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Does organizational nonsense make sense? Laughing and learning from French corporate cultures

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Abstract: Organizational cultures can contain enduring traits that apparently make no sense. To shed some light on how and why organizational nonsense happens, I examine the case of some apparently nonsensical attributes often associated with French corporations. As non-traditional research, I propose a methodology combining cultural interpretation and production of fiction. I use humor to build ideal-typed representations through three satirical vignettes that depict: elegant design generating widespread patching across organizations; working meetings becoming the ceremonial dumping of *faits accomplis*; and absurdity being naturalized as normal organizational practice. These vignettes provide points-of-entry to examine some poorly understood aspects of French corporate cultures, interpreted with the support of arguments of historical, sociological, and institutional nature. The resulting interpretation depicts systems of groups that seek for a cordial cohabitation by continuously renegotiating their essentially ascribed positions.

Keywords: corporate culture, change management, management history, cross-cultural

In this paper I address the questions of how and why *organizational nonsense* exists. I define organizational nonsense as the identifiable organizational cultures' traits that are apparently absurd or contrary to good sense and, yet, endure over time. This paper thus explores a somewhat pedestrian aspect of organizational life that remains surprisingly overlooked in management research. It

advances cultural research in management by establishing a precedent on the hermeneutical understanding of organizational nonsense.

This paper constitutes *non-traditional research* for it uses fiction to support cultural interpretation and humor to represent certain organizational phenomena. I have chosen, in particular, the case of some apparently absurd attributes recurrently associated with French corporate cultures, which I represented in three satirical vignettes. To examine what lies underneath these allegorical representations, I seek interdisciplinary support in a history of intertwined factors of cultural, sociological, and institutional nature. In line with a fundamental precept of cultural interpretation, the adopted methodology aims at accessing a deeper cultural logic that could explain what, at the surface, may indeed look senseless or even playful and laughable.

As a contribution pertaining specifically to the case under study, this paper proposes an interpretation of French corporate cultures as systems of professional groups that continuously renegotiate hierarchical separations and seek for a cordial cohabitation that eventually allows an overall remarkably high quality of life. As contributions that are general or possibly generalizable, this paper: (1) opens a novel investigation path in cultural research in management, (2) sheds light on the phenomenon of organizational nonsense and its relations to both the partially hidden coherencies and actual vulnerabilities of organizational cultures, and (3) advances the fundamental debate of how to set apart the aspects of culture that change and those that remain stable.

Following this introduction, this paper presents: the chosen theoretical ground among studies of national corporate cultures; the adopted methodology, which is based on the cultural interpretation of fictionalized representations; the three vignettes, followed by the construction of cultural explanations; and the proposed cultural interpretation followed by a final discussion of the limitations and contributions of this research effort.

Theoretical Ground: Corporate Cultures and the Case of France

Management scholars have been producing cultural studies for over four decades, ranging from studies of cultures of occupations and groups inside organizations (e.g., Manning & van Maanen, 1978; Hofstede, 1998) to cultures of societies and nations that surround organizations (Schneider, 1988; Guillén, 2001). This paper focusses on the *corporate culture* construct that, as set by the seminal management research on culture (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982), typifies the organizational culture of large for-profit organizations.

To address organizational nonsense in more specific terms, I positioned this paper within the literature examining *national corporate cultures*, both in isolation (Berggren & Nomura, 1997) or in contrast with others (Guillén, 1994; Moore, 2005). Supported by a larger literature on national business systems (Morgan, 2007), these studies produce descriptions that nevertheless remain ideal-typed simplifications of the diversity of cultures of large companies originated from different nations. Although the very principle of studying organizational cultures in relation to nations is often questioned (Witte, 2012), this literature advances several explanations on how different corporate cultures have been shaped by national traditions and by histories of transferences of organizational patterns across national boundaries (d'Iribarne, 1989; Westney, 1987; Djelic, 1998).

Having elected France as a case of study, this paper also establishes a dialogue with literatures that examine aspects of French organizational cultures in isolation (Flamant, 2002; Anteby, 2003) or in comparison (d'Iribarne, 1989; Barmeyer, 2007) and contact (Chevrier, 2003; Dupuis, 2005; Chevrier & Viegas-Pires, 2013) with others. Studies of French contemporary corporations also continue to be informed by seminal references of bureaucracy in France and their consecutive revisions (e.g., Crozier, 1964; Francfort, Sainsaulieu, & Uhalde, 1995), by classic monographs of traditional communities and societies in France (e.g., Goblot, 1925; Bernot & Blancard, 1953), by studies of French social and political systems (Dogan, 1979; Levy, 1999; Altman & Bournois, 2004; Prasad, 2005; Zeldin, 2012), and by influential sociological views of power, discipline, and taste produced in France (e.g., Foucault, 1979; Bourdieu, 1985).

