with other organizations, Tullberg came to a conclusion that, however strange was the picture she saw, by no means was it exceptional:

> One of the most common and accepted routines for fight/flight is to initiate change programmes. Managing change has itself become a primary task. But changes produce anxiety and new needs for diversion, so that activities of change end up in more and more of the same. It is paradoxical that attempts to reduce anxiety generate new anxiety and the process can thus be self-propelling instead of stabilising (2000: 270).

Anxiety, says Tullberg taking inspiration from the Tavistock School, is an important driving force in life and work, but if it rises above an acceptable level, defense mechanisms are activated to reduce it. Fight (aggression) and/or flight (escape) are typical defense mechanisms, observable in individuals but also in groups. Tullberg extends the psychodynamic explanation, pointing out that the specific contents of fight and flight differ in time and space: they are institutionalized, like any other routine activity. Seen in this light, SR is an organization that is repeatedly exposed to accusations of red tape, lack of business competence, and neglect of its customers. One could say that threats from the environment – the accusations of the public opinion – are as institutionalized as their reactions are.[3] The reactions consist of initiating new administrative reforms (see also Brunsson, 1993). An administrative reform includes a flight activity, in that the top management, by initiating a top-down reform, divests itself of the responsibility for the criticized state of affairs (in itself an institutionalized aspect of modern management). It also includes a fight activity, in that it combats the audience's negative picture of itself by being active – that is, by introducing a reform. The recent "marketization" of the Swedish public sector (Solli and Czarniawska, 2001) adds new techniques to the traditional combat repertoire: marketing and competition.

Managers have had ample opportunity for at least two decades to share the researchers' insights. Why, then, is the pattern uninterrupted? I have already mentioned many explanations: ritualization, fear of failure, unwillingness to notice spontaneous change, and anxiety. But there is yet another reason: there are theories of change other to these presented in this chapter, and practitioners are particularly fond of them.

[3] In Weick/Luhmann's terms, it could be said that SR enacts its environment in this way. There are other accusations that have never been taken up by the company (for example, that there are too many costly reorganizations).

The diffusion versus the translation model of organizational change

As Carina Löfström (2003) suggested, the model of top-down, planned change that was shared by the top managers of Sweden Post was that of *a diffusion*. This metaphor has a long history, beginning with the difference between two schools in anthropology: the diffusionists and the evolutionists (Czarniawska, 2001). Both groups observed the same type of technologies and customs in different times and places. Yet whereas the diffusionists believed that people simply traveled from one place to another and imitated each other, the evolutionists believed that, human nature being the same everywhere, the same or similar conditions produced the same inventions. In time both schools gained acceptance, but the model of diffusion, probably initiated by Gabriel Tarde (1890/1903), has become the primary model for the spreading of innovation, (beginning with Rogers 1962), and consequently for top-down, planned change.

Although Tarde's concept was far from mechanical (he believed that physical diffusion should be explained by the analogy to social diffusion), in time the "wrong" part of the metaphor, betraying its physical roots, superseded the "right" one. According to Latour (1986), the model assumes diffusion to be a movement started by some “initial energy” (initiative, order, command, instruction), which is usually attributed to top management or their agents. According to the law of inertia, the objects will move uninhibitedly unless they meet with “resistance” such as “resistance to change” or “political resistance”. Resistance produces “friction”, which diminishes the initial energy. Friction, in the social as well as in the technical world, is a negative phenomenon when movement is desired. All of this presupposes, of course, that the model of diffusion is accepted.

> [The] model of diffusion may be contrasted with another, that of the model of translation. According to the latter, the spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artefacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in many different ways, letting the token drop, or modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it (Latour, 1986: 267).

Ideas do not "diffuse" by themselves: it is people who pass them on to each other, each one translating them according to their own frames of reference. Such encounters between *traveling ideas* (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) and frames of

reference, i.e. *ideas in residence*, can be called "friction", but the term now has a positive ring to it. There is no initial energy; all ideas exist all the time. It is precisely from friction, i.e. the meetings between ideas, between ideas and their translators and so on, that energy arises. Insofar as one can speak of the *inertia of social life* – habits, routines and institutional behavior – that is what checks the movement of ideas. Without friction there is no translation; at best it is a case of "received ideas". Friction can thus be seen as the energizing clash between ideas in residence and traveling ideas, leading to the transformation of both (Czarniawska, 1997).

