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Solange Hernandez

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Whirling paradoxes: the management of metropolitan public organizations
HERNANDEZ Solange
Aix Marseille Université, IMPGT, CERGAM EA 4225,13540 Puyricard, France

Dr. Solange HERNANDEZ

Docteur en Sciences de Gestion – CERGAM EA 4225/ Equipe Management Public
Maître de conférences HDR – Institut de Management Public et Gouvernance Territoriale
Aix-Marseille Université

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Whirling paradoxes: the management of metropolitan public organizations

Our work is about local and public organizations. More precisely, we are interested in metropolitan organizations. These are public establishments with metropolitan strategic responsibilities such as the development and management of an institutionalized territory. Thence, our metropolitan public organisations are also recognized authorities. We present them as complex organizations, evolving in complex environments. The discussion is oriented towards the paradoxical nature of these organizations.

A paradox implies the presence of contradictory and mutually exclusive elements, which operate concurrently (Cameron, Quinn, 1988). It corresponds to a situation where something is the actor and the arena of its action at the same time (Barel, 1989). All paradoxes are a consequence of contradictions and all create situations where a choice is forbidden¹. In addition, paradoxes have a relativist nature, an interactive dimension and they follow a dialectic rule (Seltzner, 1986, Ford, Backoff, 1988).

Paradoxes suffuse the lives of metropolitan organizations. For instance, they lack complete authority to manage their territory, that is, they must exercise their attributions and legal competencies without the means of control and coercion on their stakeholders. The hardships of choice are such that: they do not choose the territory to manage, their competencies, or their status. While an organization can delimitate strategic intentions, their implementation is not a legal obligation and, above all, it depends significantly on stakeholders and its close environment.

In brief, metropolitan organizations have some decisional and organizational capacities, but they are intrinsically dependant and strongly constrained by their environment. As a consequence, the metropolitan management is set at the crossroad of context and strategic intent, or of determinism and voluntarism.

However, metropolitan organizations can resolve the paradoxes of their initial situation, thanks to a paradoxical management style.

Thus, our aim is to explore the particular case of public organizations with two intentions.

First, we want to demonstrate that these organizations experience a situation of paradoxical management. Also, we want to grasp what are the management tools of these organizations. Understanding the modalities of the management of paradoxes is our second goal.

The paper is organised as follows.

We begin by introducing certain theoretical ideas on paradoxical management that are central to the analysis. We want to explore paradoxes faced by metropolitan organizations in order to understand the inherent constraints of local governance.

We then present the methodology of our research process. We illustrate our topic with the results of case studies performed in three French, one Spanish and one British metropolitan organizations (Lyon, Nantes, Marseille, Barcelona, Nottingham).

Our research covered a 9-months period and was continuing. We used case studies because they allow the comprehension of complex processes of decision-making, implementation and change in organisations (Hammersley, 2004). Case study methodology permits access to detailed, first-hand information across a wide range of features of a case. This method permits to describe and explain a phenomenon or process which has a particular interest. In addition, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context

¹ This is the major distinction between a paradox and a dilemma. In a dilemma, the choice may be arduous or cruel, but in the end effective.

(Yin, 1989). Documentary sources included internal documents, articles and web documents, interviews, and observations. Although they are more subject to hindsight bias than documentary records, interviews allow a greater degree of understanding of why events occurred as they did and how people felt about them. We conducted around fifty interviews, each 1 or 2 hours long on average. All were taped and transcribed. Interviewees included: administrative, financial, communication, strategic and human resources managers.

Last, we present the result of our qualitative research.

Paradoxical management corresponds to the implementation of management tools destined to articulate the contradictory elements of the identified paradoxes. We separate three types or levels of paradox in the lives of metropolitan organizations.

First, management tools must be used to articulate the intentions and the implementation of metropolitan strategies. Second, they must support the articulation between inner stakeholders (within metropolitan framework) and outer stakeholders (on its territory). Third, they must support the relation between the institutionalized, legal territory and the effective areas of public action.

When these three levels of paradox management are operating, we can speak of a systemic management of the territory. It means that the organization is able to manage the whole lot of paradoxes that it needs to cope with.

AT THE HEART OF PARADOXES: THE CONSTRAINTS OF LOCAL MANAGEMENT

The situation of local public organizations seems to be paradoxical. However, they can precisely thanks to a paradoxical management, succeed in resolving the paradox of their initial situation.

A paradox implies the presence of contradictory and mutually exclusive elements, which operate concurrently (Cameron, Quinn, 1988). It corresponds to a situation where something is the actor and the arena of its action at the same time (Barel, 1989). All paradoxes are a consequence of contradiction and all create situations where choice is forbidden². In addition, paradoxes have a relativist nature, an interactive dimension and they follow a dialectic rule (Seltzner, 1986, Ford, Backoff, 1988).

