



## The trilogy ‘ambiguity, ambivalence, exhibition’

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### ► To cite this version:

Yvon Pesqueux. The trilogy ‘ambiguity, ambivalence, exhibition’. Workshop “The (un-)consciousness of organizing”, Nov 2007, Leusden, Netherlands. hal-00480115

**HAL Id: hal-00480115**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00480115>**

Submitted on 3 May 2010

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## **The trilogy ‘ambiguity, ambivalence, exhibition’**

In an introduction, we have to call back what will be qualified as being an organizational model before being able to do some comments about the trilogy ‘ambiguity - ambivalence – exhibition’.

### **Organizational models**

The logic of this demonstration is based on the difficulty to speak about an ‘object’ like the organization without epistemological reference for the ‘model’ as well as for what is qualified to be a modelization.

We shall first focus on the foundations of models, their first aspect being the reduction, reduction keeping pace with a simplification and the second being their normative aspect. In any reference to a model, the ‘reduction of the reality’ aspect would tend to build its ‘passive’ face when its normative aspect would be its ‘active’ face according to an identification process.

This double process can be qualified as being a ‘modelization’. In this way, it is possible to modelize indefinitely and nothing will come to limit the production of models. But with the organization, the justification of the model is as important as the production of a model. To modelize should be distinguished from the model: the modelization is the process, with its relevant characteristics when the model is the result, with its adequate aspects. The modelization is connected with the model, but they are also two different stories as far as the model is possessing a performative dimension of self-realization when it is accepted, what then comes to distinguish its story from that of the modelization. We could for example

follow L. Sfez<sup>1</sup> to speak, in this case, of an ‘abstract person’ as far as the model is neither a ‘great name’ of history, nor a hero, nor a myth, but a discursive production in synchronization with a territory and a period of time. This ‘person’ would hold its substance of the rehearsal of elements of ‘reality’ and could be positioned towards these ‘objects’.

The investigation of the organizational world, the interpretation and the understanding of observed phenomena would be impossible without referring to a model. It is the model, which supplies the concepts and the relations established among them by allowing to understand organizations by proposing a representation. The construction of a ‘truth’ or its recognition and the perception of elements of reality is always contingent to a model, partial (because, by nature, models simplify even if they are not necessarily presented as doing this) and performative (because it is a coherent truth, which creates, in return, the way through which a model is speaking about it). The representation can differ according to a chosen model while the aimed elements are identical. But a model only interests us as far as it brings a enrichment in terms of comprehensibility of things.

It is why it is necessary, in organization sciences, to differentiate ‘organizational models’, general and universal, from ‘business models’ where contingent factors like technology, sectors, etc. play a greater role. There is more durability in an organizational model than in a business model. “Ford” and “Toyota” are two icons for organizational models when Microsoft, Google are known for their business model. Toyota has become an icon during the 80’s. Its generality is available for production organization in every industrial activity but also because of the reference to a ‘continuous improvement’ (of managerial order).

Its validity will be judged according to:

- Its theoretical foundation like, for example, its capacity to propose ‘laws’ from observed regularities,
- Its capacity of interpretation,
- The validity of its predictions, i.e. the possibility of being verified by the examination of facts.

The construction of new models is not only an end in itself. It is used, among others reasons, in a domain like organization sciences, to produce better organizational techniques, methods and applied tools or to base criticisms in the domain covered by the model. It is why, as we underlined higher, the representation of the truth they offer leads, in return, to create, by interaction, a certain reality. In organization science like in other disciplines, the references made to models is systematic even their postulates often remain implicit. It is why it is so

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<sup>1</sup> L. Sfez, *technique et idéologie – Un enjeu de pouvoir*, Seuil, collection « la couleur des idées », Paris, 2002

important to reveal them at the same time than the justifying epistemological positions (positivism or constructivism, for example). It is also these choices, which come to legitimize the scientificity of a model and the field of organization science into which they fit.

M Boyer and R. Freyssenet<sup>2</sup> remind the existence of four modalities of conceptions for models in social sciences:

- An ideal to be reached,
- The stylization of a set of really existing lines,
- A construction of logical chains from agents' behaviors supposed to be fundamental,
- A coherent answer to the problems arisen from previous evolutions.

By organization, we understand here all that concern social life in entities of a more reduced dimension than the society. But, as A. Hatchuel<sup>3</sup> underlines, the contact with the object is based on two tightly connected alternatives: the organization as an organizing activity (with techniques but also a reflection on the agents and the collectives where they practice) and organizations as place of exercise of these activities which make the organization a place of urbanization of these organizational activities, between tools and organizational agents. The difficulty is to speak in a rather similar way about these two aspects while the referents are different.