Guje Sevón and I (1996) have compared the two models of change in the following way:

The diffusion model	**The translation model**
• movement originates in a source of energy (top management or consultants)	• it is difficult to trace back "the original movement"
• under ideal conditions ideas travel without friction (there is no resistance)	• energy *results* from "friction" and resistance
• changes in the original idea must be prevented (as they mean distortions)	• changes in the original idea are inevitable; they transform and often enrich it

Translation is therefore seen as a collective act of creation, and not as a bothersome impediment of a swift diffusion.

Why is the diffusion model so widely spread among managers, and so resistant to repetitive experience? There are probably many reasons, as I have discussed in another place (Czarniawska, 2003). In this context it is enough to say that it offers an illusion – a hope? – of control, whereas the translation model permits the unexpected and unforeseeable, thus promising ambiguity and uncertainty in the process. The diffusion model is attractive for the same reason that the adventures of Baron Munchausen continue to fascinate – he did, after all, jump across the lake by raising himself by the hair, and if the story is not true, it is well said (a great many consulting companies choose the US equivalent, lifting oneself by the bootstraps, as their motto). Can the translation model compete? Can it be of use to the organizational practice?

Diffusion and translation: a possible hybrid?

After having studied several reforms of the Swedish public administration, I constructed the following picture:

> Change begins when somebody has the idea that it would be good to change something. It is not necessary to spot a particular problem: every organization has plenty of unsolved problems. The will to change might originate in an ideology or, alternatively, might lead straight to decisions and plans for change, with an ideology or an appropriate label coming later to make it possible to see the change in a context and interpret it. Then comes action: there is a great deal of talk, discussion and negotiation, decisions are made and amended, there are moves and counter-moves. In the midst of the inevitable confusion someone calls for an evaluation. Sooner or later some external forces are brought in (to give assistance or consultation, or to pose resistance), and the reform goes public. Now that the reform has become difficult to stop, some people abandon their resistance and begin trying to discover what can be gained from it. They may find that it can be redirected to solve some problems, even ones at which it was not originally aimed. The power structure becomes visible, and therefore it can be slightly reshuffled. With a little bit of luck everyone (or many people) may achieve a sense of renewal, be given new hope. (1993: 163).

With a bit of bad luck, some people may end up in court, like the community decision organization's director in the Warren et al. (1974) study. Where lies the difference?

TWO CITIES AND TWO REFORMS

In a study of big city management, I had the opportunity to study two reforms: one in Warsaw and one in Stockholm (Czarniawska, 1999). Their aims were opposite but symmetrical: Warsaw wished to increase efficiency, whereas Stockholm wished to increase democracy. Therefore Warsaw centralized its offices and Stockholm decentralized theirs; many activities were identical, albeit directed in the opposite way.

Certainly practical problems were the same: transportation and removal, a fight for the highest qualified people, battles about the division of responsibilities, the sharing of documents, and the unclear role of the center.

Stockholm did not have to worry about the physical premises, as there was an abundance of buildings to choose from; not so in Warsaw. Warsaw, on the other hand, did not have to submit to a simultaneous re-wiring of the entire telecommunication system, which happened in Stockholm.

In certain aspects, the Stockholm reform followed the diffusion system to the letter. Indeed, it has been run according to a software program called MasterPlan, and has been compared to a military operation (in both a positive and a negative sense). It run like a clock: on the 1st of January, 1997, not only the new telecommunication system but also all the new sub-municipal offices were in place. From the translation model, however, it took a strong emphasis on *anchoring*.

This political concept, central to negotiation theory, is widely used in everyday Swedish (*förankring*) and, one can imagine, in many so-called consensus cultures. Any new idea, especially one that is supposed to underpin a planned change, is tested well in advance on the actors who will be potentially involved, so as to secure their cooperation or at least minimize their resistance. In this concrete case, it meant a wide and thorough circulation of information, various forms of education, and multiple informal meetings with the central actors.