Finally, analyzing cultures as accumulations of history (e.g., Sahlins, 1985; Denning, 1992), the investigation of characteristics associated with French organizations and societal groups invite the support of literatures that clarify specific historical, institutional, and sociological contexts that have shaped them. It means, for instance, that features of current French corporate cultures can be related to specific influences inscribed in France's national history (e.g., the 17th century Colbertism and the 20th century French colonial imperialism), in its institutions (e.g., the French civil code and education system), and in sociology (e.g., the particular hierarchy of classes that surrounds and permeates French organizations).

Method: the Cultural Interpretation of Fiction

This paper adopts a cultural interpretation approach (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1974) applied to organizational studies (Schultz, 1995; Hatch & Yanow, 2003). Rooted in the symbolic branch of

cultural anthropology, cultural interpretation embraces the tenet of studying cultures in analogy to deciphering texts: “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, [...] which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz, 1973, p. 452). In methodological terms, cultural interpretation becomes a form of hermeneutics by which the researcher attempts to identify a *cultural meaning* from the inductive appreciation of complex descriptions (Maranhão, 1986; Mumford, 1986). It corroborates the argument that cultural interpretation applied to management research should emphasize the meanings and significances of cultures (Hatch, 2012). Following in that tradition, this study is built upon the assumption that the persistent cultural traits that emerge as apparent absurdities of French corporations are not mere unintended sociocultural occurrences. Instead, they likely exist to fulfill precise functions on how their members interact among themselves and deal with their socio-material reality. The aim of disclosing these often-hidden functions remains central to cultural interpretation research.

Fiction has been increasingly used in interpretive research (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 472; Vickers, 2015) and there is a well-established literature examining and arguing for the value of various “creative, poetic, artistic, aesthetic, and narrative devices, including fiction, creative nonfiction, semifiction, poetry, and photography” to support research in social sciences (Vickers, 2010, p. 561). Fiction can provide *vivid analogical devices* (Edelson, 2017) to support the study of organizations (De Cock & Land, 2006). It has been argued that “explicitly fictional stories can be regarded as appropriate empirical material for organizational research” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 469), which provides “a new intertextual arena within which theories of organization can come to life” (Phillips, 1995, p. 635). Beyond the use of existing fiction, the very production of social (or organizational) fiction by researchers has been promoted as a means to unveil “particular ironies, paradoxes, or conflicts” that, once exposed, can also “engage the emotions, feelings, memories, experiences, thoughts and imaginations of readers” (Vickers, 2010, p. 563). The contrast of fiction and academic writing also tends to indicate that all textual forms of representation in research involve some degree of fictional work: “sociological studies and novels, ethnographies and journalistic articles are all stories [...], varieties of the same thing” (Watson, 2000, p. 502). In particular, academic writings based on qualitative methods (e.g., case study, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenological research...) ultimately constitute *tales of the field* (van Maanen, 2011) that contain storytelling and depend on imagination to develop *meaningful narratives* (Gabriel, 2017). Hence, “academics do what creative writers do” (Vickers, 2015, p. 82) because “we are, at the core, a profession of text writers” (Vickers, 2010, pp. 561-562).

Here, to study nonsense in corporate cultures, I produce a fiction that portraits accumulated absurdities and results in senseless and even humorous plots. It has been noted that “the aberrant or atypical [can be] used as a means of understanding the typical” (Gabriel, 2017). I therefore give up the facade of verisimilitude that would remain preserved in more dramatic or realist accounts and I present these texts as *stories* rather than any form of privileged truth claim (Vickers, 2010, 2015). Even if a few exceptional voices call management researchers to not be *too serious* (Manz, 2014), the use of humor and comic fiction in general remains extremely rare. My understanding is that, since the textualization of research aims ideologically at a solemnity of objectivity, the adoption of humour can be perceived as a profanation of the idealized scientific purity that becomes polluted by rhetorical conventions of a lower status. Moreover, humor is treacherous because potentially offensive and difficult to transpose across cultures—hence becoming an easy prey to the censorship of political correctness. Humor carries nevertheless the potential to unleash academic *playful thinking* (Manz, 2014) and to “depict sensitive and difficult-to-uncover social phenomena” (Vickers, 2010, p. 562). It can therefore be useful to expose, amplify, and discuss matters belonging to the realm of the apparently absurd. Humor can fail and backfire spectacularly but, as the stand-up comedian who enters the stage, I assume these risks.

I adopt the format of *satirical vignettes* (as in the dictionary definition of *vignette* and *satire*: a “short descriptive literary sketch” “holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn”; Merriam-Webster, 2018) to present my fiction as snapshots of corporate life exaggerated to an absurd—if not burlesque—state. If effective, these should represent nonsensical aspects of certain French corporate cultures and support interpretive explanations that help to understand these cultures. As a disclaimer, I hold no intention of offense: the tragicomic fiction I propose is an analogical device (Edelson, 2017) that some may perceive as a critique of French corporations, but my sole intention is to shed light on some poorly understood cultural aspects. I hence invite all who could take offense to be a good sport and, possibly, share a laugh.

