

“THE MANAGEMENT OF STRATEGIC CHANGE IN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS IN THE LIGHT  
OF THE EXPERIENCE OF AUTONOMY OF FRENCH UNIVERSITIES: AN ATTEMPT AT  
CRITICAL APPRAISAL”\*

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The literature on strategic change management in organizations generally pays relatively little attention to their legal status. The problem of change most often focuses on psychological, psycho-sociological or sociological characteristics of human behaviour that are assumed to be similar regardless of the nature of the organization (private enterprise or public administration). As a result, the issue of change in public management has not been the subject of research that highlights the particular complexity of public organizations and the greater difficulty for senior managers to implement strategic change policies. (*Ban, 1995*). While in private enterprise, strategic change is often one-dimensional, referring to value creation and profit maximization as the most decisive constraint, in public administrations, change is always protean in nature, largely determined by the socio-political context, the weight of history and the institutional and cultural constraints of a nation.<sup>1</sup>

The functioning and management of French universities were profoundly transformed in 2009 by the so-called "University Freedoms and Responsibilities Act" (Loi sur la Responsabilité des Universités, also known LRU), which was marked by the transition to "extended responsibilities and competences" (Responsabilités et Compétences Elargies, called "RCE").<sup>2</sup> In a very short period of time, French universities have been forced to radically change their management methods. This "cultural revolution" had to be conducted in a very disruptive and disturbing context, due both to the State's public policies ("campus plans" and "investments for the future") and to budgetary restrictions due in large part to the financial crisis, which slowed economic growth and worsened unemployment and the public finance deficit. To this particularly turbulent national context, it is also necessary to add a local context marked by the difficulties of implementing "public-private partnerships" (PPPs) within the framework of "State-Region project contracts" (CPER) and/or "campus plans".

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<sup>1</sup> This probably explains why, in France, successive administrative reforms have most often resulted a stack of structures (the famous "mille feuilles administratif", so disparaged but still present) that have made the system more complex instead of simplifying it and making it more coherent and efficient.

<sup>2</sup> The LRU Act and the transition to the RCEs had three levels of autonomy:

1. Autonomy in the management of financial resources based on the allocation of an overall annual budget and no longer "signposted" on different binding "envelopes".
2. Autonomous human resources management based on the establishment of a maximum number of jobs combined with a fixed overall amount of salaries.
3. An Autonomy of asset management by devolving real estate assets to university institutions

The transition to the RCEs has been accepted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by universities on the basis of the implementation of the first two levels. The State (and most universities) having renounced, without explicitly saying so, the devolution of real estate assets due to the complexity and heavy costs of renovating and maintaining university buildings that are often obsolete.

In many respects, this experience can contribute to a more general reflection on the issue of change in public organizations and provide lessons on the conditions for a managerial revolution in public administration.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we would like to highlight some of the issues that we felt were crucial in managing the change brought about by the implementation of the Universities' Freedoms and Responsibilities Act (LRU). We will draw on our own experience as President of the "Université Nice-Sophia Antipolis" (UNS) over two terms, the first of which preceded the LRU reform and the second was to implement it. What broader lessons can be drawn from this "experience", which is very specific in terms of the problem of change in public organisations, given that French universities are governed by public administration principles in law and, in practice, by the characteristics of a self-managing enterprise? We are dealing here with the case where the central government is pursuing a decentralization policy, aimed at granting a large degree of management autonomy to public administrations, in order to move from a "guichet" logic to a "project" logic. It is not so much the way in which the State must rethink its central regulatory system that interests us as the impact of this radical change in the orientation of public policies on the management of the administrations themselves. It is at this level that our "experience" can be useful and transferable to other similar situations, although in very different economic, social and cultural contexts.

We will adopt a resolutely contextualist, structuralist (relational) and systemic (holistic) point of view in the critical understanding of the problems we raise. This means that we wish to warn against any hasty rapprochement between situations that do not correspond to the same context (social, political, economic, cultural, historical). Nevertheless, this singular "experience" can "give cause for reflection" on the problem of change in Tunisian public administrations, in the present situation and in the multidimensional structural context that is specific to this country. This reflection can also encourage young Tunisian researchers to undertake theoretical and empirical research on this little studied theme of strategic change and its management in public organizations.

## I. Contextual ambiguities have been a barrier to strategic change in universities.

There are many external and internal contexts within universities that have both a national and an international dimension. The national level is presented on two levels: that of ministerial policy in the field of higher education and research and that of public policies in general.

In the field of university policy itself, a distinction must be made, as D. North did, between institution and organization in order to fully understand a first level of **contextual ambiguity**, which will be a considerable source of disruption in the university community, a brake on behaviour change and an obstacle to the success of university reform.

. On the one hand, the French **university institution has** been permanently subject, at least since the Edgar Faure Law of 1968, to successive reforms aimed at objectives that come back like a litany, without worrying too much about their often contradictory nature: democratizing access to higher education, diversifying and professionalizing training to meet the labor market and the professional integration of students, reducing the failure and dropout rate during study, promoting research and publications, enhancing research through technology transfers to companies. The LRU goes in the same direction in terms of objectives but presents a considerable innovation (a real qualitative leap) in its form and content by offering universities a very broad management autonomy, unprecedented in the French public administration

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<sup>3</sup> We do not ignore here the specificity of a public service university compared to other types of public institutions. Nevertheless, similarities can be found on issues such as management autonomy, quality approach, competition with the private sector, performance measurement, change management, relations with regulatory authorities, etc.

authority, allows them to make strategic choices, in complete independence, in their expenditure and in the recruitment of their staff of all types and at all levels.

The LRU aims above all at reforming the institution, while the transition to the RCE aims at reforming the management of public university organizations. "RCEs" are supposed to flow logically from the "LRU" and are presented as such by the regulatory authorities. In reality, we are dealing here with two logics that do not entirely merge and that may contradict each other in some aspects. As soon as the Law was launched, the unions opposed a reform of the university institution, which they presented as a challenge to its public service character and a first step towards its privatization. On the other hand, many university presidents have perceived the LRU as a historic opportunity to preserve the public service character of the university institution, while at the same time gaining autonomy to comply with the modernity of a European and international standard, to reconnect with the very essence of the university at its origins in the Middle Ages (La Sorbonne, Bologna, Oxford) and to have real strategic tools for action (financial and human) to pursue ambitious and innovative university policies. Contextual dynamics, particularly related to the public finance crisis that accelerated from 2009-2010 onwards, seemed to support those who opposed the "LRU". Due to a lack of financial and human resources commensurate with the needs necessary to meet their new responsibilities and "expanded skills", many universities have been literally suffocated financially and many university presidents have lost the 2012 elections as a result<sup>4</sup>.

