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**ISOLATIONIST AUTOMORPHISM, RELENTLESS  
ISOMORPHISM, OR MERCILESS IDEALISM**

The Cultural Contexts of City Management in Warsaw,  
Stockholm and Rome

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## **Abstract**

This paper employs some results of a study of city management in Warsaw, Stockholm, and Rome by setting them in a cultural context. Contrary to the common opinion, the difficulties in effective city management in Warsaw at the end of the 1990s did not stem from its communist past, but from a veneered sedimentation of a rationalist-legalist frame of action. This contrasts sharply with a pragmatist attitude typical for the city management in Stockholm, but is similar, to a degree, to management processes in Rome. While all three cities follow the same models, the necessity of fitting them into a local frame produces quite local versions of management practices



## Cultural Contexts – of Organizing and of Theorizing

This text contains a reflection produced in course of comparative research of city management, conducted in three European capitals – Warsaw, Stockholm, and Rome.<sup>1</sup> The word "comparative" is used here in the sense popularized by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) who spoke of a "constant comparative analysis". To be able to describe anything at all, it is necessary to compare it with something else, which differs. In that sense, all social studies are comparative, or at least should be; the comparison should lead the researcher move between times between places.

When the geographical distance crosses the national frontiers, however, more complications than usual are to be expected. There is, however, no good argument that it has to be so. Culture is what people at a given place and time take for granted, and the limits of a place and a time are continuous. "The Italian culture", if there is such a thing, does not begin in Bolzano, and "the Austrian culture" does not end in Innsbruck. In fact, Bolzano and Innsbruck are much more alike than Bolzano and Palermo. Thus, on the one hand, a researcher would do well avoiding stereotyping and creating "total cultures"; on the other hand, she or he would do equally well abandoning the notion of "universals", both in practice under study and in the study itself. Moving across times and places is necessary and informative; at the same time it is also problematic. The present text tries to map both similarities and differences in city management observed in the three capitals, and connect them to a context in which this management takes place.

### *Different Fields, Different Vocabularies*

One of the most important elements of a time/space being mapped is the language used to describe the events and formulate interpretations. In a research project with a cross-cultural dimension, linguistic differences play a fundamental role. My

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt from a study that formed a part of a larger research program, *Managing the big city: A 21st century challenge to technology and administration*, located at the Gothenburg Research Institute and financed by the Bank of Sweden's Tercenary Foundation. The study is documented in Czarniawska, 1999, 2000 and Czarniawska et al, n.d. The program was designed thanks to the hospitality of Bellagio Rockefeller Foundation, while the study of Warszawa was financed by the Daimler-Benz Foundation. The author expresses her sincere gratitude to all the sponsors.

ambition was therefore to find expressions that were not mechanical translations from one language to another but that occupied a similar semantic space in different language communities, expressions that are used in similar contexts and attributed a similar significance. This, however, proved quite difficult.

In the field of city management, for example, there were two central groups of actors in Stockholm, like in other Swedish municipalities: politicians (*politiker*) and civil servants (*tjänstemän*). This terminology was misleading in Warsaw. For many years the word “politician” had a negative meaning equaling a “careerist”. The word has now started a certain recovery, but not without a dose of difficulties. Most interlocutors prefer to use this word to mean “big politics” or, as expressed in Polish, for “politics with a capital P”. City politicians are called *radni* (a word approximating the English term *councilors*). The functions of these people are perceived as societal, not political. Thus, there is “politics with a capital P”, carried out by the political parties and the ruling government, “politics with a small p”, or personal aspirations to power, and “the societal function” which consists of representing the city inhabitants. There is no morally neutral expression for pursuing politics inside an organization. Actions that cannot be classified as “officially political” are tinted gray by a suspicion of the personal motives and benefits involved.

The word *urzednik* refers to nonmanagerial positions (*clerk* in English) or to “government employees”. The managerial positions in the City Government (*officials* in British English, *officers* in American English) are called *menadzerskie* (a neologism), thus avoiding the unpleasant hint of bureaucracy hidden in words like *administrator* (administrator) or *zarzadca* (dated expression for administrator).

In Rome, the problem consisted in the fact that there were not two but three groups, the third, hybrid group, being the most important. This group was formed first of all by *assessori*, i.e. aldermen (and women), but also by presidents of some municipal companies, who were either employed politicians or administrators with political functions. Although this kind of positions exists both in Stockholm and in Warsaw, they are not perceived as a group, and especially as a group of central importance. A group of lesser importance but of the same “hybrid” provenience were in Rome the members of aldermen and alderwomen's staff, who could be both “broiler politicians” or rising administrators; their future allegiance was uncertain even to them.

Thus, although it is possible to find appropriate terms in all three languages and translate them all to English, it does not mean that they denote same or even

similar positions. Still, it is quite usual to find linguistic differences in vocabularies of practice, especially in transcultural studies. It is somewhat less usual to speak about differences in vocabularies of theory, although I believe they are as frequent, if unacknowledged. It took me sometime to discover that my interlocutors (the practitioners) and I (the theorist) differed in the understanding of terms denoting the objects of my study. These must be therefore defined for purpose of this text. I begin with the term central to me, that is, *organizing*.

### *Organizing*

Organizing can be defined as an ordering activity, consisting in assuring that appropriate people and objects arrive at an appropriate place at an appropriate time (Latour, 1997). It is easy to find negative examples: a King Kong dummy was to climb the Culture Palace in Warsaw, but as the result of "bad organization" it did not until 22.00, when all the young spectators already went to bed, sorely disappointed. The Warsaw newspapers reported frequently various "organizational troubles" (Czarniawska, 2000). The "Supertram" joining Casaletto with Largo Argentina was put to traffic too early, according to the Roman journalists; that was also "bad organization" (Czarniawska et al, n.d.)