As a conceptual piece built upon fictitious descriptions, this paper is subjected to ethical concerns of a *researcher-writer responsibility* (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 469). I thus disclose that the satirical vignettes are informed by my experience in interacting with French corporations, in exchanging with local and expatriate managers in France, and in working for a French business school. As in Clarke’s joke:

“[This] is an almost-true account of things that may or may not have happened to [me] in France, depending on who is asking the question” (Clarke, 2005, p. 1).

To offer the reader some basis to estimate the interpretive biases that I may have brought to this study, I add that I am a Brazilian also partially acculturated in Canada (seven years), and in France (four years and counting). My initial exposure to French corporate life happened some 20 years ago, as an engineer trainee in a large French shipyard. I built some relationships that kept me connected to France and I went back several times before I eventually moved there in 2014, already in an academic career. Working for a *grande école* and coordinating a graduate specialization in management consulting, I got involved in projects with some twenty different French corporations and I had shorter contacts and negotiations with many more, across a broad range of industries.¹ In the classic views of acculturation (e.g., Lysgaand, 1955), I consider that I am in the acculturation phase, which is placed between cultural shock and mastering, and that is usually perceived as a privileged subjective time to describe a culture in ethnographic terms because combining rich cultural exposure and enough distancing.

I also attest that all elements that I have converted into satirical fiction exist in France corporate contexts, for I have observed each of them or been in contact with those who had. The vignettes nevertheless become fictional because I overstate and pile these elements one on top of the other to build up to the level of absurdity. Ideally, as for all satirical writing, the vignettes should not claim to be objective representations but to expose the nonsensical while also telling a deeper truth.

The fiction and the interpretations I present also count with the occasional support of a tradition of biographical, descriptive, fictional, or satirical writings portraying life and work in France (e.g., Graffigny, 1918; Orwell, 1993; Clarke, 2005). As I built upon elements that are specific—although not necessarily exclusive—to France, I apologize to the reader who may be unable to seize part of the humor because not familiar with organizational life in France.

Finally, although the vignettes are *sensu-lato* writings of a culture (or *ethnographic* in an etymological sense), they should function here simply as synthetic allegories produced to support a conceptual discussion. They do not carry the pretense of precise representations but aim at offering exaggerated impressions of certain French cultures. In line with the transition from realism to impressionism in the visual arts—which, coincidentally, happened in Paris—the vignettes are *impressions* of aspects of French corporate culture that have grabbed my attention. I present these impressions here, sugar-coated with humor, in three episodes.

¹ I keep the companies anonymous. However, since I cannot conceal my academic affiliation, I take the occasion to express my sincere gratitude to my dear coworkers at [[school name]]: You have motivated, inspired, and helped me on this task in more ways than you may suppose!

Interpreting Organizational Nonsense

1: When elegant design at the top becomes patching and plastering everywhere else

Vignette #1: Direction and execution of work at Petit-LeGrand

Mr. Leclercq, *Directeur des Opérations* at Groupe Petit-LeGrand, holds a *Diplôme d'Ingénieur*, issued 24 years ago, by ENAMC (*l'École Nationale Avancée des Mines Chaussées*). He works in perfect tune with his close collaborators also because, as it goes, most of them are ENAMC alumni (except for a few odd ones graduated at ECSPM, *l'École Centrale Supérieure des Ponts Minés*). Mr. Leclercq is proud of the tradition of cutting-edge innovation systematically produced by his office. As new business opportunities are identified by the *Direction des Nouvelles Opportunités et de l'Innovation* and appropriately approved by the *Direction Générale*, the *Direction des Opérations* excels at integrating these into detailed and comprehensive blueprints, which generate process models that maximize the use of resources and allow a well-oiled operation across all the plants. Mr. Leclercq knows that Petit-LeGrand would not survive one day without the precise operational directions that emanate from his direction via a highly capillarized computer system (backed up by a good and trusted flow of paper forms and controls). The complexity behind the operational directives is phenomenal and he knows that only the very best could conceive and convey it with the refined elegance of the *Triple-matrix resource-deployment-integration model* he created. After all, that model is the crowing achievement of his many years of professional progression. It is the work of a genius and, as they all know, the very competitive advantage of Petit-LeGrand lies upon the sophisticated efficacy of a model that allows the 23 plants and the seven distribution centers to operate under strict precision, with minimal delay or waste.