In terms of public policies displayed by governments on the right, as well as on the left, in France, as in most developed countries, the general trend is towards austerity. At the macroeconomic level everywhere, and even more so with the recent public finance crises, efforts are being made to reduce public spending and budget deficits (Pollitt, C., Bouckaert, G. (2000)). At the microeconomic level, it is a question of reforming the management of public organizations through multiple performance improvement mechanisms in the same spirit of budgetary rigor. Accountability (reporting) and strengthening controls, combating waste and fraud, flexibility and downsizing, participation and accountability, innovation, quality approach and evaluation, project management, etc. have become the key words in the transformation and modernization of public administrations. It is now necessary not only to draw inspiration from the managerial techniques developed in companies ("user-customer" approach), but also not to fear setting up "market-type mechanisms", to put public organizations and private companies and public organizations in competition with each other. Benchmarking at national and international level is becoming the norm for the new management of public organizations, also made necessary by the development of contractual relations at all levels (public-private partnerships, inter-organizational target contracts, recruitment of contract agents) and the transfer of an increasing number of tasks to private companies (outsourcing).

With their transition to the "RCE", universities were swept away by this managerial whirlwind, which may have given even more credibility to the union discourse on the fact that the LRU led to the privatization of the university institution, even though the validity and necessity of these rationalization measures, even though they predated the LRU, were not fundamentally challenged by the various university communities. This paradox is linked to a second form of ambiguity that we will call "managerial".

## **II. Managerial ambiguity, or the paradox of the primacy of technology over the stakes.**

Since the 2000s, well before the LRU, and in particular with the Organic Law on the Finance Law ("LOLF" in French), universities, like the entire civil service in France and in most countries around the world, have been under increasing pressure, particularly through internal and external evaluations, to improve their governance. These managerial concerns in governance and administrative and financial

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, during the 2012 election, presidential and legislative campaigns, the government and parties of the presidential majority were not even able to benefit from this bold and generally expected and accepted university reform.

management, often linked to the adaptation to budgetary constraints and the shortage of human resources (teacher-researchers and administrative and technical staff), are also associated with objectives that target their fundamental missions: excellence in teaching and research, permanent innovation in teaching methods and tools and research equipment.

From 2008-2009-2010, with the implementation of the LRU and the gradual transition from universities to RCEs<sup>5</sup>, these "concerns" have become an absolute necessity. The implementation of the reform and the changes it brings about has led the University's governance to focus initially, almost exclusively, on the organizational dimension and to adopt a normative discourse, if not technocratic and bureaucratic. The aim was to develop the university institution into an "ideal" model by defining strategic objectives that can be broken down into multiple action plans with an integrative aim.

The stated desire to break with the routine of traditional management has led to the establishment of project management as a model, and to focus all its attention on the "method", or even the "technique" of the quality approach, rather than on the "challenges" and the reality of the behaviors and skills of the actors involved in organizational change. The illusion was strong that change depended solely on the will of the actors and not on a slow process of maturation and the emergence of new behaviors. Lewin (1947) already stressed the importance of the organization's "recrystallization" to integrate change into day-to-day management operations. All organizational efforts were aimed at anchoring change by institutionalizing and consolidating it (*Kotter, 1996; Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990*). The aim was to set up a system of incentives (bonuses) and relationships (management dialogue) capable of mobilizing decision-making actors (deans and laboratory directors) likely to have a training effect on their "troops", by emphasizing to them all the benefits they could obtain from their adherence to the new management model. The President and his entire team focused their internal communication efforts and their external speeches on the "meaning" (literally and figuratively) that should be given to the reforms and "benefits" expected in terms of the "prestige" of the institution (vis-à-vis the regulatory authorities and all stakeholders), but also of a more efficient, equitable and democratic functioning. The idea was well established that the entire university community would become aware of the need for change and its requirements in terms of behavioral change, within the framework of realistic action plans oriented towards continuous and measurable progress.

At UNS (Université Nice-Sophia Antipolis), the President and his team were convinced that the ownership of change by all university actors was inseparable from a spirit of creativity and initiative in the most diverse fields, as long as the objectives set by the central councils, scientific, pedagogical and administrative, (whose French acronyms are CS, CEVU and CA) were shared, and as long as there was agreement on the collective meaning of the tasks to be undertaken at all levels of organizational action to make it evolve "*towards what it must become*" (*Boffo, 2005*)

With the private debt financial crisis (subprime crisis of 2009), which quickly turned into a public debt crisis from 2010 onwards, there was a tightening of the budgets allocated by the State to universities at a time when, precisely to implement the LRU/RCE, universities had to significantly increase their

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<sup>5</sup> UNS asked to switch to RCEs as from January 2010, considering that it considered it to be a real development opportunity enabling it to decide on its projects and its strategy to achieve them, to integrate a management model in line with the best international standards, to modernise its management and steering tools, to make choices that differentiate it from its actual and potential competitors, in particular by relying on comparative advantages:

- i) its multidisciplinary orientation strategically promoted;
- ii) the importance and value of its research dimension, recognised by international rankings (in particular the Shanghai ranking);
- iii) its involvement in Europe's largest technology park (Sophia Antipolis), notably through its STIC campus (Sophiatech) and the "Eco Valley" National Interest Operation (OIN) on the Var plain;
- iv) its approach as a cross-border research and higher education cluster (PRES) (with Italy and open to the southern Mediterranean), which is particularly original, ambitious and innovative, particularly in the field of marine sciences.

expenditure on qualified staff recruited from the institution's budget, to the detriment of other sources of expenditure, particularly sensitive to the academic community.<sup>6</sup> In a situation of financial stress, many universities have accelerated organizational reforms, and have taken drastic fiscal adjustment measures, which have been presented as rationalization and optimization measures with accountability of all actors.

The necessary financial management reforms (cost accounting, management control, financial dashboards, centralization of financial services, etc.), combined with financial autonomy and control of a globalized budget, were then confused with the austerity policy and by a rapid short cut with the LRU itself. The sophisticated mechanisms of resource allocation ("SYMPA" model in French acronym) and financial control were seen as a subterfuge to achieve savings at all levels of the academic institution.