In Warsaw, this ability turned out to be better developed in political contexts than in clearly organizational ones. While "anchoring up" took much time and energy, probably out of habit, "anchoring on the same level" and especially "anchoring down" was disregarded. I asked for an explanation, and was told that the politically initiated reform was protected in this way from sabotage by the officials. The idea that the officials will follow the political will, which is taken for granted in Sweden, was perceived in Warsaw to be unrealistic to the point of absurdity. There, it was assumed that politics penetrates all; that each group has its own interests, and actively builds coalitions to protect them.

The first impression was that the reform in Stockholm, the one aimed at democracy, has been conducted efficiently; the one in Warsaw, aimed at efficiency, was troublesome and inefficient. First impressions may be right, but are usually far from complete. The efficiency of Stockholm reform meant that the officials have little say in the reform, although they were invited to talk *about it*. Thus it was undemocratic, at least in the sense of workplace democracy (not for the first time I could observe the conflict between political democracy and workplace democracy in the public sector). The same efficiency meant, however, that urban services did not

suffer from the reform. As to local political democracy, the change was hardly noticed.

Warsaw reform, on the other hand, became an arena for great many macro- and micro-political games, and many an observer pointed out that although democracy was not the aim of the reform, it served as an exercise in local democracy and in workplace democracy – an exercise that was perhaps needed more than efficiency.

These translations can, indeed, be interpreted in a positive way. Instead of reifying the goals, and then arriving at the conclusion that "we have failed", the translators came to the conclusion "we have achieved something other than we planned". The translations – from efficiency to democracy, from democracy to efficiency – are also in tune with the local repertoire. Swedish municipalities, which introduced sub-municipal committees in the middle of the 1980s, were also aiming at democracy and achieved efficiency. On the other hand, failed efficiency reforms are staple fare in Poland; "exercises in democracy" are an innovation.

The translation model permits another doubt: need a reform as a process fulfill the same goals as those at which it aims? In other words, need democracy reforms be conducted in a democratic way and efficiency reforms in an efficient way? The idea of "loose couplings" (March and Olsen, 1976; Weick, 1976) is generally accepted by the proponents of the translation model.

My optimism about the two reforms was great. After all, I was a convinced admirer of Swedish pragmatism, kept safe

> ... in the minds of Sweden's public officers, who hosted every possible doubt – and survived. They are the true masters of radical skepticism, which does not prevent them from forming and maintaining a commitment to reality – against all the odds, it might seem. Indeed, they are more like the intellectuals than any other group I studied. They live wedged between appearance and reality, i.e. between politics and administration, and they spend a good deal of thought on it. Like intellectuals, they try to influence politics by argument, and unlike intellectuals, they have access to reality via the organizational hierarchy. (...) [W]hat happened in Sweden, starting in the late 1970s and culminating first now, was that the institutional thought structure which can be said to have prevailed for the last 50 years or so, began to be called in question. This might or might not announce a period of that radical changes. What one can clearly see is the mobilization of the adherents of that thought structure, with the help of many devices: not only reformulations and

> a search for new narratives, but also the blunting and diluting of the changes which go against the core of the structure. Nevertheless, (...) the visible confrontation between those who defend the institutionalized thought structureand those who attack it – increases the likelihood of an unintended innovation, which may yet produce a new identity, unplanned and unexpected by any of the parties involved (Czarniawska, 1997: 161-162).

The unexpected results relate to research, as well; while it may be said that the old institutional thought structure in Sweden did give way, no new one has yet emerged. It has been noted that the state of fragmentation can become stable. At any rate, the next majority ruling Stockholm undid the reform, at least in part; and as the examples quoted in earlier sections are of later date than my studies, it seems that the diffusion model is still triumphant over pragmatism and translation.

As to Warsaw, the next majority undid the reform completely and decentralized Warsaw once again. As it seems, nothing has been learned – neither about efficiency, nor about democracy. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic. Whereas public administration units are being disassembled in most western countries, the private enterprises have been learning.