We notice, in the next paragraphs, to what extent these characteristics can be applied to situations of territorial management.

The relativist nature of territorial management

This feature means that a phenomenon is essentially *subjective* (Ford, Backoff, 1988).

The practices of local management are only relativist, i.e. specific to a context. Indeed, every territory has particular history, culture, economy and society. These characteristics compound a unique whole.

Besides, local management practices are relativist, because they lean on manifold representations coexisting in the same territory.

This last is a spatial, temporal and organizational entity, which is evolving and has a specific identity (Laganier, Villalba, Zuideau, 2002). For Sencebe (2001), territories are being appropriated by local actors, who are constructing and institutionalizing them. Territories are, in the same time, created (people are acting and transforming them) and given (the existence of territories exceeds the one of individual).

² This is the major distinction between a paradox and a dilemma. In a dilemma the choice may be arduous or cruel, but in the end effective.

This allows understanding of why, in a same territory, the representations of territorial management practices are contingent upon actors. They are not static modalities, but evolving. We have observed that the situation of metropolitan organizations confers a relativist nature to territorial management practices.

Territorial management practices halfway through multiple interactions

A metropolitan organization is at the heart of multiple interactions. It is connected by manifold relations with diversified stakeholders. These relations can be in an organization itself, on its institutional territory, or beyond. Thereof, it seems impossible to study territorial management without taking into consideration these interactions (Hernandez, 2007).

These can be material or interpretational (Rindova, Fombrun, 1999). Material interactions concern resources and potential rents associated with them, i.e. material, organizational and human resources like competences or physical assets (Penrose, 1959, Prahalad, Hamel, 1990, Barney, 1991). And interpretational interactions refer to how managers perceive their environments. Sensemaking comprises comprehending, understanding, explaining, attributing, extrapolating, predicting and deciding to engage in exchanges and to allocate resources (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988, Weick, 1995).

Territorial management, between legal injunctions and local “reality”

Metropolitan organizations must play a part in the determination of local strategic intention. They give a framework and means to act.

The institutional territory and legal competencies are allocated to metropolitan organizations by national decision-making bodies. But these allocations do not always correspond to the necessities of local public field work.

Metropolitan organizations, between institutional territory and territory of action

Many constraints are the result of the particularities of the territorial field. In this domain, the institutional and territorial logics confront each other (Casteigts, 2003). A metropolitan organization has to determinate, in theory, its strategic actions on the territory, whose it is responsible, lawfully and administratively. However, its real actions and ambitions, concern often a more wide territory. A local actor, citizen or other, lives less and less on a well-delimited territory (Remy, 1996). As a consequence, collective and citizen behaviours distinguish more and more between institutional territory and territory of actions, the complexity of the political and technical devices of intervention also contributes to it. Those indeed generate their own perimeters of reference. But, political and administrative complexity increases this phenomenon (Casteigts, 2003). In such a context, the research of the space framework more adapted leads, more and more, to move away from the institutional limits of the territorial organisations.

From this point of view, the context influences the managerial behaviour of the organisation and conversely.

Then, there is a big gap between these sorts of territories, in term of nature and size, however, metropolitan organization can not neglect one for the other. To manage strategically its administrative territory, the organization must take an interest in its environment. In parallel, it has legal responsibilities: it must not give them up to be only devoted to its perimeter of action on which in addition it isn't always qualified.

There is no solution. The territorial organization is in a paradoxical spiral, where every cycle is an additional paradox. It seems impossible to choose between conflicting parts of paradox. Solutions must be researched in terms of local governance.

Legal dispersion of competencies and local governance

We observe an uncompleted assignation of local powers. On the same territory, there is an overlapping of local political systems, i.e. several public authorities are empowered to act.

Because of fragmentation of political power, territories don't have a singular and official leader (Montané, 2001). Each local authorities can determinate its own strategic intentions, without consultation with others.

As a consequence, « because things must be done », the public action develops its own spaces, more pertinent, and enlists multiple actors. This needs specific managerial practices in terms of governance (De Senarclens, 1998, McLagan, Nel, 1995).

To close this first part, we want to sum up the characteristics of territorial management. Because of these features, territorial management can be assimilated to paradoxical management (Seltzner, 1986, Ford, Backoff, 1988).

First, the practices of territorial management spring from contradiction. Metropolitan organization does not have all competencies to manage its territory. It acts on a territory, which differs from its legal territory. But the law recognizes only the second. Organization must exercise its competencies, but has few coercion means for this. It is not an obligation to determine a strategic intention, but there are constraints to do it.