Criticisms and union actions have largely played on this managerial ambiguity to better "throw the baby out with the bathwater" ("jeter le bébé avec l'eau du bain"). This same ambiguity has been reproduced at the level of the regulatory authorities. The government, convinced that it was putting a lot of resources into "Opération Campus" and "Investissements d'avenir", did not perceive, hear or be sensitive to the calls for financial assistance from university presidents who were unable to cope with increased operating expenses. On the verge of bankruptcy, and under pressure from the Ministry via the Rectors Chancellors of Universities, which is the height of a law that was supposed to make universities more autonomous, many universities have had to implement new budgetary rules and procedures in a hurry. They have done so without taking enough time for consultation, staff training and mind preparation, which can generate creativity, participation and ultimately greater organizational efficiency, both in terms of resource allocation and in terms of expenditure and employment. In such a context, there has been an increase in conflicts, fueled by "political" and ideological power strategies, most often based on divergent and contradictory interests between categories of staff (professors and lecturers, incumbents and individual contractors), components (faculties, institutes), services (central and component), stakeholders (research organizations such as CNRS-INSERM).

The urgency of the measures to be taken and the need to carry out all the changes on all fronts globally and simultaneously, without being able to have time to sequence them by successive and ordered objectives, may have reinforced the illusion of an autocratic and authoritarian centralization of power around the President, his team and the central services. The image of the "castle" (The head office of the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis is located in the castle of Valrose in a magnificent park), a citadel that attacked the components that were resistant to change, often appeared during the 2012 election campaign for the renewal of the presidency.<sup>7</sup>

We can thus see how, what was supposed to be a tool for change can, in a context of economic crisis, threaten structural change reform. The theory and practice of change management in public organizations, however, have underlined the need for time to involve as many actors as possible in the democratic appropriation of the change process in its various dimensions, in order to make it sustainable and stable in the long term by gradually rooting it in a new organizational "culture".

The UNS, has not escaped this vast movement of renovation. The transition to the RCE, as set out in many policy documents, was intended to enable it, within a framework that preserves its academic traditions of independence, democracy and the pre-eminence of the university research community, to compete internationally and maintain its position as a research-intensive university. The implicit strategic objective of being among the world's top 100 universities was supposed to give meaning to a fundamental reform of its governance. The organizational changes, as they appear in the institution's five-year contract developed by governance, wanted to highlight concepts such as:

(i) measuring performance and success in research and teaching, and in the administration itself,

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, expenses for infrastructure, equipment, participation in conferences, pedagogical support (the "sea snake" for overtime hours), basic equipment for research laboratories, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The young colleague who succeeded me and who is currently Minister for Higher Education and Research has nevertheless further strengthened the central power of the University around a small number of collaborators.

- (ii) the adaptation of academic training provision to the needs of the labor market,
- (iii) rigorous management through quality approaches and management control,
- (iv) the normalization and intensification of partnership relations with the private economic sector, both in terms of initial and continuing training and the promotion of research and the transfer of scientific results and discoveries to businesses and civil society in the broad sense.»

In retrospect, we realize that more attention should have been paid to academic studies on organizational change. This would have allowed us to better distinguish the protean nature of the change and to be able to put in place more differentiated support strategies according to the actors and according to whether the change concerned:

- *processes and procedures, (integration, optimization);*
- *resources, (allocation and control criteria);*
- *practices (professionalization, accountability);*
- *objectives and positioning (differentiation, competition);*
- *style (authoritative and coercive or cooperative or collaborative).*

But the "will" to conquer a "new modernity" is not enough, because structural and cyclical obstacles and the inertia of habits and behaviors require ever greater perseverance, pugnacity and capacity to win the support not only of the university community in all its components (Faculties, Institutes and Laboratories, teacher-researchers and administrative and technical staff) but also of all stakeholders (students, research organizations, local authorities, companies...).

### **III. The ambiguous powers of the University President in a complex public organization.<sup>8</sup>**

Although it has a direct impact only on financial and human resources management, the transition to the RCE opens the possibility of a radical change in the traditional mode of governance of an academic institution, in that the LRU gives the President of the University a power and responsibility that has no equivalent in the rest of the French public administration. There is nothing in law to prevent this "new" power from being exercised in an autocratic manner and the trade union organizations have not failed to focus on this particular point the bulk of their criticism of the LRU. In practice, the power of the President is considerably limited by the very nature of the University, which functions neither as a public administration nor as a private company, but as a hybrid organization, which is both public in nature, in its public service missions and in its financial dependence on its supervisory ministry, and self-managing in its mode of governance and decision-making. All the governance bodies of the Institution are based on free and democratic elections that elect the President as a "Primus inter pares". The relatively short duration of four years (renewable once) of the presidential term of office and the central councils (Governing Board, Scientific Council, Council for Studies and University Life and Joint Technical Committee) does not provide the time necessary for an authoritarian "drift" of presidential power, even if the President would also enjoy a status (Full Professor, scientifically recognized and having already completed most of his career) that would protect him from any dependence and pressure from his peers, particularly at the end of his term of office when he becomes a "simple" teacher-researcher again.

Paradoxically, the very complexity of the university tends to reinforce the President's power as a force for proposal and arbitration and thus allows him to have a strong influence on the dynamics of change.

The University is indeed a particularly complex organization based on a large number of formal and informal horizontal and vertical groups and relationships. From this point of view, the "university community" is a kaleidoscope of entities of different sizes that often interpenetrate or coexist without really knowing each other, or very little, in the transversal bodies of the central councils. These entities vary according to the professional status of their members (Professor, Senior Lecturer, other tenured teachers, temporary teachers, administrative and technical staff), disciplinary membership, trade union or political ideology, membership of a teaching (faculty, institute...) and/or research component (Host Team or Joint Research Unit), membership of different bodies (faculty councils or university councils,

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<sup>8</sup> The generic term President is obviously gender neutral (woman or man).

presidential team, decanal teams...), etc. In this internal context, the centrifugal forces of all kinds of conflicts, competition between components over budgets and resources and competition between individuals over promotions tend to take over the centripetal forces of cooperation and coalition. The President, then, appears to be the only one able to "rise above the fray", inspire trust and confidence, and represent the entire academic community in its diversity of special interests. Provided that he preserves his credit and does not get caught up in partisan quarrels and that he shows his objectivity and benevolent neutrality towards all, including his outspoken opponents, he is able to bring out, if not the general interest, at least compromise solutions acceptable to the greatest number of people. It must then remain focused on strategic projects of collective interest and appear as the defender of the institution and its members not only in negotiations with the guardianship(s), but also with external stakeholders. By sharing and widely disseminating all the information at its disposal as a result of its function, by promoting all initiatives and innovations that bring positive changes for the Institution, by giving meaning to the various projects, it then becomes able to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the university and to influence the change and evolution of the organization. The LRU and the RCE are not goals in themselves. These are tools that the President must know how to master (show it and make it known) so that the organization can develop, fully carry out its public service missions and ensure that all its members develop their skills and well-being in their professional lives.