Géraldine Durant is an *Assistante des Provisions*, level B3, at the rubber machinery plant of Petit-LeGrand in Sainte-Mathilde-la-Girotonde. She joined Petit-LeGrand five years ago, after obtaining her *Licence professionnelle de management des approvisionnements* at the *Université Régionale Pierre-Chaussure des Métiers Artisanaux*. She has been working in the plant for five years. This morning she received the biweekly provisioning plan of non-metallic inputs to the 27 active cost-centers operated by her plant. Hanging on the wall of her office, as required, is the last revision (v.2018.7) of the infamous *Triple-matrix blah-blah-blah* model. She knows too well that if she had to comply with that silly cacophony of boxes and arrows a third of the suppliers' trucks would be sent back over the next two weeks, causing pandemonium to all the lines. Yet, she is positive that the plant will be running as usual on the days ahead. She perfected the art learned from the old-timers of her service and became a master at playing with a few tags, codes, and hidden stocks, to approve the reception of all items. She knows that, after receiving it, the guys down on the shop floor will solve the eventual problems as they've always done: by running a parallel system of lending and borrowing a few parts and batches of materials across the various cost-centers. After all, it is always better to hide a few spare items or some material before the mid-November annual inspection than to interrupt production. At the end of the day, what counts is that the plant will be running. Even better, by now she had figured out how to avoid all computer error-messages and paperwork returned from the headquarters. It is the work of a genius and she makes no effort to contain a self-congratulatory smile. If it wasn't for her ingeniousness, the Petit-LeGrand rubber machinery division would be long dead by now.

This first vignette depicts a disconnection between the daily work of the headquarters top management and those at an industrial plant. It aims to represent a two-tier configuration that continues to exist within the French society and its organizations and institutions. The concept of *égalité* [equality] can provide a point-of-entry to examine this divide. Not by coincidence, this crucial cultural marker to French national identity also relates to other elements alluded by the

vignette, such as France’s education system and the centrality of values of order and honor. A micro-sociological observation of French organizations reveals a peculiar interaction between two classes—the *cadres* and *non-cadres*—characterized by the distinction between those who occupy command positions in the organizations and the others. It also reveals the emergence of forms of resistance and very prolific arenas for unofficial action. Finally, the snapshot of the organizational life at *Groupe Petit-LeGrand* reflects some attributes of a socio-industrial system shaped by the tradition of the *dirigisme* economic doctrine.

As a tale of the coexistence of two logics and two spheres of action, the vignette shows the direction operating in a world that remains tragically separated from the one inhabited by those who run the plants. In his study of classic French organizations, Crozier (1964, p. 238) argued that “the educational system of a given society reflects that society’s social system, and [...] is the main force perpetuating it.” We may then start by revisiting the educational paths that made Mr. Leclercq a cadre and Géraldine Durant a non-cadre.

Historically, the so-called *méritocratie républicaine* [republican meritocracy] has been fundamental to define the French educational system. Once the *Révolution* cut short the monarchic absolutist ruling, the new-born *République* engaged in an energetic effort to improve education, which became essential to build France as the nation we know today. It gave nevertheless priority to those identified as best students and ended by maintaining a society of tiers (Krop, 2014) that uses less-than-perfect mechanisms to potentially democratize the selection of elites. It also resulted in an educational system marked by many instances of examination:

“The place taken by examinations throughout the school years, the prestige given to such a simple examination as the grade school graduation certificate,² with the social cleavage it brings among the most modest people, and the decisive and often even irreversible importance of the *grands concours* for the upper classes—all these independent features testify to the obsessive passion for selection that characterizes the French educational system” (Crozier, 1964, p. 243).

The selection mechanisms that remain central from primary (Krop, 2014) to higher education (Lazuech, 1999) unveil a peculiar connotation to the French concept of *égalité* (Rosanvallon, 2011). Instead of eliminating inequality, the solution built in post-monarchic France ended by legitimating the existence of a structural divide among classes. Rights based on novel trials and rites replaced those based on inheritance and lines of blood and—as some denounce—the overthrowing of the monarchy finally did little more than adapting pre-existing institutions (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 86). It replaced actors but preserved a well-distinguished order, analogous to the one that already in

² The so-called *baccalauréat* (or simply “*le bac*”), to be obtained following the third year of *lycée*.