Let us remind the four criteria which he suggested as coming to base an organizational model<sup>4</sup>:

- A vision, which exceeds the dimension of organizational techniques,
- An overtaking of the sector-based specificities,
- The existence of institutions allowing the formulation and the broadcasting of the model (schools, researchers, groups of professionals, etc.),
- Exemplary realizations.

What is today considered as organizations is at least raising the question of its epistemological and political dimensions while organization sciences mostly reduce this field in a set of utilitarian techniques applicable to companies. The problem of the constitution of an appropriate knowledge for the company and the organization is then also raised towards a perspective which is often taking the appearance of a strictly technician knowledge, when we

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<sup>2</sup> R. Boyer & M. Freyssenet, *Les modèles productifs*, Editions La découverte, collection « repères », n° 298, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> A. Hatchuel, « Quel horizon pour les sciences de gestion, in *Les nouvelles fondations des sciences de gestion*, A. David & A. Hatchuel & R. Laufer (Eds), Vuibert, collection F.N.E.G.E., Paris, 2002, p. 13

<sup>4</sup> A. Hatchuel, « Y a-t-il un modèle français ? Un point de vue historique », *Revue Française de Gestion Industrielle*, vol. 17, n° 3, pp. 9-14

here postulate that their social inscription tend to give them all the characteristics of an ‘organizational Reason’.

Let us call back the implicit, which is covering the way of speaking about these ‘objects’<sup>5</sup>. One of the contacts with organizations is mostly made through the discourses. The problem is then to reveal the representations conveyed by these discourses without masking the co-production of these discourses and their linked representations: discourses indicate representations and representations indicate discourses. In other words, to speak about the organization is made in a justifiable shape which allows to speak about it, justifiable shape, which is going with the actions inferred by the way of speaking about them. It is what gives the illusion that an organizational question (like the organizational learning, for example) can be taken as a model. In that meaning, K. E. Weick<sup>6</sup> is speaking of enactment. It is necessary not to forget the interactions between discourses, representations and their generated effects.

The operators of modelization, which will be used throughout this paper, will be the ambiguity, the ambivalence and the exhibition (and the exhibitionism).

## **Ambiguity, equivocality**

The notion of ambiguity is related with the logic of interpretation. The ambiguity appears where the meaning is vague. The notion also contains the idea ‘to leave a doubt’, idea understood here as a polysemy. If we add the idea of a moral judgment, the ambiguous is going to become the equivocal, what arises the degree of anxiety, doubt, suspicion.

The ambiguity belongs to the categories of the theories of organizations, mainly marked by the contributions of J. G. March<sup>7</sup> and R. L. Daft & K. E. Weick<sup>8</sup>.

## **The ambiguity according to J. G. March**

For J. G. March, any choice implies two kinds of guesses: on the future consequences of the present actions and on the future preferences associated to these consequences. The uncertainty (1° consequence) and the ambiguity (2° consequence) are inflexible aspects.

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<sup>5</sup> Y. Pesqueux, *Organisations : modèles et représentations*, PUF, Paris, 2002

<sup>6</sup> K. E. Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations*, Sage, 1995

<sup>7</sup> J. G. March, « rationalité limitée, ambiguïté et ingénierie des choix », *Bell Journal of Economics*, vol. 9, n° 2, Automne 1978

J. G. March & M. Feldman, « L’information dans les organisations : un signal et un symbole », *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 26, 1981, pp. 171-186

<sup>8</sup> R. L. Daft & K. E. Weick, « Toward a Model of Organizations as Interpretation Systems », *Academy of Management Review*, n°9, 1984

According to the meaning, which is given to the word ‘ambiguity’ in linguistics, the ambiguity is going to arise from data processing, which depend of the organizational agent representations, partly connected to its wider social experience and partly to its organizational experience.