Neither theory nor the reflection about organizational practice devotes much attention to the complexity of organizing, giving priority to "organizations". And yet organizations can be seen as nothing more or less than societal fictions (Knorr Cetina, 1994), legal persons called to life in order to facilitate accountability, this foundation of modern society (Douglas, 1987). The fiction of organization requires supporting fictions: norms and rules – legal, economic, and technical.

"Organizational structure" is such a fiction of lesser caliber, one that helps introduce accountability in society and that supports the organizing process without replacing it. Perfecting organizational structure might, but need not, influence the outcome of organizing. Structures and practices are, as Weick (1976) called it, *loosely coupled*. The principle of loose coupling is considered functional insofar it prevents the transfer of perturbations from one part of the net to another.

Organizational structures can only help or hamper the process, but at least they can be easily changed, redesigned, constructed anew. Processes are loosely coupled to structures, and they are dynamic, complex, and often invisible, not because they are hidden but because they are taken for granted. What is, then,

organizing? There are many possible ways of describing such process, none of them necessarily “truer” than other (for a classic text, see Weick, 1979). In my opinion, three aspects are especially worth pointing out:

- *Muddling through* (Lindblom, 1979). Study of practice shows decisively that organizing is not about “reaching goals” or “putting plans in operation”. Rather, it is about coping with daily problems (or managing, as the double meaning of the word in English astutely suggests). Muddling through does not preclude the activity of planning and constructing visions. It is just that the two activities are “loosely coupled”, as the practice of managing Rome, performed for many centuries, showed most convincingly (Czarniawska et al, n.d.).
- *Framing and reframing* (Goffman, 1974). Like in film and photography, what is put into a frame and what is left outside decides much of the meaning in a picture of the world thus produced. With time, a habitual framing develops, which may in the end stop providing the picture of the world needed for successful action – therefore a need for constant reframing. The activity of reframing denoted in fact the most typical aspect of managing Warsaw, and a very important one in managing Rome, at the time of the study.
- *Anchoring* always converges with the change of frame. 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 any idea that results from reframing, is tested on the potentially involved actors well in advance so as to secure their cooperation or at least minimize their resistance.

The definition of organizing adopted here emphasizes aspects other than the well-known ones of planning, decision-making, and control. This perspective does not make those latter less important – it is just that they have already received much attention. Moreover, the pragmatist perspective on organizing sees them as rationality rituals rather than as the central focus of organizing (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). From within this perspective, it is “muddling through”, “framing and reframing”, and “anchoring” that must be explored.

These definitions did not tally with my interlocutors’ understanding of organizing, organization, and management.<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that there existed

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<sup>2</sup> In Polish “to organize” is a slang expression which means “to provide something by any means”, which usually denotes an illegal activity. In Swedish and Italian the use of the word is closer to that of organization theory, but more limited.



clear and firm definitions that can be analyzed and compared to mine. Neither the correctness of one definition or the another is an issue here. It is important to keep in mind that in practice definitions have a *performative* character – they are constructed for pragmatic purposes and thus might vary from one context to another or might have a historically acquired and rather shallow meaning. Thus, my definitions have only one advantage: they are more fixed, at least for the length of this text and therefore can be used as a basis for comparison for other, more mobile and transformative ways of understanding those terms. They are also performative, but perform another function, that of structuring a text, rather than a living experience.

Performative definitions, because of their changeability, cannot be used to delineate a priori an object of a study. Such delineation must be done, as organizing, even that limited to city management, takes place all the time and everywhere. Chaos and the consequent need to organize is a function of time and entropy, not of a place or domain. Thus, other modes of delimitation were necessary, and a notion of "action nets" was used to that purpose.

### *Action Nets*

In society as we know it, a person who produces to make a living has to sell. Usually, producing, as a type of organizing, is thus connected to more organizing actions, such as purchasing, marketing, financing, investing, and recruiting. These interconnected actions can be called *action nets* in the sense that it is the actions rather than actors that are connected. Obviously, the actors influence the shape and kind of actions performed, but for many generations of merchants and producers in the same institutional order, production required marketing and selling.

Those action nets cover the entire global economy, but a researcher can single out any piece that seems to make sense. There is also a constant structuring taking place within nets themselves. Some actors attempt to fix "their" piece of an action net so that it will have to change according to their wishes and not to its own requirement. In market theory the result is sometimes called "nasty networks" (Brunsson and Hägg, 1993), in social psychology, a "clique". On the other hand, some actors may decide to mobilize "their" part of the net, creating a collective actor, and including even non-humans, like in Callon's (1986) "actor-network". Such collective actors can then undertake certain common actions, such as petitioning the

government to change rules or remove regulations, or even boycotting such rules and regulations, which non-humans often do.

Often, however, it is more than a part of one net that needs to become mobilized. Nets are repeated all over the place: there are many production nets and sales nets, and it is very likely that in the same time and place they will look alike. One speaks of an *organization field*, which hosts people and organizations involved in similar action nets (DiMaggio, 1983). They might never meet one another, but they feel a community of profession, or activity as, for example, “those who deal in public investments”. Their community is not only spiritual; there are special organizations promoting contacts in the organization field, such as norm and standard institutions, professional associations, and more or less formal lobbies. Thus, a part of a net that become mobilized (“public investors in Warsaw”) establishes contact with a similar part of other nets (“public investors in big cities”) and can exert impact within or even outside its field.

The focus of my interest in this study was an action net that can be called “managing the city of [Warsaw, Stockholm, Rome]” and an organization field that can be named “big city management”. Within that field, a given city's problems can be seen as both typical and special. City finances, transportation, water and waste systems are typical problems in big cities. Warsaw was additionally a big city administered while a transformation of the institutional order was taking place, while in Rome such transformation was wished for. *Institutional order* here has a wider meaning than a set of formal institutions; it is a set of social practices considered legitimate in a given place and time. It is against this background that a reframing takes place. A new institutional order is always forged with help of models existing in other places. To grasp this aspect of transformation, another concept is needed.