medieval times set apart the pure (or noble) from the impure (or common). Indeed, as pointed by sociological studies of almost a century ago (e.g., Goblot, 1925, pp. 126-127), the persistence of such separation relies on a wide repertoire of sociocultural mechanisms—such as the baccalaureate exam, codes of professional ethics, and fashion and arts (Crozier, 1964, p. 219)—that continues to separate the working class from a more affluent bourgeoisie. It restates what Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a former French Prime Minister, popularized by the expressions *France d'en bas* and *France d'en haut* [lower France and upper France] (Rémi-Giraud, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, there is abundant criticism to this “meritocratic legitimization of French inequality” (Rosanvallon, 2011; Zeldin, 2012, p. 192) and, in particular, to the role played by the *grandes écoles* (Lazuech, 1999; Altman & Bournois, 2004). These—as the fictitious engineering school that counts Mr. Leclercq among its alumni—can not be examined in isolation, but as the continuation of an irreversible track rooted in previous stages of education, often at an early age and notably in the *classes préparatoires* of the most prestigious *lycées* where some students are pre-selected to be trained to pass the *concours d'admission*. If successful, the admission to one of the *grandes écoles* (which, by the way, are also ranked, for some of them are grander than others)³ will provide them with both the formal education and the implicit assumption of “diploma equals competence” (Placet, 2001, p. 66). There the students also find diverse extra-curricular functions (associations, students’ representation bodies, regular internal and external events, career services, network links to alumni and industrial leaders...) that, on top of constructing a strong *esprit de corps*, also provides a *pédagogie du savoir-être* [a pedagogy of how-to-be] that equip them with the needed micro-sociological skills to become *cadres* (Lazuech, 1999; Zeldin, 2012). Graduation from a *grande école* legitimizes a superior high education and ensures the employability of young leaders-to-be (Lazuech, 1999), which is not a small deal in a country marked already for some decades by high rates of structural unemployment among young people.

The etymology of *cadre* comes from *quadrum* (Lt.), meaning square. It evolved to the sense of a frame and eventually became used to communicate a class of workers in France “who acquired a higher education and occupy a function of command, control, or direction in a company or administrative body and who enjoy the benefits of a differentiated status vis-à-vis other categories” (Larousse, 2018, my translation). The distinction between a *cadre* and an ordinary worker (often

³ Students are also admitted through alternative tracks, such as transferences from other institutions, places offered to members of diplomatic families, or other processes. At the most prestigious *grandes écoles* however at least 90% of the admissions happens through *concours d'admission* (also called *grands concours*).

called a *non-cadre*) is legally established by collective labor conventions and reproduced in the instances of labor unions and intra-company representations (as the *comités d'entreprise*, mandatory to French companies with more than 50 employees). By being so ubiquitous, this distinction gives origin to the two-tier micro-sociological configuration that characterizes most of the French corporations. There is little, if any, mobility from a *non-cadre* to a *cadre* position and the rare transition happens only under strict rites of passage (d'Iribarne, 1989, p. 39). The formal organogram of industrial organizations can even reproduce the ranking of different engineering *grandes écoles* (Flamant, 2002, p. 189; Crozier, 1964, p. 124) with glass ceilings at echelons that depend on the school of origin. Accordingly, Mr. Leclercq's accession to become a director at Petit-LeGrand started to be defined long before he joined the company, probably when his *lycée* (high school) set him apart as a superior student in an educational system that values conformity, analytical thinking, and positive sciences. It is not a surprise therefore that his successful professional progression makes him confident and proud of the value—not to say the conceptual elegance—of the *Triple-matrix...* integration model.

The distinction between the two categories is reinforced as *cadre* also assumes the role of *encadrer* [to frame or to put one in his or her place] the common workers by “directing, providing intellectual and moral instruction, imposing authority, and constituting hierarchical orders” (Larousse, 2018, my translation), which highlights the divide between the *encadrant* [those who frame] and the *exécutants* [those who execute] (Rosanvallon, 2012). In French sociology, the internalization of behavioral dispositions of class has been notably expressed in Bourdieu's propositions of the embodiment of *habitus* and the notion of *bodily hexis*. The membership to a particular class, he argues, becomes translated into socially-constructed postures, body constitutions, aesthetical preferences, and styles (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 218). Professional groups become also defined by a normative “codex of attitudes and behaviors” (Altman & Bournois, 2004, p. 326) and, therefore, the distinction between *cadre* and *non-cadre* transcends the boundaries of the organization because embodied in individual postures and embedded in larger social arrangements.

A closer look at the *non-cadre* position reveals however a degree of autonomy where the actual need of being framed is questionable. Géraldine's education comprises the formal qualification of the diploma delivered by a *Université Régionale* that provided her with the training and legitimacy to enter Petit-LeGrand. The mastery of a well-defined *métier* rests at the core of the strong sense of corporatism that equips each class of worker with its own honor code—or its own *logique de l'honneur* (d'Iribarne, 1989). As she tries to keep the lines running despite the apparently alienated

direction, Géraldine fulfills the internalized obligation of being the master of her job. These processes of internalization of norms—eventually called *coercive persuasion* in organizational research of culture (Schein, 1961; Chan, Clegg, & Warr, 2018)—reinforce the argument that individual responsibilities and functions are largely defined by one’s professional category (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 27), by emerging senses of complicity among professional groups (Anteby, 2003), and by the resultant custom of class (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 96). Occupational cultures become therefore central to regulate working relations in France (Chevrier, 2003, p. 148) and necessary to allow individual autonomy within a rigid hierarchy (Barmeyer, 2007, p. 156). Related professional groups are positioned vis-à-vis each other (Altman & Bournois, 2004, p. 326). Flamant (2002, pp. 66-68) offers the example of a new category of work that emerges in a factory and gets ranked in terms of being more or less noble (or clean). In his description, a group of individuals started to work with synthetic materials, acquired a new *savoir-faire*, and eventually constituted a new professional group. When jockeying for position, the construction of the novel identity profited, in particular, from the discourse that working with synthetics was superior to working with metallic materials because cleaner (d’Iribarne, 1989, pp. 120-121).