The LRU and the RCEs have opened up new opportunities for university presidents and university "forces of change", who are still strongly present and active, to act and have real and unprecedented scope for defining and implementing genuine strategic projects. Depending on the size and history of the institution and the personality of its President, they may be more or less innovative and ambitious in their objectives and in the mobilization of resources to achieve them.

However, the national and international context has been favourable to the emergence of strong and ambitious university strategies driven by an "ardent" and exciting obligation to meet major historical challenges for French universities. There is no denying the will of the President of the Republic (Nicolas Sarkozy), himself not from the system of "grandes écoles" (French characteristic of the higher education system), to give more weight to universities through their management autonomy and heavy and selective investments ("competitiveness clusters" ("poles de compétitivité"), "State-Region project contracts"(CPER), "Plan Campus" et "Investissements d'Avenir"). Ministers of Higher Education and Research (Mrs. Valérie Pécresse and Mr. Laurent Vauquiez) have been actively involved with the Universities and have won the support of the University Presidents. The role of the Conference of University Presidents (CPU) has been crucial in accepting reforms and implementing the changes necessary for their success. In addition to this national context, which is conducive to the acceptance of structural reforms, there is an international context marked by national awareness (on the part of academics themselves and politicians on all sides) of the "dropout" of French universities in the European and global higher education and research area. The famous "Shanghai ranking" has been a powerful indicator of the weaknesses of the French higher education and research system, marked on the one hand by the presence of the "Grandes Ecoles", which monopolize and guide the best students outside universities, and on the other hand by the existence of research organizations (CNRS, INSERM, INRA, INRIA, CEA, etc.) which obscure, even when associated with Universities (in joint research units), the national and international visibility of Universities and academics in the field of research and scientific publications. Culturally accustomed to competition rather than cooperation, French academics have had no difficulty in projecting themselves into an increasingly competitive world at all levels (regional, national and international) and in all dimensions of the globalized knowledge and knowledge economy and society. Since then, university presidents, supported by their supervisory authority and convinced of their historical responsibility, have fully committed themselves to the structural changes of their institutions. The creation of the research and higher education poles (PRES) has enabled all university presidents to deploy their political know-how and procedural imagination in complex alliances designed to create new entities, with such a critical mass that they could compete with the best universities in the world and, for the largest of them, claim to be included in the "top ten" of the best French universities and in the top 100 of the Shanghai ranking.

This collective enthusiasm of university presidents was not naive. They were well aware of the ambiguities of the LRU and the difficulties of implementing the RCEs. But they also perceived the power of external pressures related to the commodification of increasingly globalized knowledge and the dangers it posed to French universities. In unison with all their academic communities, university presidents remained deeply committed to the university institution's status as a national public service, which guaranteed them their pedagogical, scientific and political independence, and offered them the capacity to establish a new partnership with business and local authorities, most often in their favour, based on relationships of trust and mutually beneficial cooperation.<sup>9</sup> University Presidents have emerged as the only representative interlocutors in the eyes of companies and local authorities, not only for the implementation of CPERs, but also increasingly to actively participate in concerted territorial development policies by extending their training offer to the needs of local labor markets, by increasing the importance of technology transfers linked to basic research and by their active contribution to "ecosystems of innovation". Better establishing the territorial anchoring of universities within the framework of concerted "site policies" does not mean a "local withdrawal" but on the contrary implies greater openness and international influence.

While the political alternation that occurred in 2012 showed continuity of regulatory authorities in the field of university reforms, unfortunately, during the university renewal elections, discontinuities appeared that were detrimental to the smooth and thorough development of strategic change strategies. These contrasting developments, according to universities, can accentuate the phenomena of cumulative dropout and backwardness for the most fragile universities, which are unable to build on the achievements of previous governance. From this point of view, the excessive focus on the personality of the President is a weak point in university reform, not because of alleged authoritarianism, but because of the absence of organizational mechanisms likely to ensure the continuity over time of structuring actions for the long-term future of the Institutions.

#### **IV. Saturation, absorption capacity, training: "the better is the enemy of the good" or the "therapeutic virtues of the crisis"?**

As a kind of amplified echo of a style of governance carried by the former President of the Republic, the multiplicity of projects launched by the regulatory authorities caused much unrest and excitement, which eventually turned into a saturation of the university community. The latter, having quickly reached its limits of capacity to absorb change, ended up deserting the reform front.

At the same time as universities were undertaking a thorough reform of their organizational governance model,<sup>10</sup> devoting a significant proportion of their financial and human resources to it, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research launched large-scale actions around "campus operations" ("excellence" ("promising"))<sup>11</sup> worth €10 billion and "future investments" financed by a "major loan" of €30 billion.

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<sup>9</sup> The creation of university foundations could be a good tool for a stronger partnership with business and local authorities and can be a powerful lever for change and transformation of universities. At the "Université Nice-Sophia Antipolis", we created two foundations (a university foundation and a partnership foundation) whose purpose was to ensure, on the one hand, the long-term devolution of its real estate assets to the university and, on the other hand, the financing of an Advanced Research Institute.

<sup>10</sup> It was necessary to develop, restructure and raise the level of qualification of the "support functions" of the RCEs: accounting, financial and management control services; personnel and payroll, payroll and human resources management services; engineering and management of real estate assets and health and safety services; computer centre, IT and information systems management, not to mention the other central services (research, schooling and pedagogy, vocational guidance and integration, disability, international relations, interior, communication, green plan, reprography, etc.) and the services of the fragmented components, as far as UNS is concerned, on several campuses from Menton to Seyne sur Mer, via Nice, Sophia Antipolis, Cannes and Draguignan.

<sup>11</sup> "Opération campus d'excellence et campus prometteurs". The University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis having been selected as a promising campus, which was a first step towards obtaining an "excellence initiative" (IDEX) for which we had begun to restructure the laboratories and submitted a dossier that had not been selected in the first instance because it was still too early.



Each of these actions was divided into several calls for projects involving heavy and complex operations that would be tedious to describe in detail here. It should be noted, however, that in order to be able to respond to these various calls for projects within a limited time frame, it was necessary to mobilize a large number of researchers and teacher-researchers and qualified personnel who had to be recruited from their own resources, owing to the lack of sufficient high-level skills among the institution's statutory staff. A lot of energy deployed and a lot of time spent in meetings and negotiations was consumed by the central governance, the President, the Vice-Presidents, all the directors of laboratories and UFRs, people made available to the University by local authorities and external design offices.

