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What did I do When I did What I did?

- Kluster work Revisited

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“To say that you can ‘have experience’, means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience”

C. Wright Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, (1959), p. 196

In this modern classic of the most productive kind, C. Wright Mills defines the frame for, well, basically any type of a significant, critical yet constructive reflection on matters of human behaviour and social-instances. What Mills articulates as the core of social imagination is this: constant combination and connecting of the dots between the both levels of an individual’s biography and its relationship to the

society where he/she is at.

Why? Well, “The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted”. (1959, p. 161). What Mills also constantly reminds us of is that this necessity functions always the other way too. We need both-and, in interaction, and in deep-seated connection to the histories within which these relationships are acted, re-arranged and maintained.

To label Mills’ book on the task and promise of social imagination as a classic is duly adequate because what Mills is building his intentions and arguments upon are the classics of the previous era. The list, the willing and able analyst of the studies of the relationship in-between man and society, is long but worth to spell out: Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim, Karl Marx, Thorsten Veblen, Joseph Schumpeter and Max Weber.

However, accidentally and/or intentionally, what Mills leaves out are two characters, two providers of tools for thinking that are central for the task and promise of analysing of who we are, where we are, how we are in and within which conditions of conditions we are trying to cope and to survive. These two are John Dewey and Aristotle. From the former, we take this acute and assumingly irritating question: what is it that you do when you do what you do? From the latter, there is no question but a focus on an activity: practice.

And yes, with these extra helping hands, combined with the structure outlined by Mills, we have the three inter-connected levels of

- 1) individual
- 2) collective
- 3) institutional

Or, to be argued from another angle, this same three-level scheme looks like this

- 1) biography
- 2) practice
- 3) society

When put together, each part in its own right and weight is necessary and required when we are shaping the context of a given time and place, and the activities happening in and through it. When conducted and orchestrated together, situated and embedded way every time especially for each topic and case, we have a structural tool that allows us to concentrate and to focus both on analysing what someone is doing and at the same time analysing and thinking about what we as participating agents are doing.



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Therefore, when lounging upon the act of re-visiting the *klusterarbete* at then called Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts of the University of Gothenburg, I will follow the roots and routes allocated by Mills – combined with Dewey and Aristotle. It is an argument in three parts: individual level, collective level, and finally institutional level. It starts with certain analytically based hope and ends in anger, but no, never, never in despair.

The task is not accompanied so much with the question of what went on during these years of meetings, or on the other hand, what went wrong in them, or even, what got done in the right way. Instead, my attention is to re-think the expectations and the experiences of this type of platform for production of knowledge that highlight the interactions between an individual within in a collective that is then framed by an institution.

Individual level

Klusterarbete was conducted in a very simple, transparent and, well, seemingly effective way. The way it was organized did not pretend to invent anything new. It appropriated the age-old structure of any serious type of a long-term committed

activity, which combines individual work with a collective group environment and engagement.

In practice, we met every second month, and in each time for a period of four full days, there was a highly intensive program of presentations, lectures, talks and readings etcetera. We met, we argued, we laughed and we got angry – and then everyone left home and kept on working on their individual projects.

Nothing strange or highly complicated in that.

The point is this: we kept coming back, returning to the sender. One by one, one after another. Like a clock, tick tack tick tack, but unlike a clock, we were encouraged to think through the past what happens in the present in order to plan ahead the future – the acts of talking with and discussing about. We were connecting the dots and making this all along the way.

Now, it does not matter at all what type of an activity we do, what we do and how we do it depends on what our personal and biographical background is. Within the *klusterarbete*, this background was essentially dual: both the background of each participant as a person and background of each participant as his/her professional activities.

The task for each individual participant was very easy to address: share, care and dare. A) You share – your knowledge of what is it that you do when you do it. This was the core challenge since this was the one very thing most of us was not well rehearsed or used to. B) You care – about what you do and what others do and therefore, you invest time and energy on staying with and keeping on the processes of discussions. You give and you take, you push and you pull and you are not that worried even if there is never a balance of either or but you learn to trust the ongoing process and its accumulation of content-based effects and mentally driven affects. And finally, C), you dare as in getting out of your already shaped and made safe haven of a box, you reach out and touch, you get out and get knocked down and then you get up again. You dare to take intelligent risks, you dare to experiment and you dare to make mistakes.

In this continuity of share, care and dare, *klusterarbete* was conducted and framed by two principles, which might have been sometimes more, sometimes less well articulated and executed. These were the principles of 1) closed doors, and 2) everyone talks.

The first notion of closed doors, due to the novelty of the enterprise of practice based artistic research, was somehow readily misunderstood. The notion of closed doors is important to any critical yet constructive combination of individual meets

a collective type of a work. The act of closing the doors creates a space of its own. A space for taking risks and not falling down so that it hurts too much. It is a space within which people meet – and they learn, one by one, not necessarily to like each other's works or personalities, but to tolerate each other's quirks and stamina. This is not abstract tolerance, but tolerance based and built on self-interest and the care for the content of artistic practice, both one's own and others.