### *Translating*

In order to denote transfer of ideas and practices from one context to another, one traditionally spoke of diffusion. But “diffusion” suggests a physical process subject to the laws of physics. The explanation of phenomena denoted by this term thus conjures a further train of physical metaphors, such as “saturation” or “resistance”. Latour (1986) proposed to replace it with *translation*, calling attention to the richness

of meanings associated with this term, of which only some are evoked in everyday speech. Translation, he says, is transportation combined with a transformation.

It is this richness of meaning, evoking associations with both movement and transformation, embracing both linguistic and material objects, that makes translation a key concept for understanding organizational change (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). It comprises what exists and what is created; the relation between humans and ideas, ideas and objects, and humans and objects – all needed in order to reframe a city.

What exactly was being translated in cases of Warsaw and Rome, but also in Stockholm, a city that makes a constant reframing into its habit? The "global", or translocal ideas of self-government, modern city budget, effective management, and privatization. Each time, such translation from the translocal into the local repertoire encountered difficulties that can be metaphorically depicted as resulting from lack of a dictionary. As every translator knows, translation is a destabilizing operation. It destabilizes the text under translation, which is taken out from its proper cultural context and fit onto another. And the language into which the translation is made is destabilized, if ever so little, with every translation made. Thus the need for a stabilizing role of dictionaries, for if translators decided alone, we would soon end up with another Babel tower. In Warsaw, but partly also in Rome, even the main dictionary – the institutional order – was under revision in order to embrace quite new and different translation possibilities. The dictionary was being translated itself.

One can thus say, for instance, that the dictionary valid in Poland for the last 50 years was, by general request, undergoing a thorough revision. The model for the new dictionary was an institutional order of a kind known as a western-type democracy accompanied by a capitalist economy. As to the character of the old dictionary, it is hard to say. I would agree with those who claim that in 1989 it was a patchwork of incoherent influences rather than an exemplary planned economy in a socialist country (if any such thing ever existed). But as to the model, it is easy to agree that we are speaking of a post-World-War-II model, best known in its Anglo-American version. If so, it is important to point out that this model is grounded in the pragmatist philosophy (especially its US. version) and in common law (as different from codex law). Will it fit the local tradition in Warsaw? Has it been assimilated in Stockholm and Rome?

## Frames Old and New

### *Remembering and Forgetting*

One of the ways to successfully forget, which is necessary for successful reframing, leads through an extirpation of institutional memory and its props: networks, associations, and information channels. But such operation which, one could claim, was successfully performed in post-socialist regimes, leaves the institutional field empty. It is therefore easy to produce new solutions, but it is difficult to circulate and institutionalize them.

For example, the city treasurer in Warsaw was working out an innovative procedure for presenting budgets to the councilors so that they could easily understand it. The lack of pressure from professional norms, the latter very strong in Stockholm where a similar attempt had been made several years ago (Czarniawska, 1997) made it easy for the treasurer to solve the problem with which other city treasurers struggled without much success. Lack of a developed organization field, however, meant that this innovative practice would most likely remain a local discovery and might vanish when the incumbent left her position. Indeed, the presentation of the budget went well during the tenure of one council, but the next council severely criticized the budget (Czarniawska, 2000).

In a well-developed organization field the network of professional organizations would intervene either at an early stage, preventing the treasurer from deviating from what is considered a good practice, or at a later stage, defending the treasurer from attacks by arguing that a new "good practice" is being developed. Nothing happened along such lines. This example illustrates what was the most salient characteristic of organizing practices in Warsaw. On the one hand, the loosening of an institutional order created room for maneuver, experimentation, and creativity; on the other, that same loose institutional order did not save and propagate the results of such creativity.

In Rome, like in other Italian cities, an attempt was made to introduce the practice of "management accounting" (*controllo di gestione*, see Gherardi and Lippi, 2000). As its procedural aspects were open and left to be interpreted locally, the old institutional order defended itself by translating the innovation into a set of practices undistinguishable from those that it was meant to replace.

Also, it is easier to extirpate the network of interactions (like in post-1989 Poland or in Italy after the "Clean Hands"-campaign), than to eradicate the memory of actions that took place in such a network. The old frame still interferes, although this is more visible to the observers than to the actors, who unconsciously reproduce old patterns of action. A vicious circle is being set up. Where the organization field is *undeveloped*, like in Poland, there is no organized reflection or debate on the processes of transformation, and there are no forms of organized reflection, such as development courses focused on analyzing the everyday experience rather than abstract models. Where the organization field is *overdeveloped*, like in Italy, the old connections between actions persist even when the actors were replaced.

"An undeveloped organization field" is a concept that can be compared to a concept used by Polish analysts themselves: a *regulatory vacuum* (Aziewicz, 1993) In a report on privatization of municipal services, its authors of claimed that one of the difficulties of privatization lay in the lack of proper laws and regulations which would aid this process. A year later, however, the same team came to the opposite conclusion, saying that "the excessive regulation of the process, especially in the form of impractical and unenforceable rules, turns out to be much less advantageous than giving municipality autonomy" (Aziewicz, 1994, p. 166). Warsaw found itself in a situation similar to that of Rome, which can be called a *regulatory jungle*, or "an overdeveloped organization field".

One may postulate that a *well-developed organization field* is not the one filled with regulations and rules, but with standards and norms, which are adopted at will, not out of fear of formal sanctions. The relative problem of Stockholm, which finds itself in such a field, is its propensity to eagerly follow all managerial fashions, which are quickly spread in such a field.