In addition, the UNS was also to lead other projects and structuring and heavy projects, major for its future: STIC campus in Sophia, Medicine campus in Pasteur, MSH and ISEM on the Saint Jean d'Angély campus, Cannes campus dedicated to cinema and multimedia, Mediterranean Institute on Risks, Environment and Sustainable Development (IMRED) in Nice-Méridia on the Var plain as part of an operation of national interest (OIN) managed by the Nice-Côte d'Azur Metropolis, etc. Each of these projects has its own complexity, combining research, pedagogy, administration, equipment and real estate.

Under these conditions, it is easier to understand how the university fell into the syndrome of "too much" and "too little". Too many projects at a time, too much haste, too big projects, too much dispersion. Too little time for consolidation, too little time for reflection and coherence, too little consultation and communication, too few resources.

The theoretical literature on simultaneous changes shows that, because of their complexity, their management must be both contextualized for each of them (depending on the type of change), but also more global, holistic (or gestalt). The manager must be able to understand the sources of discomfort caused by each type of change and adapt his or her interventions to the sources of intense concern.

This syndrome of "too much", in a context of strong mobilization, has been amplified by the desire to do more and more in a frenetic way, to correct mistakes, to respect deadlines, to be sure to succeed and to appear on the short list of the lucky elected officials. But "the best being always the enemy of the good", we ended up far exceeding the absorption capacities of the organization and discouraging and tiring the best human wills and drying up their energy to pursue change. Such a dynamic leads to specific concerns about the disproportion of initiatives and excessive changes.

Certainly it would have been wiser and more in line with best practices in public management to focus on fewer projects, to put more resources and resources into them, to devote more time to consultation and communication, to ensure an active presence of senior managers to support the troops' efforts and ultimately to give more meaning to change. (*Mourier and Smith, 2001; Probst and Raisch, 2005*)

*Orlikowsky and Tyre (1993) showed that "members of an organization display and maintain a better willingness to change when they proceed in concentrated change cycles, interspersed with respite periods between these cycles, rather than maintaining the organization in a permanent state of change. »*

*According to Bourque (2007), "the appropriation of multiple changes in the manager would depend on his or her ability to develop an understanding of the changes, to interpret the implementation context in terms of leverage (regularity/frequency of communications) and obstacles (rapid implementation rate), to evaluate his or her own capacities and personal characteristics and to be aware of emotions, while adopting behaviors that allow him or her and his or her team to appropriate the changes experienced. Create meaning to integrate multiple changes into a mobilizing and unifying vision. Instead of simply adopting project-based management, they would benefit from a differentiated, coherent and integrative management of their simultaneous changes. »*

In the case of UNS, the real question was not whether we complied with a reasonable position of limiting projects according to our limited absorption capacities, but whether we really had the choice of being able to do otherwise in a context of strong internal (laboratory directors) and external (government, local

authorities and companies) pressure? Could we remain impassive and indifferent to the general excitement of emulation and competition between the best research universities? Should we "see the trains pass by" and miss out on unique opportunities? How to choose very selectively in a multidisciplinary university with several excellent laboratories without running the risk of making even more people dissatisfied? Or worse still, to see our best teacher-researchers invest in competing projects carried out by other universities?

Beyond what may appear to be "bad excuses", our choices were in fact quite deliberate and fully aware of the risks mentioned above. We saw in these calls for projects a unique opportunity to bring together the internal stakeholders, often indifferent or skeptical about the reforms of the LRU, and to get them to join and participate in the strategy for change that had been launched by the governance of the Institution. It was also a unique opportunity to bring together around the University a set of internal (some large laboratories located in Sophia Antipolis) and especially external forces, which sometimes tended to want to either ignore it completely or use it in a secondary role. This was the case for UNS, as for other universities, research organizations (CNRS, INSERM, INRIA), certain associated components (OCA), various groups around the Sophia Antipolis technopole, and "local" political or "technocratic" personalities.

As the literature often points out, an administration operates under only two constraints: that of evaluation, which provides it with feedback from the environment, and that of crises that occur when maladjustment has reached an intolerable point.

An important element of organizational change has been to institutionalize the practice of evaluation in order to stimulate the process of university evolution and make it continuous. An evaluation agency ("AERES") has been created for this purpose. Contested by some (research organizations as CNRS in particular), recognized by others (universities in general), this institution has not had time to fully prove itself or to ease the tensions associated with organizational changes that have continued to be experienced as a crisis.

In a rather intuitive and not perfectly theorized way, the UNS presidency was convinced that the pursuit and acceleration of reforms in a heavy and complex public institution such as the university in general and the UNS in particular, required periodic crises and periods of intense stress. Crisis management then had to be integrated and coupled with change management.

Let us remember that from a Marxist point of view, the crisis is indeed a particularly favorable time for "revolutionary" changes because individuals, no longer anticipating their place in old "social production relations", become available for radical changes in their ways of thinking and their social living conditions.

From another point of view, adopting a systemic approach like Edgar Morin's, we thought that the crisis both destroyed and built. It exacerbates for a time the relations of opposition and competition, which existed in a latent manner in order to make the relations of complementarities and cooperation more manifestly resurface. To do this, the crisis must be channeled to better eliminate, transform or divert the behaviors and forces that oppose change. (Morin E. (1976)). The crisis thus reveals the positive potential of the system, its capacity for resilience and survival. More recent work has analyzed the role of *"organizational resilience" as a true strategic vehicle for organizational change* and highlighted that crises in public organizations were *"particularly conducive to change"* (Bout L. (2005)). *"In a changing environment, organizations must evolve their missions and objectives as well as their business model. These changes are all the more critical in the public sector because the management tools used to respond to change are often poorly adapted. These crisis situations for decision-makers and public organizations can, under certain conditions explained here, become a strategic lever to drive change within organizations and make the organization resilient to the crisis"* (Rochet et al. (2008)).