Distinctive class embodiments therefore reinforce the separation of groups at Petit-LeGrand, which interestingly contributes to allowing the factory to continue to run despite the coexistence of two parallel games. The higher game, played at the headquarters, is the one of designing, promoting, and defending a grandiose system; the lower game, played in Sainte-Mathilde-la-Girotonde, is the one of making things work: “I need to make my own stuff work” (D’iribarne, 1989, p. 22; my translation of: “*if faut que je fasse tourner mon propre machin*”). An old French tradition on that matter is the so-called *système D* (Barmeyer, 2007, p. 174), mentioned as early as Graffigny’s writings during the First World War:

“Isn’t it the war? So, one needs to apply the *système-D* and work it out smoothly.” (Graffigny, 1918).⁴

Système D stands for the ability to get something done by going beyond what is formal or official. The letter D refers to the slang verbs *se débrouiller* and *se démerder* [to make do or to manage to get done] notably in an adverse situation. The parallel provisioning system described in the vignette exemplifies a *système D* established to circumvent formal rules to attain the results that Géraldine and her colleagues needed (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 26). The separations among strata and the

⁴ My translation of: “*C’est-y la guerre, oui ou non? Alors, il faut pratiquer le système-D et s’arranger en douce.*”

internalized sense of duty towards one's professional groups also allow Géraldine and her colleagues to work hard regardless of the often-scarce extrinsic motivations. By so doing, they will push the limits of informal and practical arrangements to navigate the grey-areas among the official, the quasi-official, and the unofficial (d'Iribarne, 1989, p. 44; Anteby, 2003). To that, the French adjective *officieux*, which lacks an exact translation in English, is particularly informative: *officieux* is what comes from an authorized source but is not official neither totally guaranteed; or what fulfills a function without an official nomination (Larousse, 2018, my translation).

A *système D* can also house forms of resistance (Scott, 1985). Looking at some early records of working life in France, George Orwell's memoir describes the following system developed to escape managerial control in a large Parisian hotel in 1928:

“[All] the discipline of the hotel depended on the manager. He was a conscientious man, and always on the lookout for slackness, but we were too clever for him. A system of service bells ran through the hotel, and the whole staff used these for signalling to one another. A long ring and a short ring, followed by two more long rings, meant that the manager was coming, and when we heard it we took care to look busy” (Orwell, 1933, pp. 69-70).

The groups of workers therefore also bond together by collectively resisting the control of those above. Ironically, what the direction of Petit-LeGrand perceives as an elegant design to coordinate the work across the factories ends up triggering extensive patching and plastering. Or, to use a very French word, it creates *bricolage*, in the sense of tinkering or makeshift jobs.

The widespread *bricolage* provides an explanation of how the production continues to run, but it also reveals a conundrum: if the internalization of different *logiques d'honneur* can keep the factories working, what is the function of their apparently alienated direction? Part of the answer resides in the value the direction adds externally, at the level of the industrial system, by connecting the organization to a larger sphere of action, typically orchestrated by the government. It refers, more precisely to a tradition of French industrial systems: the economic doctrine of *dirigisme*, characterized by state interventionism through intense policy-making and direction over the productive systems (Kuisel, 1984; Clift, 2005; Prasad, 2005). Or, as in Clarke's jokes:

“[L]eaders all come from the same école. They don't want to change France. They all want just one thing, for France to be capital of the planet. Et voilà” (Clarke, 2005, p. 335). “French businesspeople and politicians [are] constantly scratching each other's backs, as opposed to stabbing them, which would be counterproductive” (Clarke, 2005, pp. 382-383).

The practice of close relationship between government and big business have been consolidated during the *Trente Glorieuses*: the thirty-year period following the Second World War (1945 to 1975) that featured strong economic growth, high average wages, affluent consumption, and a very

developed system of social benefits. Its influence reached beyond an economic development choice to become a full-fledged ideology:

“For loyal Gaullists, dirigisme was not simply an economic program: it constituted a core component of their identity, the translation into the economic arena of General de Gaulle’s belief that only a strong, activist, modernizing state could restore France to greatness” (Levy, 1999, p. 66).