Second, territorial management is in circumstances, wherein choice is forbidden. In fact, metropolitan organizations have no choice in many main fields. They don't choose the territory to manage (neither its perimeter nor its features), their competencies, their status, the status of their employees. A metropolitan organization must not part from a part of its legal territory, or of one of its legal competencies.

Third, territorial management has a relativist nature. In the same territory, its mental representations are manifold functions of local actors. They are not a shared vision, because it does not exist an immutable type of management.

Fourth, territorial management is interactive. It is connected by manifold relations with diversified stakeholders.

Fifth, territorial management is dialectical. A metropolitan organization can be active: it can delineate and carry out a strategic intention. But, "active" does not mean totally independent. In fact, this sort of organization has some management abilities, but it is intrinsically dependent and under restraint by its environment. Territorial management is at the crossroad of context and strategic intention, of determinism and voluntarism.

With these arguments, we can conclude that territorial management has a paradoxical dimension.

METHODOLOGY

We are reminded that we want to explore the particular case of public organizations with two intentions.

First, we want to demonstrate that these organisations experience a situation of paradoxical management. Also, we want to grasp what the management tools are of these organizations. Understanding the modalities of the management of paradoxes is our second goal.

We then present the methodology of our research process. We illustrate our topic with the results of five case studies performed in metropolitan cities within three countries: three French, one Spanish, and one British. The cases are Barcelona (Strategic Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona Association), Lyons (Grand Lyon), Nantes (Nantes Métropole), Marseilles (Marseille – Provence – Métropole) and Nottingham (Greater Nottingham Partnership).

We used case studies because they allow the comprehension of complex processes of decision-making, implementation and change in organisations (Hammersley, 2004). Case study methodology permits access to detailed, first-hand information across a wide range of features of a case. This method permits to describe and explain a phenomenon or process which has a particular interest. In addition, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 1989). Documentary sources included internal documents, articles and web documents, interviews, and observations. Although they are more subject to hindsight bias than documentary records, interviews allow a greater degree of understanding of why events occurred as they did and how people felt about them. We conducted around fifty interviews, each 1-2 hours long on average. All were taped and transcribed. Interviewees included administrative, financial, communication, strategic, and human resources managers.

METROPOLITAN PARADOXES MANAGEMENT

After the data processing, we have four main categories of management territorial: pragmatism, territorialism, partnership and systemic. They bring to light the relevance of paradoxical approach, because they play a role of « pivot » in territorial management.

They are a mean of articulating intentional and operational levels (category « Pragmatism »). We are here in logic of *action* management.

The second level of articulation concerns the stakeholders of the organization (category « Territorialism »). How joint the micro facet (internal stakeholders) and the macro facet (external stakeholders), whereas they are opposed?

The articulation of the centre (legal territory) and the outskirts (real territory of actions) is the third modality of territorial management (category « Partnership »).

These three categories are three levels of connection between the inherent opposites of a paradox. When these three levels of articulation are real, metropolitan organization shows its ability to cope with all paradoxes. We say that it is able to manage its metropolitan system (category « Systemic »).