Our view was that the crisis should be used to break down old rigidities and, above all, not to restrict creativity or block emerging potential in new rigidities. In a way, we had to endogenize the crisis to make it a *momentum* of an organizational transformation process. For us, putting the public organization "in crisis" does not mean disorganizing it or preventing it from ensuring "the continuity of the public service". It is a question of not being afraid to push the phases of tension to their extreme limits in order to generate creative and innovative solutions. Our vision is more "evolutionary" than revolutionary, in the sense that the organization is a complex living structure, capable of a cognitive functioning of learning and adaptation to its internal and external environment (Arena R. and N. Lazaric (2003)).<sup>12</sup> We believe that this "adaptation", this "organizational resilience" is a co-evolution that is even better revealed in extreme situations, because the organization must then show its creativity to find new solutions, in order to integrate elements of complexity that suddenly arise in its environment, while in return carrying out a structuring action on this environment.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting on these issues to take a closer look at the literature on the distinction between continuous change and episodic change that operates by rupture or abrupt readjustment to correct a deviant trajectory. The view on strategic change management differs depending on whether one is thinking in a framework of "*punctuated equilibrium*" (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985; Gersick, 1991), or, on the contrary, in a continuous evolution of change "*which focuses on daily decisions, actions, interactions and adaptations that are made or occur constantly, sometimes imperceptibly changing what the organization does and how it does it from one moment to another. Over time, these small incremental adaptations can lead to substantial cumulative transformations, partly intended and partly strictly by chance, as people improvise during their current practices*" (Hatch, 1998; Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha, 2002).

These two visions are not so opposite. They can be combined in an evolutionary and dynamic view of public organizations where the crisis appears as a transitional moment of change in a cyclical representation.

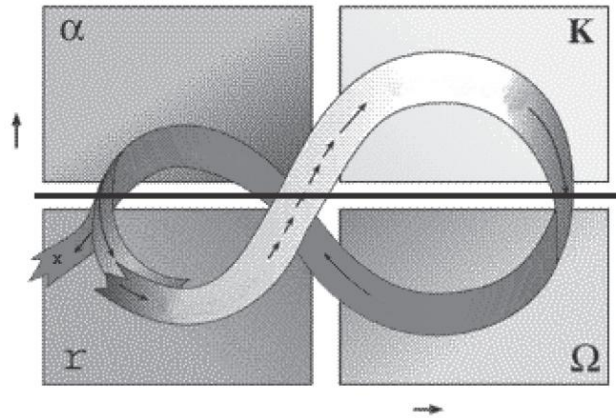
The Gunderson and Holling scheme, developed from the observation of ecosystem resilience (fig 1), is very instructive from this point of view in that it makes it possible to better reflect varied experiences in the context of organizations of a different nature. It allows us here to make a more detailed analysis of our own experience with the implementation of the RCEs, placing it in a long-term dynamic perspective.

*Figure 1 - Cycle in the evolution of adaptive systems (from Gunderson and Holling, 2002)*

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<sup>12</sup> Here we find the concept of a "learning organization" that Michel Crozier applied to the company.

<sup>13</sup> This point of view must obviously be contextualised, because in a situation of social unrest and extreme political crisis that results in a random march towards a regime change that fails to emerge, the administration often appears as a major element of stability towards its environment. The urgency is more to ensure the uninterrupted provision of public services and the safety of staff and users than to implement brutal reforms, the success of which is far from certain in such a context.



The cycle is divided into 4 phases:

- phase  $r$  is that of growth and conquest;
- phase  $k$  is the phase of bureaucratic consolidation;
- the  $\Omega$  phase would be that of the crisis itself. It is a phase of "creative destruction", in the Schumpeter sense, characterized by a very strong interdependence of systems and a high vulnerability to external shocks.
- *The  $\alpha$  phase follows. It is a phase of reorganization, where new organizations are recreated, a new organizational capital that quickly returns to the growth phase  $r$ .*

Applied to the university in general and the UNS in particular, this scheme would mean that, with regard to the question of achieving full, complete and perfectly controlled autonomy, we would still be in the  $r$ , growth and conquest phase, and not yet in the bureaucratic consolidation phase, after 3 years of RCE implementation.

But if we adopt another point of view that is more in line with reality, considering that the implementation of the RCEs is similar to a phase of "crisis"  $\alpha$  of "creative destruction", from which the new model (marked by reorganizations and the acquisition of new organizational capital) will emerge during the  $\alpha$  phase, we could consider that UNS, unlike other universities that were able to capitalize on the previous achievements of the previous governance, still remains blocked on the  $\Omega$  phase. This then took the form of a latent crisis, marked no longer by creative unrest, but by widespread atony.

This is where we see the weakness of the university public organization compared to other types of public organizations. The way in which university governance is renewed does not promote a certain cumulative continuous evolution. More or less prolonged stagnation, or even regression, is always possible because of the excessive concentration on a small number of people (the President and his team), the forces capable of carrying out reforms and leading change. This weakness is almost congenital at the University. It is not found, for example, in the "grandes écoles". It is the inevitable consequence of an organization that is fragmented into small chapels and small communities, all of which defend particular interests, to the detriment of the general interest of the University with which they do not identify, or very little. This is why, during the first two years of the reform, we tried to change the system of excessive empowerment of faculties and institutes with special status who did not feel directly involved in university policy and who were going it alone. Therefore, the question of change was not so much in terms of fighting individual behaviors of "resistance to change", but in terms of the structures that shape these behaviors and overdetermine them.

To get out of the  $\alpha$  phase and start a smooth transition to the  $r$  phase, we have set up a double participatory movement at UNS:

- A bottom-up development of the university's medium-term strategy, which has involved the entire university community (components, laboratories, administrative services, etc.) in the development of an establishment project, which has been legitimized by a five-year contract solemnly signed with the responsible ministry.
- A top-down system of operational strategic steering from commissions and conferences at different levels, designed to closely involve deans, laboratory directors, administrative managers

in the process of organizational change. The replacement of a central technocratic management by a participative managerial management has made it possible to mobilize the management staff around the university's major strategic challenges and the quality of service to users. The aim was to create an architecture of highly competent services, whose managers were experienced in strategic management, with increased added value and, in addition, at constant costs.

With the change in governance in April 2012, this process was interrupted for about a year. The new governance, seeking to distinguish itself from the previous one, has finally resumed the course of all the former projects of the previous governance, but unfortunately with a waste of time and above all a human waste. Subsequently, UNS, having finally obtained an IDEX, embarked on a vast restructuring operation within a COMUE (Communauté d'Établissements) which should lead to the creation of a "Grand Établissement" called "Université de la Côte d'Azur".

## **V. The decisive importance of human management of strategic change.**

In our opinion, there is no successful management of strategic change in a public organization without a great deal of attention paid to human management. It is essential to avoid the trap of technocratic rationalization and to initiate from the outset an organizational learning process, which makes it possible to improve the functioning of services very quickly by developing the initiative capacities of all staff and more specifically of managers.