Although reframing was a conscious goal both in Warsaw and in Rome, the old frame reappeared again and again in both cases. Much experimentation went on in Warsaw, but new solutions were not properly anchored and easily vanished into oblivion. The assumed necessity of a total rupture between "the old frame" and "the new frame" made comparisons, and therefore constructive reflection, difficult. The old frame became a taboo, and by the same token it was more difficult to remove than if it were a topic of open discussion. The undeveloped organization field favored individual learning but not collective learning. All this hampered the "metatranslation" – the translation of the institutional order – which, in turn, hampered local translations and local learning in particular action nets.

My interlocutors in Warsaw would probably easily agree with such a summary. What would become a contested point, however, is the "old frame". There has been an unquestioned agreement about the fact that the "old frame" consisted of so-called "communist order", no doubt obnoxious, but, after all, never legitimate and only 50 years old. Although there were undoubtedly such sediments in play, the frame I saw showing under was much older and therefore more solid.

What I saw in Warsaw was an attempt to translate a philosophy of management originating in a blend of a liberal-pragmatist philosophy and the Anglo-American legal tradition. This attempt was met with an unconscious, but strong, resistance of the local, rational-legalist, anti-pragmatist tradition (influenced by the French rationalism, German idealism, and continental law). This latter tradition is even more accentuated in Italy, characterized, as I see it, by a "merciless idealism" in its view on public administration and the ways of reforming it.

In Rome, the "old frame" was that of corruption and (bureaucratic) inefficiency. The "new frame" was to be one of transparency and (managerial) efficiency. The ways of reframing were, however, found within the existing institutional order, which therefore had a tendency to reproduce itself. Somewhat to my surprise, city management in Warsaw and in Rome seemed to share the same frame of meaning, so that they can be discussed together, and contrasted to Stockholm.

A short excursion into the differences between the pragmatist and the idealist frames might be in order. The *Pears Cyclopaedia* is particularly useful for this purpose, because of its popular and therefore unabashedly ideological kind of definitions. In the edition of 1959, *common law*, which together with *equity* and *statute law*, is the cornerstone of the Law of England, is presented as follows:

The English Legal System is a *living organism*, not a dead, static code. The system as we know it began to develop in the thirteenth century, when Henry II extended the practice of sending the royal judges about the country "on circuit," to deal with crimes and disputes, and to adapt and give official authority to the best of the local customs. . . . The judges did it by *empirical methods* — that is, by practical, commonsense decisions on actual cases. . . . Simple records of the most important decisions were kept from the earliest times; as the centuries passed, the gradual elaboration of a system of *law-reporting* ensured that the *facts* of significant cases, the *reasoned judgments* delivered on those facts, and the *principles* those judgments enshrined, should

be recorded and preserved; at the same time the doctrine of *precedent* . . . ensured consistency throughout the country. Thus there was gradually developed a body of principles— living, growing, and adaptable to new sets of facts as they arose; principles, moreover, which rose above local differences of custom and became *common* to the whole Realm. (D4)

The “dead static code” is common law’s main rival, the continental, or Roman-Germanic, called the code or civil law. The last label developed as the result of the legal reform in Prussia in 1896, where civil law, as regulating the private sphere (including enterprises) was strongly differentiated from the public sphere. However, in its original meaning as introduced by Justinian in the code of the Roman Empire, *jus civile* meant law as applied to the citizens of Rome, as opposed to *jus gentium*, the law common to the all the nations of the empire.

The best known codes in contemporary times are the Napoleon code, reformed in 1875 and *Juristenrecht* in its 1896 version. This information comes from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is scientific in intention and austere in tone, but adds nevertheless:

The French Revolution established the idea that the basis of law is statute, not custom. Customs were to be tolerated as the basis of laws only until they were replaced by statutes. The civil code that Napoleon enacted sought to express all laws in written language comprehensible to the average citizen. It also sought to avoid ruptures with tradition when possible. The code is expressed in short articles arranged in comprehensive and logical manner...

The German system attempts to be more precise than the French and to be detailed in areas in which the French code is cursory. Its wording is more subdued and its tone less didactic. As modified for conditions in West Germany today, the code is aimed at preserving social democracy (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1990, *Micropaedia* vol. 3, pp.338-339.)

The differences diminished in contemporary practice. In the United States one finds codes regulating some types of matters in a far-reaching and detailed way (e.g., the Uniform Commercial Code), and the situation differs from one state to another. In the United Kingdom there are voices claiming that a constitution should be written down. Various European countries apply variations of the Napoleon Code (Italy, but also Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain) or *Juristenrecht* (Sweden, but also

Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark and Japan). Poland, as far as I understand, combines the element of the Napoleon Code with the Swiss commercial law. Specialists in comparative law claim that current Dutch law meets the requirements of modernity best (Stolleis, 1995).

It is obvious that the different frames express different assumptions concerning human nature. Common law is pragmatic and optimistic about human nature; left to themselves, people will construct what they need. Civil law is idealistic and therefore severe toward the human nature, which must be improved by sanctions and prescriptions. My interlocutors in Warsaw and in Rome shared this pessimism toward their fellow human beings, assuming, to put it briefly, that people direct themselves by their short-term interest only and are unable to show solidarity with one another. If unhindered by structures, they will therefore engage in incessant conflicts, which not only threaten the interests of the collective but also their own interests in the long run. Consequently, the two frames dictate two different action programs.

*The Two Action Programs and Their Mixed Results*

The actual opinions concerning two issues: how to run the city (manage it) and how to introduce changes were diversified. Sometimes they constituted a controversy, but more frequently they oscillated or mixed preferences as to two ways of changing and managing: one that recommends constant experimentation and memorization of successful solutions, and the other that recommends creating a vision of a desired future and programming the way of reaching it.