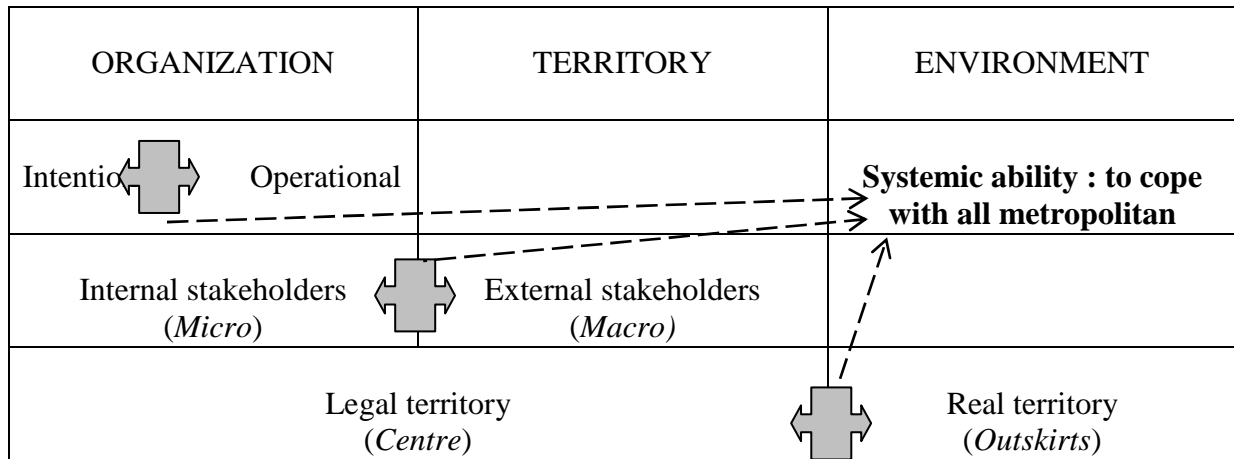


Figure 1 : Systemic management of metropolitan paradoxes

These elements are the sorts of articulation, which are used by metropolitan organizations to manage paradoxes. They don't use them all and simultaneously. But, our case studies allow proposing some management modalities (Tableau 1).

<i>Types of connection between the inherent opposites of paradoxes</i>	<i>Spatial dimension of inherent opposites of paradoxes</i>		
	Organization	Territory	Environment
Intentional / Operational	Diagnostics – Planning board – Planning management – Public services delivery – Evaluation Support for direction Internal communication		
Micro / Macro	Reactivity – Creativity Partnerships Local animation – Local communication		
Centre / Outskirts	Exchange network Partnerships External communication		

Tableau 1 : Paradoxical practices of territorial management (case studies results)

We are giving details these practices of territorial management in the next paragraphs.

The articulation between intention and operational: the actions management is sequenced

The metropolitan organizations we are studied use some **sequential practices** to pilot the actions. The tasks are cut up in several processes. Each one emphasizes one of the two contrary elements of a paradox. Here, we want to articulate the intentional and operational facets of strategic objectives. For that, the organizations differentiate time periods of diagnostics, planning board and planning management, public services delivery and evaluation. In every time period, there are facets of intention *or* facets of operation. This allows us to consider the inherent contradictions of the

paradoxical metropolitan situation: we take into account singly effects of every facet on the global process of local action. Every opposite element manifests itself, but staggered.

The temporal differentiation of management practices is a necessity for the metropolitan organizations, because their strategy is constructed step-by-step (Avenier, 1997, Favoreu, 2000). Whatsoever intentional and volunteer behaviours, local managers can not avoid any unforeseen event. They do not control anything. In spite of strategic intention it goes before strategic action, its implementation may require some adjustments. Thereby, the metropolitan strategy may change. Then, context is a strong constraint for the accomplishment of the initial strategic intention. For this reason, it is fundamental that the intention was clearly explained and pointed out. It must be supported politically. Its issue must be explained to metropolitan organization members and to primary stakeholders.

We distinguish here the strategic intention and its implementation. The first needs clarity and perseverance without equivocation. During the second, local managers have to demonstrate their « suppleness ».

Thus, intentional and operational facets can be temporally differentiated, but they must not be « hermetically » unconnected.

As a consequence, sequential practices contain two traps: the transition point and the articulation between time periods. For these reasons, local managers must give heed to internal communication and support ability of the direction (directors and elected members). In fact, communication and support allow implementing continuity and a homogeneity between these phases.

In several case studies, we observed the fundamental role played by team leader in order to provoke staff implication (Barcelona, Grand Lyon).

The articulation between micro and macro levels

In this paragraph, we are speaking about management practices utilized to joint demands of internal and territorial (or external) stakeholders.

To take account stakeholders thanks to dialogue

For this, studied organizations have developed specific competencies.

First, they are **reactive** at the hands of habitants', majors', enterprises' requests, and at the hands of sociological changes or new opportunities too.

Reactivity depends on proximity devices. The observed organizations have introduced territorial segmentation in order to allow a sort of decentralization at the level of every metropolis. Reactivity needs information exchanges.

Reactivity depends on local marketing actions too, with the increasing concerns of client services (or user services). Besides the legal aspects, knowledge of the customer is necessary for good local management.

In addition, reactivity development goes together with citizens' consultation processes.

Be reactive often goes hand in hand with the ability to **be creative** in terms of territorial management.

However, the innovations are seldom over-all. Many initiatives are the result of judicious appropriations. Benchmarking and institutional constraint (Di Maggio, Powell, 1983) promote the diffusion of territorial management practices among European metropolis, like for example the proximity devices.

Partnerships contribute to implement and keep close relationship between stakeholders (Douat, 1996, Duran, 1996, Hertzog, 1996, Le Gales, 1996, Uhaldeborde, 1996, Torres, Pina, 2001, Hernandez, 2005, Van Boxmeer, Van Beckhoven, 2005). They concern gradually all the fields of the metropolitan action.