The *dirigisme* legacy remains strong and, historically, it reflects an even older ideological inclination towards *économie concertée* solutions (i.e., solutions based on government-business coordinated action; e.g., Crozier, 1964, p. 304) that finds roots in earlier traditions of economic interventionism as, in particular, the so-called *Colbertism* of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, *Contrôleur Général des Finances* under Louis XIV between 1661 and 1683 (Clift, 2005, p. 106). Following on this tradition, the creation of the *grandes écoles* of public administration, management, and engineering have facilitated the coalition between government and industry by providing the *cadres* to fill the top positions in the public administration, private management, and large-scale technological projects. In that regard, France’s ENA (*École Nationale d’Administration*), founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1945, has been paramount to produce generations of highly educated and devoted top civil servants (Placet, 2001, p. 50). Very much in a process of coercive persuasion (Schein, 1961; Chan, Clegg, & Warr, 2018), the ambitious students entering ENA remain under constant surveillance as they compete for ranking and for access to the inner circles that lead to the best placements in the government:

“Most people here are always nervous. Everybody is watching you all the time. You are under pressure from the first day to the last. They just want to rank us, not to teach us.” “This school makes you ambitious: you realize power is held by only a very few people, and so you feel obliged to try to get the highest rank, in order to get power, [and] to enter the ‘charmed circle’ that controls it.” (Zeldin, 2012, p. 161, quoting ENA students).

The links between *grandes écoles* alumni are reinforced by some circulation of top leaders across organizations and occasionally between private and public top positions. Such linkage often leads to both business and political opportunities. For instance, as a former director of a French large corporation told me, part of his company strategy in the 1980s was simply to “have breakfast with the minister.” Such close relation with powerful members of the government, he argued, served the *national interest* and, in return, had produced some business advantages to the company such as some influence on domestic development programs and even a more favorable position to negotiate with foreign actors.

These close-knit relations also support and are supported by a certain cultural homogeneity that began to be forged during the experience of the two (or three) hard-work years at the *classes*

préparatoires, when they were still at their *lycées*. As a living legacy of the old “republican meritocracy” (Krop, 2014), those who survive the long progression and make the cut are eventually elevated to become the top public officers, engineers, and managers who play the higher game of setting up the conditions to make French industry strong. The *grandes écoles* alumni hence share the experience of affiliation to an elite system (and therefore noble) that is often understood in opposition to the much more democratic (and therefore common) French university system (Crozier, 1964, p. 244). As it goes, as long as the *nobles* play their higher game with chivalry and fervor to protect the French national project, they are helping those playing the lower games of, for instance, improvising to get things done at an industrial plant in Sainte-Mathilde-la-Girotonde.

2: When meetings become the ceremonial dumping of truckloads of *faits accomplis*

Vignette #2: A working meeting at Avenoa

Dominique Gagnon is a new hire French-Canadian geologist at Avenoa, the French leading multinational corporation in oil prospection and deep-water drilling (previously known as *Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures et du Bitumine*, before being partially privatized and then rebranded to sound more modern). He joined it following a careful recruiting process when it became clear that Avenoa valued very much his English proficiency and his close familiarity with an international, more Anglo-Saxon managerial style. In his mid-thirties, Dominique counted already seven years of solid experience in geology labs and offshore rigs in Alberta and Nova Scotia. But he grew tired of working in remote locations. Enough of being in the middle of nowhere! He was indeed pleased to be based at the very elegant Avenoa headquarters, at *La Defense* business district, near Paris.

Following two weeks of training and introduction to some specific aspects of Avenoa’s businesses, he was glad to take part in his first working meeting. It would be a very high-level discussion of how to proceed with the offshore prospection of field X4J in Côte d’Ivoire. He diligently studied the material attached to the call for the meeting, which would be jointly conducted by the head of the X4J project and by the director for Côte d’Ivoire. Dominique wanted to be useful and, of course, to cause a very positive impression. He even wrote to the technical staff asking for some additional information on the underwater topography and geology of certain prospection areas but, so far, received no answer—no surprise that they needed his expertise there! He hence decided to do some research by himself and ended up putting extra hours after 6 pm, when virtually all colleagues were gone.

When the day arrived, Dominique was feeling well prepared and confident. But it didn’t go the way he expected... Getting to the meeting, he was surprised that it would take place in an amphitheater, already filled with perhaps a hundred people, most of whom Dominique had never seen before and were probably not part of the offshore prospection group. Four people were seated behind a table that faced the crowd: the Côte d’Ivoire director, the head of the Field-X4J project, and his technical and commercial supervisors. After receiving a praising introduction, Jean-François de Labave, the *Directeur pour la Côte d’Ivoire*, opened the meeting with an apparently impromptu speech that impressed Dominique by its eloquent mastery of French. Dominique found peculiar that he took a long time to describe an apparently little-known passage of Montesquieu’s life that—also very peculiar—apparently delighted the audience. As Mr. de Labave proceeded to kindly devote twenty minutes to colorfully illustrate and emphasize the historical friendship between France and Côte d’Ivoire, Dominique was amazed by the use of some subjective forms of French verbs that he had possibly read in books but was quite positive he never heard in Quebec (after all, the French verb morphology contains 19 tenses, even if a cultivated French person

would usually employ *only* 14 of them...). Some general strategic statements on the future of the country division closed Mr. de Labave's speech and, after a round of applause, the Head of the X4J project took the microphone. He stated that, once they were obviously all aware of the current situation of that important oilfield, he would simply pass the word to the supervisors, who immediately started to present the new plan by exposing, with firm precision, a sequence of PowerPoint slides detailing what should be done at the X4J, how it should be done, and who should be responsible for what.