Closing of the doors also underlined a fact that is so easily forgotten: slowness of the process. Before anyone could possibly say and be convinced of what kind of a practice based artistic research they were trying to do, they had to think and talk it through. And yes, here, thinking it and talking it through in a collective give and take environment is historically one of the most effective and also pleasurable ways of doing it.

Then to the principle of everyone talks: the fact is that in any type of a collection of individuals, how these situations function is always coming back to how and why do each individual act or do not act as they do. Some want to talk more, some think they have more to say, but all in all, the principle of everyone talks in a round-table manner, it provides another structural element in the act of slowing down so that the pleasure of thinking with can go up.

But this all depends. It depends on what each individual wants, fears, needs, aches for and wishes for. Because, well, because, as individuals, we are as high and tall, shallow and sad as anyone else. Like the saying goes, this time not in its animal referential type, but in connection to yet another central institution: you can lead a person to the parliament, but you can't force him/her to think there.

If and when each of us manages to find and maintain the required concentration, it is extremely important to address the cruelty of the expectation and experiences of discussing matters that matter. Experience, in any field, in fact, shows that it is easier to establish a productive environment for discussing issues and cultural products that are linked but not directly and personally related to the people taking part in the discussion. This non-personal element is the one that allows us to take the distance and to treat that distance with the respect that is needed.

However, it is not a surprise that when anyone would talk or present his/her project, and this in a situation with other person's projects and trajectories very close to one's own, this causes an immediate clash and collision. And yes, here, herein lies one of the main, well, let's say, results of *klusterarbete*: when we present what we do, we want to hear comments but very often, not to say most often, what we hear is not what we would like to hear. This "lost in transformation" is not due to extraordinary vanity of anyone. It is due to the structural fact of incommensurability: we wish for inside-in interpretations by people who have no access to that position.



Therefore: we discuss and we share, we help and we might get hurt, but it is never ever automatically, never ever in a symmetric manner. We give X but we never get X back. And if we would, what would be the bloody point in that. We articulate something X and throw it out there. But what comes back, most effectively, in and through the comments you get, is the boomerang effect back to the sender. You give so that you get it back – not getting back the ways to do it, but the provocations and motivations of thinking again from your own perspective, needs and necessities, of what, how, where and when.

Collective level

Not so very surprisingly, but also very truthfully following the framework set by Mills, when addressing the individual level, it is impossible not to refer and not to discuss the collective level at the very same time. These are, indeed, levels that in a klusterarbete are possible to separate only via structural violence.

However, there are issues that are mainly connected to the collective level that are best treated on their own merits and aims. Because, well, because on the collective level, anything that gets in and anyone who has the interest in coming back time after time, is brought together by that collective level of a same or at least rather

similar professional practice. And here, here lies both the chance and the danger.

The danger side is well recognized. In any type of a practice, we often fall down the metaphorical stairs of taking things both at their face value and to take things for granted. We, as nurses, we, as auto mechanics, and we as artists, or curators, or janitors, we are what we are. And we know, we know what the other nurse, the other mechanic and the artist, curator, janitor etcetera knows thinks and does.

Or do we?

The central aspect of any serious and self-respecting research project, along its long-term commitment and slowness, is the task of digging deeper and staying with. Digging deeper means this: what ever it is we do and see, it ain't necessarily so. It is about nuances, grey on grey coloured areas – it is about insecurities, changes and vulnerabilities. In one act: of getting lost and finding back to ones practice again.

There is and there ought to be no one model, one version of anything. Whatever we do, because it is depending on the overall social, political, historical and economical, not to forget, psychological, conditions of our conditions, it is not one, it is not same, it is not neutral, it is not given, nor natural. It is made, shaped and maintained – or destroyed. It is many, and it is, hopefully, in a process, not progress.

The process character of a self-critical and history-aware practice is one of self-doubt and then again celebration of its openings and risks. It is a process where something keeps remaining the same while some other parts keep on changing.

In the *klusterarbete*, we were constantly confronted with wide variety of versions of what it means to be working as artists, any kind and type of artists. These versions often enough were at each other's hairs: they openly suspected and even disliked one another. But they came back – returned to the platform. And while returning, we managed to articulate a significant part of the changes on the profile, anticipating what it means to be working as an artist. Through the discussions, we got a rather solid and good over-view of the changes of how artists want and must work. In short, what characterized almost every individual project was that it had, either just a part or the main part, a collaborative part in it. What's more, in each case, the act of writing with, and writing with the process helped to do keep on keeping that process of a practice up and running, up and running.

Therefore, the collective long-term committed get to together is never an answer but it is always a necessity. It is not about holding hands and being or becoming friends. It is about learning while doing the act of getting together. It is about distance and nearness, distance and nearness, which both must be kept and constantly re-arranged. It goes from too far to way too close, from detachment to suffocation. It is

a process that is highlighted by its internal intimidations and vulnerability. It takes so much time to get on going and maintaining it, and it is so very easy to forget and let it fall down. It is temporal and it is always only as active and willing and able as the individual needs of its participants.