I summarize the two action programs in a table below.

|                                      |                      |                     |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Method of Introducing Changes</b> | <b>Revolutionary</b> | <b>Evolutionary</b> |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|



|                                   |                                                                                 |                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Results</b>                    | Visible in direct effects of the change                                         | Long-term, resulting from necessary adaptations of the change's program and the learning process            |
| <b>Management understood as</b>   | Creation of structures, rules of conduct and regulations                        | Conscious development of practices, utilization of emerging opportunities and establishment of the new ones |
| <b>Decisive success factor</b>    | Charismatic leadership, integration of conflicting interests imposed from above | Good will of a group of people who negotiate an integrated line of action                                   |
| <b>"Philosophy of management"</b> | Rational and legalistic                                                         | Pragmatist                                                                                                  |

One could say that formulations like "pragmatist" or "rational-legalist philosophy of management" are imprecise at best. But this is what I am after: a concept that evokes a variety of associations without pretensions to "define", a summary of the definitions in the field rather than an attempt to force one from the outside. I use the word "philosophy" in a common sense meaning here. Within institutionalism one speaks also of an "institutionalized thought structure" (Warren et al., 1974), a set (rather than a system) of assumptions that are taken for granted by a certain community at a certain time, Rorty's "normal way of reasoning" (1980).

With a certain amount of simplification, one could thus claim that the rational-legalist management philosophy is a "normal" way of reasoning in the context of organizing. Its contradictory character, i.e. the fact that it clashes with both democracy and liberal economy, is usually overlooked. This is possible through many a deceiving metaphor and imperfect memories. The Anglo-American practice of management applies the first line of action, whereas the U.S. mainstream management theory propagates the second. The combination may result in what Brunsson (1989) called the *necessary organizational hypocrisy*: the action follows the pragmatic program whereas the decision takes on the rationalist façade, covering the unappealing "muddling through", "reframing", and such other maneuvers that

are typical in practice but shameful in theory. This kind of mixture can be seen as typical for management of Stockholm.

In the Polish case, the preference for a "pure" rational-legalist philosophy was often expressed via a metaphor of a "good master". In Warsaw's case it was incorporated in the person of its last prewar mayor, Starzynski. As shown by Jacek Szymanderski (1994), however, this patriarchal management model is in fact a direct heritage of the Polish People's Republic. Translated into the realities of free market, it suggests that the "invisible hand" is actually the hand of the master who "gives everyone a clear task, as he knows his estate well, and is thus able to reward and punish people fairly, according to their work and honesty. But cheaters and speculators, that is, all those who listened to the voice of the Satan of risk and chance, should count on no mercy from the good master's hand" (1994, p. 79). The market is thus the central planner hidden in a computer.

Szymanderski shows convincingly that there is hardly any difference between socialism and capitalism if they are seen as utopias. All utopian thinking excludes the role of chance, ambiguity, and relationships. And yet the tolerance of these phenomena is common to all so-called modern societies that can be called "successful" in the sense that the majority of their citizens perceive them as such. This is why I do not intend to call here for "correcting the mistakes", "clearing up the misunderstandings", or "formulating a consistent management philosophy" and "observing it rigorously". To the contrary, I claim that all such "purifying" operations unnecessarily constrain organizing and managing, limit the adaptability of action, and lead to stagnation and paralysis.

Roman and more generally, Italian, public administration reforms could be quoted as another example in question. The institutional thought structure prevailing in Italian public administration is very close to the one in Poland, and can be summarized in a conviction that the only way of reforming is by reforming the legislation. The Italian idealism is merciless, however, in the sense that it establishes exaggerated expectations as to results of such reforms, and does not permit itself to be softened by the (modest) effects of "muddling through". As a result, the reforms, quickly and superficially evaluated, seem to lead to no effect (so-called futility thesis, Hirschman, 1991) or to the effects opposite to those intended (perversity thesis, Hirschman, 1991). This in time produces an attitude that Hirschman called a "fracasomania", a failure complex he observed in Latin American countries

attempting to reform. Hirschman observed that many a defamed law had in fact "a variety of useful accomplishments to its credit" (Hirschman 1991, p.33n).

My Italian interlocutors launched the perversity thesis quite often (e.g. discussing the new institution of public tenders, see Czarniawska, n.d.). The perversion thesis is only an ironic variation of the futility thesis where, says Hirschman, "[t]he contribution of Italian social science ... is preeminent" (Hirschman, 1991, p.59). He mentions Michels approvingly quoting the Italian proverb: "*Si cambia il maestro di capella/Ma la musica è sempre quella*" (ibid.)<sup>3</sup>

But as in Warsaw, the attitudes on the matters of successful management and a successful reform that our study discerned in Rome (Czarniawska et al, n.d.) were mixed. There were at least two views – one typical of the legislators and reformers that represented the rational-idealist stance in the extreme, in a way that I called a "merciless idealism"; the other typical of people practicing management, that proffered pragmatism and obstinacy in "muddling through". Perhaps in time they will merge into a "merciful idealism", or some other benevolent mixture.

There may be many similarities between management of Rome and of Warsaw, but there are also many differences, resulting from different histories and the different attitudes to the countries' past. Poland's history is marked by repeated ruptures: it starts with two occupations by the neighboring powers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and continues into modernity with two contemporary occupations: by the Germans in the years 1939-1945 and the Soviet Union in the years 1945-1989. The result is a great respect to the achievement of Polish administration in those short periods when Poland was independent, like in 1919-1939. Left alone, it is felt, the Poles would achieve wonders of efficient administration and modern management. This belief results in a refusal to imitate other countries, or, in this case, other cities' management, giving preference to imitation of one's own past, a phenomenon called by Birgitta Schwartz (1997) *automorphism*, in contrast to the *isomorphism* prevalent in modern management (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

The managers of Stockholm thoroughly approved of the pragmatist philosophy of management, but often ended up in rational-idealist quandaries due

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<sup>3</sup> Hirschman takes this proverb for an equivalent of the famous French formulation of the perversity thesis: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (1999, p.59). Note, however, that the sayings are not identical. The Italian proverb says that replacing actors does not necessary change action pattern; the very point I was trying to make before about city management in Warsaw and Rome.

to their tendency to follow managerial fashions, and not seldom even the ambition to lead such fashion trends. Such trends are at the outset nothing more than fashionable ideas, *disembedded* in order to travel better (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996), and therefore prone to encounter the implementation problems similar to those produced by a legalist way of reforming, and with none of its sanctions. I speak, however, of *relative* problems – Sweden's peaceful history, the success of the welfare state and the pragmatist attitude, of which more later, made Stockholm's fashionable ambitions pretty well cushioned.