The management principles that we implemented with more or less happiness and success were as follows:

- personal involvement of the President and his team in the functioning of the Administration;
- recruitment of highly competent management staff, particularly in support functions:
  - i) Director General of Services,
  - ii) HRD,
  - iii) Chief Financial Officer and Accounting Officer;
  - iv) Director of Wealth and Property Management;
- training and mobilization of all staff at all levels;
- Decentralization of operational responsibilities;
- development of accountability and responsibility at all levels;
- implementation of the quality approach without focusing on quantitative performance measures;
- reform of information systems to develop strategic management;
- active communication and information flow policy.

In public organizations in general, and the university is no exception, there is no natural tendency for managers to be more innovative in their organizations. The idea remains strongly held that any significant change must come from the ministry in the form of a legal framework and regulatory guidelines, and that it must result in an increase in the resources allocated to the organization. In this context, the training and "upgrading" of management staff is often carried out in a national context in seminars organized either by the central administration or by the CPU (National Conference of the Presidents of the Universities). Networks of university management staff are being set up on this occasion and we have not hesitated to involve our senior managers strongly in them.

Nevertheless, the question of human management in a complex organization, such as that of the university, cannot be confused, and cannot be reduced, to the sole "HRM" (human resources management) which would replace the former "personnel services". However, we defend the idea that radical, organizational and cultural change is essential in this field, which requires the recruitment of an HRD who is a true professional who is also experienced in all modern techniques of participatory management by objectives and collective bargaining. Issues such as decentralization, flexibility, selection on skills, performance, evaluation, individualization of career plans and remuneration, the famous "job

and skills planning management" (GPEC)<sup>14</sup>, etc. must be addressed head-on, without complexes and taboos. But we must be careful not to believe that these new practices are the "THE" magic solution to behavioral changes in public organizations.

We believe that the rather mixed results so far of university reform and change strategies in universities are largely due to the mismatch between stated objectives, measures taken to achieve them and behavioral inertia, coupled with strong "organizational routines" (*Feldman, 2004; Feldman and Pentland, 2003*). The variables on which HRM claims to act never all evolve at the same rate, nor always in the expected direction. For example, the objective of decentralization, accountability and participation can be achieved in an autocratic manner and paradoxically lead to a strengthening of bureaucratic rules and procedures. These phenomena have also been observed in private companies (*Mintzberg, 1979*). The lack of coherence ("procedural incoherence") between the proclaimed content of public reforms and the process by which they are actually imported has been the subject of extensive literature based on a multitude of case studies (*Horton, 2003; Emery and Giauque, 2003*). These "contradictions" are quickly perceived by a critical academic community and can lead to the discrediting of any "modernization" enterprise and any experimentation aimed at generalizing "good practices", often without considering the singularity of contexts and the specificity of change processes.

The UNS presidency may have given the impression of succumbing to this managerial ideology of human resources and, in fact, the shortcomings described above have been observed.

Beyond this managerial dimension of an organizational type, there remains a "political" dimension in universities that must be integrated into the human management of strategic change. This requires a good analysis and understanding of how the different strata and groups in the university community are organized during a structural reform such as the USL.

Transcending in part the usual well-known academic divisions (trade unions, politicians, disciplinary, etc.), we see several groups emerge with regard to the reform, each of which calls for different responses in terms of human management of change management.<sup>15</sup>

1. The "**indifferent**", who do not feel (or very little) concerned;
2. The "**egocentric**", concerned about their own future and the consequences of the reform on their working conditions, remuneration, acquired benefits, etc.;
3. The "**attentive**", skeptical about the supposed impact on the institution;
4. "**Concerned**", who express (or feel) concerns about the legitimacy of change, their own ability to meet expectations and requirements, and the ability and commitment of the President and management team to manage and complete change.
5. "**Passive participants**" who expect to be given guidance and resources to comply with the requirements of change and who rely on the understanding and support of their direct supervisor and the central governance of the institution;
6. The "**active participants**" who are involved in the various committees, participate in the commissions, ask to benefit from the training plans, willingly collaborate with other departments and show enthusiasm and interest in the reforms;
7. The "**creative**", **who are** not afraid to innovate by going beyond expectations, who are full of imagination and initiative and regularly make proposals to move faster, further and better in the direction of reforms.

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<sup>14</sup> «Gestion Prévisionnelle des Emplois et des Compétences »

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the model of the phases of concern which favours the approach resulting from the humanist current and organizational development. Hall and Hord (1987; 2001). The theory of phases of concern (*Bareil, 2004a; Bareil and Savoie, 1999*) shows that diversified concerns about any change are expressed in a likely sequence. It considers that each recipient is called upon to experience normal and legitimate concerns about change. According to this theory, there is a tension between the desire to change and the need for security in every human being. As a result, the novelty would inspire less formal opposition and more concern.

Due to a lack of resources, time (it was often necessary to act in haste) and perhaps will, the central governance of the Institution was unable to carry out a detailed and detailed analysis of these different groups in order to be able to respond in a differentiated manner to their expectations and concerns. She focused on the last three groups, hoping that the first four groups, which she considered undifferentiated, would eventually, by mimicry and necessity, embark on the path of the proposed changes.

Recent literature reports on the introduction of new technology, another differentiation of attitudes into **four types of change appropriation practices**: rebellious, limited, conformist or sophisticated. (Boffo (2005))

**The rebels** reflect practices where the recipients try to defeat the intentions of the promoters;

**Limited practices** are those by which individuals attempt to marginalize change and do as little as possible;

**Conformists** have practices that fully respect the spirit of technology and change;

**Sophisticated practices** demonstrate, unlike previous ones, the creativity of end-users who strive to improve change far beyond what had been envisioned by the promoters.

Boffo rightly points out that rebel practices are not necessarily negative. They are oriented in a direction that is the opposite of the promoters' intentions, which could lead them to change their own behavior. He also points out that these practices are not fixed and that they can evolve within the same individual depending on the degree of openness of the promoter and can go from "rebellious" to "sophisticated" (or the opposite) and thus be interpreted differently.

These various analyses have the merit of "demystifying" the famous question of "resistance to change" which would be somehow inherent to human nature. (Bareil C. (2008))<sup>16</sup>

*"In the public sector, the major organizational changes of recent years have generated all kinds of reactions from the different groups of stakeholders who felt concerned. These reactions, sometimes strong and commonly recognized as resistance to change, are believed by transformation experts to be one of the major causes of organizational change failure (or semi-success)."* (Bareil C. (2008)).