PROJECTS VERSUS REFORMS

If reforms are routine in public administration, so do projects become routine in companies. And as public administration follows the example of private enterprise, it follows the project fashion as well. Sweden Post had the "Project 21st century workplace"; Stockholm reform was called a project, and was aided by a software constructed for project management. Although reforms and projects have the same origins – in planning – it seems that the translation model is closer to project practice than is the diffusion model. One interesting example is given in the Marcus Lindahl (2003) study of a Finnish company producing and installing diesel power plants worldwide. The process he describes is analogous to that of a reform: installing a power plant in a different environment each time requires change, just like reforms are legitimized by the alleged changes in organizational environment. The difference is that reforms assume environmental change in time, whereas power plant projects encounter change due to the change in location. Lindahl's conclusion was that the successful technical and financial operation of the company depended on its simultaneous emphasis on planning and improvisation; an operational hybrid that

corresponds to the combination diffusion/translation. Let me contrast the logic of a reform with that of a project, the latter as described by Lindahl:

Reform	Project
• the system re-forms itself ("lifts itself by the hair")	• the system extends itself: it tries to do more than it has been programmed to do
• outcomes are difficult to operationalize (in terms of time, money, quality)	• outcomes are easily visible (in time, money, quality)
• planning clashes with improvisation and tinkering	• planning, improvisation and tinkering aid one another
• political supervision; little supervision from the clients	• little political supervision; client supervision
• "muddling through" is a norm but must be hidden from view	• "muddling through" is a norm
• agents are in the hands of the tools/plans	• plans are tools in the hands of agents

One conclusion from this comparison could be that it is harder to reform public administration than to accomplish successful projects in the industry. This would be a hasty conclusion, however, as we have seen in the case of Engico, where the project ran exactly along the lines of an (unsuccessful) reform. Yet another conclusion is that if public administration is to learn from private enterprise, it should choose lessons that facilitate rather than hamper their tasks. The aims will remain indefinite, and the political supervision present, but a close and positive scrutiny of unexpected consequences, improvisation, and tinkering with what can be found at hand can be well incorporated in any change program. In turn, a private enterprise that wishes to become public will have to learn to cope with political supervision (although not in the sense of party politics) and with a dressing up of its muddling. Hope – for both – lies in tinkering and a cultivation of unexpected consequences.

When translation is given free rein….

My studies and those of other scholars of reforms and planned changes lead me to a formulation of the following set of heuristics for a successful reform, where success is defined as a feeling of renewal and hope experienced by as many of the reformed as possible, that is, those employees whose actions were supposed to be re-formed:

1. the aim of reform has been thoroughly anchored in many conversations and negotiations; the anchoring continues as the aim gets re-formulated;
2. the aim is constantly being re-formulated, and its attainment is followed up rather than evaluated;
3. the methods or the means are lightweight (easy to drop your tools!);
4. spontaneous inventions are immediately noticed, tested, and stabilized;
5. the change process is continuous rather than episodic (Weick and Quinn, 1999),[4] there is no cycle of trial-failure-and-trial-again.

If this short list reminds anyone of the five points in which a "technology of foolishness" has been formulated by James G. March (1971/1988), this is not a chance resemblance. I have attempted to assemble the same type of pragmatic sense description of change processes as March did for the choice processes. Indeed, much of the traditional critique of planned change is the same as that of decision making: not rational enough, not planned enough, not controlled enough, too many unexpected consequences as a result of acting too quickly, not enough forward thinking. An alternative worth considering is that "[i]ndividuals and organizations need ways of doing things for which they have no good reason. Not always. Not usually. But sometimes. They need to act before they think" (March, 1971/1988: 259). Munchausen clearly did not think much before he tried to jump across the lake. He must have succeeded, because he lived to tell the tale. By lifting himself by the hair? Perhaps, perhaps not. But it is a good story. A system cannot reform itself, but by intentionally reproducing itself, it may increase the likelihood of a mutation by chance.

[4] Observe that ”reform as routine” is not continuous change; it is episodic change with short pauses between episodes.

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