## Constructing Hybrids

When two conflicting traditions, like the rationalist-legalist and the pragmatist, meet by design, the contradictory elements of both can function side by side in an illogical but functioning myth; otherwise, the contradictions can be removed by means of local adaptations, as it seems to have happened in Sweden but also in France. Both these countries had stood, at one time or another, before the necessity of incorporating pragmatic action models into the sediments of various other institutional orders, making up the landscape of organizing and management in each place.

### *Seen from Sweden*

Sweden's legal system has the same roots as Italy's and Poland's. For many decades the country was also strongly influenced by German idealist philosophy. The first initiation into the capitalist order also took place with Germany as its model. Because Sweden is small, however, (9 million inhabitants) one can actually speak of a high level of societal consensus that gives the legal system a less central place than it enjoys in countries of heterogeneous population and multiple conflicts. A typical welfare state, Sweden has developed a sophisticated public sector that intervenes deeply in the life of its citizens, especially in the matters of social welfare, based on a loose legal framework allowing a high degree of interpretive freedom (Brunsson, 1995, 24 May).

To illustrate this aspect of the managerial philosophy common for Sweden, one might take the following excerpt from *Goda utsikter* ("Good Perspectives") by

Sten Jönsson (1995) where the author presents the Swedish institutional order and, more specifically, the role of the legal system:

Some of our institutions are laid down in laws that are expressions of society's collective experience of what is considered exemplary behavior (and what behavior is to be condemned). The law, however, cannot prescribe in detail how things are to be done, for society is in a constant change and new situations arise.

Legislation often trails behind and legitimates what has already become "good practice". Acknowledging this, the so-called framework laws purposely let practice develop its own norms. This is the case, for example, in the area of accounting, where the legislator explicitly recommends that good accounting practices be established and maintained by those interested.

Then there may exist professional groups, such as the auditors, who elaborate recommendations and directives and see to it that unsatisfactory practice is eliminated. An erring member of the profession may, for instance, have his license to practice withdrawn, a powerful sanction that requires the authorization of the state. Correspondingly, norms for what is considered "reckless driving" are shaped by traffic regulations and schools of motoring so that we can dare hit the road confident of right-hand traffic. Established practice provides a basis for accurate expectations so that we can drive at a higher speed than we otherwise would venture. The institutional relations in the economy function in the same way. Legislation and codified practice are, of course, fundamental, but of real interest are patterns of behavior resulting from what is expected of others and what they expect in turn. (1995, pp.118-119, trans. BC).

It is hard to imagine a more limpid elucidation of the pragmatist way of seeing the world. Instead of a priori prescribing proper actions and proscribing the improper ones, the law system describes what practice has selected as advantageous. "Proper" actions are taken not to avoid sanctions but as a result of trust that other members of the same interpretive community will act in a similar way. Where did such a pragmatic attitude come from?

Michele Micheletti (1995) performed a historical analysis of Swedish political relations and concluded that pragmatism was to be found in the first program of the Social Democratic Party from the 1930s. It was expressed, above all, in the way the

party chose to tackle the class conflict of the time. Disappointment with what they observed in other European countries, especially in Germany which served a role model for Sweden early in the era of industrialization, made the Social Democrats choose “cooperation, pragmatism and compromise rather than conflict with and impertinence towards the capitalist class” (Micheletti, 1995, p. 61). After the Second World War Sweden cut its ties with Germany almost completely and turned to the United States as the symbol of modernity, informality, and efficiency (Löfgren, 1993). The success in building the welfare state resulted in attracting the most talented and best-educated young people to seek employment in the public sector, which also symbolized progress and the ideals of modernity. In a short time graduates filled many executive positions in the sector, previously filled by lawyers, with degrees in business administration, a discipline that also shed German influence in favor of the U.S. line of thought.

In the meantime, however, “social engineering” which was a positive term when coined by Gunnar Myrdal, had become an insult (Hirdman, 1989), and the traditional social democratic program begun to be equated with the near caricature of the “Rationalist” as depicted by Oakeshott, the famous British conservative philosopher:

The conduct of affairs, for the Rationalist, is a matter of solving problems . . . In this activity the character which the Rationalist claims for himself is the character of the engineer, whose mind (it is supposed) is controlled throughout by the appropriate technique and whose first step is to dismiss from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intentions. This assimilation of politics to engineering is, indeed, what may be called the myth of rationalist politics. . . .

Two other general characteristics of rationalist politics may be observed. They are the politics of perfection, and they are the politics of uniformity. . . . The essence of rationalism is their combination. The evanescence of imperfection may be said to be the first item of the creed of the Rationalist. . . . what he cannot imagine is politics, which do not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no “rational” solution at all. Such a problem must be counterfeit. And the “rational” solution of any problem is, in its nature, a perfect solution. . . . And from this politics of perfection springs the philosophy of uniformity: a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can

have no place for variety. (Oakeshott, 1947/1991, pp. 9-10)

Although Oakeshott had British politicians in mind, many critics, among others his colleague from London School of Economics, Karl Popper, considered Swedish social democracy to be the most perfect incorporation of such rationalism. It is difficult to imagine that any ruling elite could have espoused both of those management philosophies simultaneously, and yet this is how it was, at least according to the historians. As Hirdman (1989) said with some irony, the Swedish reformists from the 1930s thought at the same time that the common sense of the people should play the leading role in determining the future of the country, but also that people are backward and therefore do not always know what is best for them, so the role of the state is to show them the way along which they should lead.