The issue of resistance to change highlights *"reactions of insecurity, fear, apprehension, hostility, intrigue, polarization, conflict or impatience"*. (Collerette, Delisle and Perron (1997), or *"indifference and cynicism"* (Abrahamson, 2004; Stanley, Meyer and Topolnytsky, 2005). In any case, "resistance" is perceived as negative here, because it expresses a refusal to accept change and actions to prevent it.<sup>17</sup>

Bareil (2004a) was able to identify several causes and levels of resistance to change analysis: individual, organizational, cultural, etc. Under individual causes, characteristics such as intolerance to ambiguity, preference for stability, fear of being unable to adapt, insecurity, anxiety, fear of the unknown or loss of control appear.

Oreg (2003) measures resistance to change according to the degree of risk aversion, intolerance to ambiguity and closure to experience, while Stanley, Meyer and Topolnytsky (2005) link resistance to cynicism.

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<sup>16</sup> *"The term "resistance to change" dates back to the authors Coch and French, who, in 1948, published an article in the journal Human Relations entitled "Overcoming resistance to change". They presented resistance as an individual phenomenon to be overcome by managers and encouraged them to use participatory methods. Lewin (1952) instead positions resistance to change at the level of the systems within groups, while Lawrence (1969), in an article in the prestigious Harvard Business Review, suggests that the impact of change on social relations tends to create more resistance than change itself."* (Bareil C. 2008)

<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, the unions against the LRU present "resistance" as a heroic act to prevent a harmful enterprise from dismantling the public service led by a right-wing power considered reactionary.

In the academic world, the cultural dimension seems to us to be more important in explaining resistance behaviors in the face of organizational change. The proposed change must not explicitly or implicitly convey values considered contradictory, divergent or in opposition to those of public service, pedagogical and scientific independence, freedom of opinion and citizen participation. The "political" and historical dimensions specific to the institution concerned also play an important role. Depending on the degree of trust placed in governance, the experience of past reform failures, the perception of the political commitment of the President and his team, his or her ability to protect the institution from external aggression, to defend it before the regulatory authorities, etc., the proposed changes will be passively or actively resisted.

Similarly, in a highly "politicized" academic organization, both literally and figuratively, the notions of dominant coalitions, power games and interest groups often take precedence over individual and psychological considerations. Resistance then focuses on retaining information, protecting acquired advantages, respecting democracy and advice in decision-making, etc.

Ultimately, change may be considered inappropriate depending on the organizational culture, complexity or succession of proposed measures, without a direct link to its merits in terms of the very interest of the public organization and its evolution.

In any case (especially in our opinion, in the university institution), this resistance is never acknowledged as such (Hafsi, Séguin and Toulouse, 2003). It is always presented in a roundabout, hidden and ambiguous way. It is difficult to predict the violent forms it can take, on what occasion? In which areas and when (When the change is announced, during its implementation or later after its implementation). This unpredictability is due to the continuum of behaviors ranging from demonstrations for change to hostile reactions. It was possible to show how one could move from *"active resistance (explicit opposition), to passive resistance (indirect opposition, compliance), to passive support (modest support with slight sacrifices) and finally to active support (championing or high enthusiasm for change, exceeding expectations)"* (Herscovitch and Meyer (2002)).

Often, the question of the change promoter has been underestimated to demystify resistance. *"Individual behaviors would be constantly assessed in terms of what is being sought by promoters and not just in terms of the change itself. The recipient would not only react to a new idea submitted to him, but even more so: he responds to the context, the way of doing and saying, the content and meaning of the change, but also to the intention and the concretization of the idea of change submitted by its promoter."* (Bareil C. (2008)), (Boffo 2005).

In our opinion, the notion of trust is of decisive importance here. The word trust has common roots with faith, fidelity, reliability ("fides" in Latin) but also refers to treaty, pact, convention ("fedus" in Latin). Trust refers us to a belief that itself refers to credit and debt. In the human management of change, the notion of trust is constantly earned and built through the extreme attention that must be paid to respect for people and the empathy that must be shown to them.

Driven by the desire to build new things and make radical changes, we sometimes tend not to pay enough attention to what we destroy or destructure, and to those we leave on the side of the road.

New Public Management has focused its concerns on learning new empirical recipes and not on the issue of "adaptive work" which allows *feedback on the* epistemic knowledge base (Mokyr, 2003).

In the competitive sector, research shows that organizational innovation does not come from the application of prescriptive knowledge such as management recipes, but from the acquisition of new organizational capacities ("*capabilities*"), i.e. the creation of new knowledge.



## CONCLUSION.

The factors of resistance to change in public organizations are mainly of a psycho-sociological and sociological nature. They concern issues relating to the "rules of the game", statutes, power, capacity for influence, autonomy of actors, values, etc. However, the individual and psychological dimension must never be forgotten, not only in its usual considerations (fear of the unknown and uncertainty, preference for stability, fear of losing acquired advantages, fear of questioning one's skills, etc.), but also and especially in the experiences of people who each have a personal "history" to which particular attention and empathy must be given. Change objectives do not justify everything. The levers for steering change processes must not be technocratic in nature, based on a lack of consideration for people and manipulation. It must be assumed that everyone, regardless of their rank and status in the organization, aspires to "do well", succeed and flourish in their work, provided they are shown respect, consideration and trust. A training plan, for example, must not only aim to meet the needs of the organization and change alone, it must also correspond to an individual request, which is not always formulated according to an explicit "career plan", but which always reveals aspirations specific to a personal experience and history. The public organization in search of strategic change and modernization would benefit, in our opinion, from never forgetting the human being and the ethics of responsibility according to the very principles of Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy: "It is the "face" of the other that enters my being and breaks my tranquility, questions my right to persevere in my being and to use the world as if it were my own.

The Nice-Sophia Antipolis University is now engaged in an adventure that will in the best of cases lead to its development in a new, much broader entity called "Université de la Côte d'Azur" with a redistribution of the old faculties into new entities that are supposed to promote interdisciplinarity. I have the feeling that this race for reformism, which today favours the "big is beautiful", only retains the "organizational" dimension of change without paying enough attention to the psychological dimension of human behaviour and the professional and ethical values of the university community. This is built on the basis of communities of researchers per field of study, which must remain on a human scale. Openness to interdisciplinarity cannot be decreed by an ukase, it must be built step by step on the basis of research projects and the construction of interpersonal links between researchers from different disciplines who gradually get to know each other because they also live in the same place. This is not the case today for UNS and the future University of the Côte d'Azur, which is scattered in several places on geographically dispersed campuses.

Moreover, the fact that neither preparatory classes and grandes écoles nor scientific research organizations (CNRS, INSERM, INRA, INRIA, etc.) are directly integrated into the university will not, in my opinion, bring the best students (oriented towards grandes écoles) closer to the best teachers (confined to universities). This congenital disease at French universities is not about to be solved. Alas!

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