At last, to avoid or manage conflicts, **communication** plays a paramount role too. Communication and local animation allow managing relationships with external stakeholders (Hermel, Romagni, 1990, Noisette, Vallerugo, 1996, Giroux, Giordano, 1998). They have several targets: enhancer some local event and its approval, or citizen agreement of the public actions. Beyond, we observed the development of quality processes and concerns of client services. The more organizations act within an approach of proximity, the more it is required to evaluate satisfaction of users (or clients). This logic is more paramount in the English case. It allows for some processes to receive a complaint. Sometimes in case that the metropolitan organization made a mistake, some users may receive financial compensations.

The intention is to create a climate of confidence.

The articulation of the centre (legal territory) and the outskirts (real territory of actions)

The appropriation of manifold territories of action

Metropolitan organizations can construct an **exchanges network**. Thanks to this, organization can come into a lengthy learning process (Evans, Doz, 1989), i.e. it succeeds while being integrated in the progressive opposite dimensions of the metropolitan paradox.

To be a member of one or several networks can have the same effect. Networks integrate sometimes into other national, European or world metropolises.

To differentiate perimeters of interventions and to engage in a dialogue

We regain here some management practices already well-tried for the treatment of another paradox: the creation of partnerships and the utilization of communication tools (cf. supra). These practices are utilized to manage the paradox of the gap between institutional perimeter, actions territories and environment.

These **partnerships** are required, because they allow stepping in the « good » scale or obtaining some financings. They seem increasing among management tools of metropolitan organizations.

But, despite their several assets, they pose a problem sometimes, when they are often based on politic and fluctuating coalitions. The management of paradoxes requires implementation of formal process of **communication**, in order to restraint risks of conflict between actors.

The ability to cope with all paradoxes: the systemic metropolitan management

A systemic metropolitan management means that a metropolitan organization shows its ability to cope with all paradoxes. In this instance, organization shows its ability to joint the inherent opposites of paradoxes: intention and operational, internal land external stakeholders, institutional territory and territories of actions.

Systemic management does not correspond to disappearance of paradoxes. In fact, metropolitan paradoxes are an intrinsically part of the context. But, thanks to several techniques, organizations succeed to consider paradoxical situations with more detachment.

In fact, thanks to **organizational learning** (Argyris, Schön, 1978), actors change their perception of environment, and, as a consequence, their behaviours. This concerns managers, elected people,

main partners and stakeholders of the organization as well or alike. The creative processes participate in this phenomenon (cf. To take account stakeholders thanks to dialog).

In addition, **leadership**'s development allows considering paradoxical situations with more detachment, particularly, paradoxes created by the cohabitation of internal and external stakeholders, and by the gap between legal territory and real territory of actions. With the expansion of its leadership, metropolitan organization can tower above others, and so, it can overcome an instant some or all paradoxes. When leadership becomes a well-know attribute of metropolitan organization, political actors benefit from big authority and influence. And, this is paramount in order to establish strong foundations for public actions (Barcelona, Grand Lyon, and Nantes Métropole).

Finally, **strategic intelligence practices** contribute to management of metropolitan paradoxes. For this, it seems that all means are good, in order to open organizations to their environment and to others modes of thinking (Josserand, Perret, 2000). Strategic intelligence, benchmarking are advised, like partnerships and networks.

It is difficult for metropolitan organizations to consider their paradoxical situations with more detachment. However; it is an exercise that local managers must strive to practice.

CONCLUSION: THE ABILITY TO MANAGE METROPOLITAN PARADOXES

We are reminded we wanted to explore the particular case of public organizations with two intentions.

First, we wanted to demonstrate that these organisations experience a situation of paradoxical management. Now, we can conclude that territorial management can be assimilated to paradoxical management (Seltzner, 1986, Ford, Backoff, 1988).

First, the practices of territorial management spring from contradiction. Second, territorial management is in circumstances, wherein choice is forbidden. Third, territorial management has a relativist nature. Fourth, territorial management is interactive. Fifth, territorial management is dialectical.

Also, we wanted to grasp what are the management tools of these organizations. Understanding the modalities of the management of paradoxes was our second goal.

Thanks to our case studies, we observed four main categories of territorial management: pragmatism, territorialism, partnership and systemic. They brought to light the relevance of paradoxical approach, because they play a role of « pivot » in territorial management.

We remember that these modalities have a function of articulation between conflicting parts of paradox. They are a mean of articulating intentional and operational levels, the internal and external stakeholders of the organization, the centre (legal territory) and the outskirts (real territory of actions).

These three categories are three levels of connection between the inherent opposites of a paradox. When these three levels of articulation are real, metropolitan organization shows their ability to cope with all paradoxes. We say that it is able to manage its metropolitan system.

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