### **The ambiguity according to R. L. Daft and K. E. Weick**

The posture, which is considering the organization as an interpretation system has contributed to base the organizational notions of intelligence and memory. It is then necessary to underline the ‘strong’ postulates which prevail in such a perspective, postulates such as the representation of the organization as an interpretation system, the possibility of individualizing an ‘object’, the decision, and to be able to link to the decision to an *ad hoc* information. It is in this pragmatic perspective (in a philosophical understanding of the term) that are situated R. L. Daft and K. E. Weick’s conceptions. They propose a typology of organizations according to four perspectives of information interpretation. For them, each perspective depends on faiths of the management on the environment and the ‘weight’ of the organization. This typology is based on the hypothesis that the modes of interpretation are associated with organizational differences according to the understanding of the environment, with the aim of reducing the ambiguity of its understanding. Their postulates take into account the fact that organizations have capacities of cognition and memorization allowing them to keep knowledge beyond the individuals. Organizations should proceed to interpretations to give a meaning to the collected information. This process of interpretation, which is neither simple nor well known, is resulting from other activities that the only interpretation and can be divided into three stages: the search for information, which is more or less formalized, the interpretation, which corresponds to the action of transcribing facts and developing a common meaning among the decision-makers, and the learning.

For these authors, two key variables determine the differences of interpretation logic among organizations: the faiths of the agents about the complexity of the environment and the nature of the perception of the environment by the organization, logic, which tend to move from information to knowledge. It is by the way of an ‘information on’ that we acquire a ‘knowledge of’. According to the faiths, they separate between two key attitudes as far as organizations perceive their environment as being analyzable and measurable, or not (1° ambiguity - ambiguity of interpretation). In the first case, the organization will look for a ‘good’ answer when, in the second, it will try to make a reasonably plausible image of the situation considering its previous experiences. In other words, it will try to have a knowledge of the factors which explain these differences of perception and which result simultaneously

from the complexity, from the more or less stability of the environment and from the experiences supposed to be those of the agents. Regarding the perception of the environment during the search for information, certain organizations look actively for an answer (supposed to exist by nature in the environment), the others 'test' the environment to discover an appropriate search and the others, finally, have a passive attitude and accept the setting up of services susceptible to receive the information emitted by their environment (2° ambiguity - ambiguity of organization). They explain these differences by taking into account the degree of existing conflict between the environment and the organization.

They will then characterize organizations according to the logic used for information collection (considering the three aspects they advanced higher: the search for information, the interpretation and the learning):

- Active logic. The organization has an active policy of perception of an environment, which it considered as being not analyzable. It tends to 'build' its own environment and to learn through action.
- Logic of discovery. The organization has a policy of perception, but considers the environment as being analyzable and, as such, looks for 'the good solution'. It then has a tendency to modelize and to foresee its evolutions.
- Packaged logic. The organization adopts a passive strategy, trying to discover data in an environment perceived as being analyzable. It focuses on some important information and sets up procedures of creation of habits.
- Steered, indirect logic. The organization is passive in front of a not analyzable environment and uses little formalized data like contacts, rumors it can 'get' according to its activity.

## **Ambivalence**

The notion of ambivalence contains the idea of the meeting of two feelings for a same 'object'. In psychiatry, it is a clinical case, which is affecting the modalities of expression of the will because of the assertion of a position and its opposite at the same time. It can affect the reflection as well as the affects (for example, to like and to hate simultaneously the same person). The ambivalence has little presence in organization sciences as far as the teleological hypothesis is widely inherent to most conceptions of the organization. The notion leaves few chances to the 'rational' organization! And nevertheless the ambivalence is a constant of the human person and of the organizational life. It is the case with the reference to the versatility as a necessary condition for the autonomy.

## **Exhibition and exhibitionism**

The exhibitionism qualifies the obsessive action, which consists in taking out of the shadow an aspect to make it public. It is turning to another meaning the more neutral notion of 'exhibition' we commonly find in the field of the aesthetics and in that of the social practices when it is a question of making something public.

The exhibition (quite as the exhibitionism) only exists because there is appeal to one (or several) witness(es). In both cases, the appeal to the Other is a necessary condition, in a positive perspective for the first case (the exhibition) and in an obsessive perspective in the second (exhibitionism). As S. Bressler underlines, "*the exhibition is a mirror of the consciousness, a projection towards (or through the other one)*"<sup>9</sup>.

Exhibitionism is a practice which consists in evolving in public places by being dressed in a provoking way. It is, for example, the case with female wearing mini skirts without breeches or male in torn jeans without underwear. Exhibitionism consists in showing more or less obviously sex in different social meetings. Exhibitionism qualifies the desire to show its genitals in public and is at the source of the excitement of the one that shows them. On the public way, the exhibitionism is illegal and is legally considered as an offence. It is only legal in given places.

But we have to stress the hedonism of the exhibitionist message.

By extension, and it is also what interests us here, the term is also used in a non-sexual context to indicate the action to show something with ostentation. It is often the case with the news where the third listener is manipulated through its emotions, exactly to reduce the consciousness of it for example with news at the television.