Institutional level

Institution of what, where and how? In terms of the acts that we tried to act in the *klusterarbete*, it stumbles back to this very usable quote:

“...what is most urgently needed is a politics of self-defence for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community and therefore need to protect themselves from the corrosive effects of capitalism and the depredations of state power.”

Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics* 2006, 155

In the conditions of conditions on the institutional level, our structure was the university of Gothenburg. On a larger scale, this particular university found itself inside-in a society called Sweden – with all its sweet and sour tendencies. More precisely, and moving towards a micro cosmos of its own sort, our institute had a name, now already changed: Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts. How did the above quoted text relate to our situation?

As for capitalism, for better or worse, we were left alone. Capitalism had most likely something else to do. Perhaps better or not, but we do not know, no.

As for state power, this translates to university power structures and their current state of development; a development that is best served under this topic: Darwinism backwards. Of course, this is not what it is called. It is called organisation change, the common as muck act of shuffling of the chairs. To call this hysterically pretentious re-inventing of the organisation wheel as a new beginning is cynical to the max, verging towards the black sun of nihilism.

What ever its current title or hyped expression, it is definitely not the site for the survival of the fittest brains in terms of education, experience and intellectual results, but the war for the survival for the lowest common denominator: will to power.

But: let me take this one by one, chronologically. At first, we (supervisors and Ph.D students) were left alone. We were the new kids on the block. We realised that in a new process, all participants (artists as Ph.D students, supervisors, the examiners

and the institution) must re-think their roles and ambitions. We knew that we had to move slowly, and carefully, thinking through each step and its consequences. While our experience of trial and error, we witness a great deal of lip service from the site of the institution. We were, in a classical manner, tolerated. But, well, tolerated in its negative spiral of being left alone, which, in fact, is a wonderful state of affairs. A state of illusion, that is.

Soon enough, the seemingly open tolerance turned into active sabotage. The leaders of the different parts of the institution, and in beautiful silent agreement, whom no one sported the needed requirements for taking part in decisions that they took (no relevant education, no relevant experience, and nothing to show for intellectually relevant products), started actively to want to have a say on the content of practice-based artistic research. An no, not only that, they wanted to monopolize it with their openly and happily vulgar and absolutely not hands-on version of research practice and research culture.

Why?

Well, as said, will to power. And: because of human nature. They had no idea, no competence, no experience with the content, their only chance was to stay with the pure will of power games and formal issues. Their motto: live and do not let the others live.

To quote that magnificently vivid tale of the commodification of everyday life, Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of the Champions*: "And so on." (1973, 21)

The results were very effective, both in terms of corrosive power and deprivation. And this is then deprivation of not only watering down but actively trashing the age-old and seemingly universal criteria's of higher education based on endurance and commitment to the content and its constant self-critical evolvement. As a consequence, sooner rather than later, the institution said one thing and did the opposite. It praised quality and supported stupidity. Obviously enough, the more you constantly reminded them of their intellectual and mental incompetency and impotency, the more decisively the institutional powers tried to simultaneously ignore you and to dispose off you.

The fact: the knowledge and experiences generated in and through all the individual participants and the collective efforts of the *klusterarbete* were actively ignored or ridiculed. Amazingly enough, the institution invested a lot of time and energy and plain old capital on our practice (paying for its process and its production as in books and exhibitions) but it had absolutely, positively and fundamentally no whatsoever interests in our results or our experiences.



Why?

Let me repeat: *Why?*

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Here, at the end of this revisiting exercise, I choose to change sides from a collective we toward my own personal point of view. The answer is and remains: I do not know.

We could rely on the differences of the cultural and social backgrounds, not only wants and wishes. This would then be spelled out in everyday anthropology as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: speakers of different languages conceptualize and experience the world differently. Thus, the so called linguistic and experience based relativity.

I am not sure the reference to “lost in translation” captures all the needed nuances of the gap in-between saying and doing, superficiality and seriousness, dressing up for the part and actually playing it.

But what I do know is this. Even if the institution within which you are

structurally linked and embedded lies and deceives, openly and aggressively, it is not a reason to stop doing and trusting on the content of what you and your colleges are doing. It is exactly the opposite. I trust the content, and I fight for it. But in accordance by the rules spat out by the institution, but y the rules created and generated in and through the production of content.

I do not look back in anger. I will not let the despising heroes of bureaucracy to pull me down. I will wait, and I will laugh – at their faces, at the current hysterics on the makings of their deep dark and dirty mental graves called organisational renewal.

And I will sing, along when Elvis and Costello are put together. It was Elvis Costello who sang about a certain historical figure called Margaret Thatcher (*Tramp the Dirt Down*, Spike 1989). I will join the song and sing about all those people who stand on the way of content and sabotage a practice called practice-based artistic research that could shine, shine so bright and cleverly, so richly and so pleasurable but that is demolished and denied its potentiality due to petty stupidity of the ruling bureaucratic arrogance that claims to know everything but understands absolutely nothing.

Well I hope I don't die too soon
 I pray the Lord my soul to save
 Oh I'll be a good boy, I'm trying so hard to behave
 Because there's one thing I know,
 I'd like to live long enough to savour
 That's when they finally put you in the ground
 I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down.