From the point of view of formal logic, this paradox is amusing, but not from the point of view of practical consequences. One could hazard an opinion that the early successes of Sweden's Social Democratic Party were due to the wisdom of its paradoxical thinking, whereas its present problems are due to the dogmatism and purism that it achieved during many years of success. Similarly, the rationalist management theory, focused on problem solving and decision-making, survives easily side by side with the practice of management focused on muddling through; the problems start when the theory is allowed to purify the practice.

Ways of coping with paradoxes vary across time and place. The blending of rationalism and pragmatism looked different in 1938 (the historical agreement in Saltsjöbaden) than it did in 1998 (the time of the study). In the 1930s rationality concerned the people's way of life, now it concerns the country's economy. "The Swedish way" is unique in that it is an adapted, local blend of traditions, aspirations, opportunities, and constraints, but it is typical in that all the countries of the western Europe made such a concoction for themselves and continue making it.<sup>4</sup> Common to them is not only the influence of the liberal tradition and the U.S. life style as the symbol of modernity but also the influence of continental rationalist philosophy and the continental legal system, which differentiates between administrative and civil law. The rest of the ingredients, however, are local, as is the final blend.

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<sup>4</sup>More on that theme is to be found in Chandler (1990) and Jönsson (1995).

## *France or the Matter of Honor*

The reader interested in history but not a historian by profession easily forms the impression – perhaps too hastily – that France was among the first to resolve the modern conflict between liberal pragmatism and idealist rationalism, between the common-law and the civil-law traditions. The liberal ideas came to France from England as early as the eighteenth century. In his *Médecin de campagne* Balzac (1833) explicated his own theory of “socialist capitalism”:

Deep down Benassis is at once a socialist demiurg and a capitalist pioneer, and the myth of the *Médecin de campagne* is just that grand idea of an economy that is dynamic like a capitalist economy and planned according to needs like a socialist economy (Barberis, 1972, p. 164, trans. BC)

At the same time Alexis de Tocqueville, intrigued by the new type of institutional order forged in the United States, paid that country a visit. This resulted, among others, in *De la démocratie* (1835-40), in which he presented, albeit not without critical commentary, the United States as proof that freedom can coexist with democracy.

Those were the times when French aristocrats, making sighs and faces at their *nouveau riches*, nevertheless married their daughters with them and provided them with a title of *chevalier d'industrie*. One could risk saying that, in France, business was treated pragmatically from its very inception in modern times, although French pragmatism was not for the most part the version propagated by such U.S. philosophers as Henry James, Charles Pierce, and John Dewey. It was a positivist version, in the spirit of Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. In Poland, positivism fiercely fought against romanticism in the soul of a potential capitalist and, more often than not, lost (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). In France, the heroes of Zola and Balzac, the ethnographers of those days, built a new world, not without trouble, but with significant success.

This tradition seems to have continued well into our times. Thus Philippe d'Iribarne, in *La logique de l'honneur* (1989) compared “*gestion à la française*” with U.S. and Dutch management styles, where the latter is described as ruled by the logic of consensus and thus closely associated with what is perceived as the Swedish style. D'Iribarne begins by stating that modern management techniques in France, like everywhere else, are borrowed or copied from the United States. But they are not identical. Although the orientation towards effectiveness and efficiency is retained,



the French translation differs from the U.S. original in political aspects. In the United States, management practice is grounded in the “logic of the fair deal” (good work for good money); in France, in the “logic of honor”. Thus actions of every employee are determined first by the norms and values of the occupational group to which they belong (“occupational pride”). It is none of the managers’ business to determine the objectives (“management by objectives” was not a hit in France). What is expected of them is generosity and understanding in their managerial job. Honorable behavior of a manager consists in defending the subordinates from sanctions intended by the next level up. Sanctioning one’s own subordinates is a defeat, because it means that the manager failed to use his or her informal power and formal authority. The tradition of occupational pride is mainly responsible for the fact that French companies function well with a minimum of managing and organizing, claims d’Iribarne.

This does not mean, however, that U.S. knowledge and experience are irrelevant in France. It is just that “it does not make much sense to start with U.S. management techniques to see what can be adapted. Let’s begin with the question of who we are” (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 97).

Not all d’Iribarne’s observations, which come from ethnographic studies of French industry, can be directly applied to public administration, where U.S. influence is weaker and local tradition stronger. Michel Crozier, in his classic from 1964, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, expressed doubts as to whether French bureaucracy, proud of being the first modern bureaucracy, will be able to keep pace with changes taking place in commerce and industry. The *Grands Corps* elite was trained in a hierarchical and centralist way of thinking. Nevertheless, Crozier was optimistic:

They have been deeply influenced by the new intellectual climate of the student world and by the experiments in economic action made possible by the nationalization of various enterprises and the growth of *économie concertée*. As a consequence, they have lost most of their attachment to the bureaucratic system as an ideal of perfection. They have become empiricists, more devoted to economic growth than to purity of style and, especially, financial purity. Their heroes are no longer the perfectionists but the doers (Crozier, 1964, p. 310).

In a later work Crozier reported on the reformist attempts of the young public servants (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980). Tired of relying entirely on “occupational honor”, they were trying to reform the French hospital system so as to detach it from its past. Their success was partial. Comparing them to a similar group in California, Crozier and Friedberg noted that

. . . because the French group adopted a strategy of rupture, it underestimated the difficulties of implementing the reform and forgot that it was attacking a very complex system of action. What is more, it erroneously believed that it could impose a new structure simply because in theory it ought to have been more effective (p. 199).