The commercial advertisement is by nature possessing some exhibitionism often mixed with eroticism, sometimes situated on the verge of the pornography.

## **Inhibition**

Inhibition characterizes the clinical situation of absence or decrease of a behavioral answer inside the chain 'stimuli – answer'. This absence of reaction can be of contextual order as well as of clinical order, both modalities having generally the fear as sign. But, as underline it D. Widlöcher, its theoretical foundation remains opened: "*the term 'inhibition' seems in fact to have corresponded more to the notion of a deficit or a disorganization. We speak about intellectual inhibition to describe difficulties to take advantage of natural intellectual abilities*

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<sup>9</sup> S. Bressler, article « exhibition », *Dictionnaire de la pornographie*, PUF, Paris, 2005

*because of emotional motives. We also speak of sexual, social inhibition, etc. (.) It is how the term took a widened meaning, doubtless in an excessive way, as far as it does not refer to a precise mechanism but to a simple report of an incapacity of function”<sup>10</sup>.*

Both notions of exhibition and inhibition are in duality. To speak about the first is also to speak about the other ‘in hollow’. It is important to underline how the organizational life is inhibiting the freedom of the person. Despite the same linguistic root, the inhibition can not be directly positioned as the opposite of the exhibition. On the other hand, it is the de-inhibition, which leads to the exhibitionism by breaking mental ‘dams’.

## **Intimacy**

The intimacy is considered as one of the essential aspects of socialization. It also enters to the register of a peri-sexuality, the sexual relation being situated generally in the register of the intimacy. It is exactly when it comes out of this register that we meet the notions of ambiguity, ambivalence and more specifically exhibition (-ism). Intimacy is contradictory with transparency because of the importance of the secret which is inherent. It is when the space of the intimacy is closed, its lock being quoted that we speak of cocooning. The cocooning is going to find its justification as an intimate activity coming to play as compensation in front of the attacks of the outside life. Cocooning and urbanization are then in duality. The cocooning is offering a situationist conception of the intimacy. It aims the frame of the intimacy, inevitably personalized (it is the context of the intimate relation) or purified (minimalist version) to allow the concerned persons concerned to center their relations with another one.

The intimacy confers a specific status on the communicated discourse, the discourse ending on the construction of a mutual knowledge of the one on the other, knowledge marked by the bijection between the ‘close friends’ and the exclusion of those that are not and by the depth of the established relation. The intimacy does not resist to the departure of one of the members. The relations of neighborhood, by the physical nearness they infer, appear as a threat for the intimacy. As indicate L. Deroche-Gurcel, “*an intimate relation appears as soon as the internal face of this relation is felt by the actors as its essential aspect, as soon as its emotional structure, to take G. Simmel’s terms, “emphasizes what each gives or shows only to a single person and nobody else: then we have this particular tone which is qualified as intimacy”*”<sup>11</sup>. It marks the fence of the relation towards the outside, the separation ‘inside – outside’ and this is available for the borders of the organization as the place of private life, the

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<sup>10</sup> D. Widlöcher, article « inhibition », *Encyclopedia Universalis*

<sup>11</sup> L. Deroche-Gurcel, article « intimité », *Encyclopedia Universalis*

relation with the other being marked by the confidence (in a personologist meaning of the word this time - and not situationnist as when we spoke about the *cocooning*).

The archetype of the intimate relation is generally the couple. The intimacy is marked at the same moment by the force of the relation but also by its fragility. It is the reason for which the institution comes to dedicate the intimacy: the marriage or the Pacs intervene to base institutionally (under two aspects - legal and symbolic) the intimate link and the absence of an authority of outside observation (i.e. the absence of third party and / or of a mediation). It is here that the public space of the political society recognizes the space of the private biologic sphere (which is not necessarily the family), private space which is based on the public space, while placing it borders by specification of the elements which will authorize to break the categories of the intimacy.

Close to the discretion, it is however different in terms of degree of nearness and confidence. The intimate relation is closer than the relation marked with the seal of the discretion. But the discretion guarantees the intimacy.

It is also close to the notion of confession, this last one however not being limited to one (or a reduced number) of other persons: there are public confessions. Moreover, the confession is of conventional order more than the intimacy, which is more marked by the personalization of the relation. The confession, quite as the discretion, can lead to the indiscretion, when the other one breaks the fence of the relation by opening it to the outside.

## **Conclusion**

These notions certainly have a real potential, to build and / or to criticize organizational models.