This comparison is very close to the one I made describing how Warsaw and Stockholm reformed their respective administration systems. Warsaw city managers, like the French group, showed a remarkable lack of interest in the difficulties of implementation and refused to circulate information to the interested parties and thus to anchor the reform, in sharp contrast to the Stockholm reformers (Czarniawska, 1999).

Olivier Borraz, writing 20 years after Crozier and Friedberg described local French governments as experiencing a “pragmatic revolution” (note the oxymoron). A crisis of legitimacy, and the identity crisis it caused in the public sector, made the local governments turn their backs on the administrative tradition permeated by rationalism. The authoritarian, centralist decision-making system was contrasted with the procedure of open deliberation followed by attempts to reach consensus. Institutionalization should be the result of a successful practice, not its precondition.

Borraz (1999) claimed that local governments always acted pragmatically but kept the façade of being governed by the set of universal rules applied by the state for diplomatic and legitimating purposes. Now the façade has become dysfunctional; once a solution, it has now become a problem, and must therefore be abolished.

A desired transformation is not easy, however, and there are strong analogies between the French, Polish and Italian cases. Lack of a new, “comfortable” façade and a new, attractive identity made many mayors in France resign from their post where they found themselves too exposed and the demands too conflicting. Additionally, the legal system still demands a strict uniformity, where all administrative units must be treated alike, regardless of their size or situation. Borraz was nevertheless optimistic. Like Enzensberger (1992) and many others, he

thinks that the increasing complexity of social and economic problems will force decentralization, even a retreat from the rationalist principle of universalism (or, as Oakeshott calls it, uniformism).

### **Away from Purist Extremes: Blending Rationalism and Pragmatism, the Global and the Local**

Crozier and Friedberg also pointed out the ultimate paradox of the situation: the fact that the French, in selecting the strategy of rupture, that is, a modern strategy, actually followed a very rooted, nearly stereotyped, pattern according to which “Americans are supposed to be a pragmatic people given to negotiation, while Frenchmen are held to be dogmatic and given to dramatic breaks with the past” (1980, p. 199).

One could say the same about the city management in Warsaw and in Rome. The attempts to break with the past take usually, though unintentionally, a traditional form (“this is how we use to break with the tradition here”), whereas the observance of tradition acquires new forms in every epoch (Löfgren, 1993). In order to cope with this paradox, it is necessary to return to the more general conclusions formulated by d’Iribarne. The contemporary dilemmas of managerial practice need to be related to the Great Modern Dream – that of breaking with tradition once and for all, of purifying human life from prejudice and religion, of liberating future generations from the suffocating trap of the past and the local community, of placing hope in Nature and Reason, both accessible through Science. Grounded in rational knowledge and technology produced by science, and facilitating a continuous process of innovation where there is no room for tradition, the “business enterprise” was one of the most typical means for actualizing that dream. For the purpose of actualizing the dream it was necessary to create universal methods, procedures, and structures that are supposed to bring about the same results regardless of the context.

The last decades of the 20th century have been dedicated to a critical reflection concerning that dream. This reflection sometimes ends in a “modernist lament” – either that not enough effort was put into fulfilling the modernist dream or that so much effort was put in it that it almost destroyed the earth. A different conclusion is that of a “postmodern celebration”, which claims that, having awoken from the

dream, people might now do something sensible. The most convincing is the stance that incorporates all those reflections. After all, as d'Iribarne pointed out, contemporary enterprises are *simultaneously* traditional and rational, and, we may add, contemporary public administration organizations are simultaneously conservative and reformist.

This observation can be applied not only to various "hybrids" like those discussed here but also to the very models themselves, such as the United Kingdom or the United States, which represent "pure models" on paper only. Is not the "logic of the fair deal" an U.S. tradition while the pragmatist philosophy its modernist philosophy? The uniqueness of the United States lies in the fact that it has one tradition only – that of modernity (it has thus been said of it that it is the oldest country in the modern world). In Sweden, modernity is not the only tradition, but it is one enhanced by the recent 60 years of the successful welfare state: to be Swedish is to be modern (Löfgren, 1993). In France, on the other hand, occupational honor, no doubt the premodern tradition, has been effortlessly translated into modern professions such as engineering or public service. The tradition of respect for the state is a tradition of respect for the *modern* state, not for French monarchy. If there is any managerial skill that is universal, says d'Iribarne, it is the skill of combining the modern with the traditional, the rational with the pragmatic. But the character of this combination is specific to each place and time. There are no universal principles, there are only local practices.

Hirschman (1991) is exceptionally skillful in exposing the faults of purist attitudes, of both reactionary and progressive types. He rescues from oblivion or ideological attack another element of conservative thought pointing out that

An essential component of [Edmund] Burke's thought was his assertion, based primarily on the English historical experience, that existing institutions incorporated a great deal of collective evolutionary wisdom and that they were, moreover, quite capable of evolving gradually (p.161).

Surely this can be said about any country's historical experience? Nevertheless, this does not exclude a possibility that a country's own institutional order can be usefully enriched by experiences of other countries, resulting in innovative hybrids. Acknowledging the role of both direct and vicarious experience might help to avoid

the extremes of isolationist automorphism, relentless isomorphism, and merciless (reformatory) idealism.

The not-so-successful meeting of EU-countries in Nice in December 2000 produced at least one memorable symbolic encounter: that between the representative of the previous country-president of the Union, Romano Prodi, and the next, Göran Persson. Ridiculing Swedish demands and postulates, Prodi has been repeatedly quoted citing his region's (Tuscany's) proverb, "You cannot have a drunken wife and a full bottle at home" (*Non si puo avere la botte piena e la moglie ubbriaca*). Any Swede, however, would be able to explain to him that the feat was, in fact, easy – it depends how rich you are. Prodi has unerringly located the core of the wisdom of the Swedish welfare state – and found it ridiculous. Let us hope that this purist conclusion was too hasty.

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