Someone handed Dominique the six-page long attendance list that was zigzagging through the amphitheater. "An attendance list to a meeting?!" That was a first to him. He found his name on the second page and, as he was signing at the appropriate place, he glimpsed at the projected slide and got surprised again: it displayed some of the geological information he requested. If they were presenting it now, why didn't they send it to him a couple of days ago? The audience followed the slide presentation attentively, taking notes in a school-like manner and trying to contain their reactions when learning of managers being replaced and of budgets and timeframes being adjusted. No questions were asked, and Dominique even thought about raising his hand but, finally, he didn't. After a round of applause that punctuated the end of the session, the head of the project dismissed the meeting.

Dominique headed back to his office amidst colleagues who engaged in small talk and pleasantries. But he walked in silence, puzzled by what he thought would be his first working meeting at Avenioia. It was all very confusing... he kept walking and shaking his head slowly, as if, by so doing, the ideas could be rearranged to make some sense. He wasted long hours preparing for that. And just about two hours ago he was so confident that the Field-X4J working meeting would be a game-changer for him... "How was that possible?" he thought, "It makes no sense..." "*Ostie d'crisse de tabarnak!* and what about that freaking Montesquieu bullshit?!" "Oh boy, what a shame... what a shame..."

This vignette tells the tale of a newcomer's frustrated expectations. It unveils the apparent incoherence of a high-context culture where only meager information circulates, shows the mastering of language becoming a marker of hierarchic position, and it portraits a somewhat loose coupling between the symbolism of a grandiose discourse and the concrete execution of the project. Overall, the telling of Dominique's befuddlement also suggests that elements behind Avenioia's *modus operandi* and longevity escape the understanding of a foreign junior geologist.

Meetings in France are not always the place where work gets done or where decisions are made. Or, reading again from Clarke's jokes:

[A British man reflects on what his French boss has just called a very constructive working meeting:] "We can't agree, so we decide to pay a consultant who's going to be bribed into agreeing with the guy with the crappiest ideas. [It] didn't seem very constructive to me. But then it was my first ever French meeting. I had a lot to learn" (Clarke, 2005, pp. 28-29).

Indeed, Dominique ignored that the *Field-X4J meeting* would in fact be a ceremonial exposition of grandiose statements followed by the announcement of previously made decisions. A large audience was required—and even controlled through an attendance list—to fulfill a formal function but there was no work to be done at the meeting and, as it is often the case in France, no preparation was necessary (Chevrier, 2003, p. 148). Finally, Dominique's befuddlement prevented him from having a pleasant time and savoring Mr. de Labave's erudite eloquence.

The abrupt transition from a mode of ceremonial formality to concrete announcements of changes to positions, budgets, and timeframes offered no indication of how the decisions have been made. The attendance reaction could suggest however that speculation would flourish and circulate through the corridors, during the pauses for coffee and cigarettes, and behind closed doors. The lack of more complete information on the reasons for these decisions sounds particularly contradictory if we appreciate that France typifies a high-context culture (Hall, 1976) where the answer to a simple question can depend on knowing why it has been asked, who is involved, and what are the consequences of the possible answers. Navigating high-context cultures equipped with incomplete knowledge equals navigating blind through heavy fog, which can indeed cause disaster or induce paralysis.

This apparent contradiction lies in the fact that information in many French organizations stands for *symbolic capital* that can be converted into effective power (Bourdieu, 1984). Information is therefore exchanged very prudently, which results in asymmetrical, unevenly distributed, incomplete, and often unreliable information—no surprise that some emails by Dominique remained unanswered. More complete information is formally made available only to those who hold power (Flamant, 2002, p. 203), which tends to give origin to informal or semiformal traffic of information, in the fashion of black or grey markets. Interestingly, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, the power captured by those who control information often justifies the very existence of the hierarchy that legitimates their privileged access to the information. Amassing information means holding power and, in a management tradition that emphasizes control, it ultimately comes with the expectation of using this power to make decisions (Flamant, 2002, p. 197). Overall, such configuration helps to maintain an organizational order but, if brought to a pathological level, produces excessive lack of transparency, sub-optimal decision-making, and waste of time and energy to negotiate access and verify information.

Interestingly, as told in the vignette, a flash flood of new information delivered in a meeting (or broadcasted by other means) carries a perverse irony. Always thirsty for information, the attendants are suddenly delighted but their satisfaction in joining the circle of the well-informed is an ephemeral illusion: once the information is made available to an amphitheatre full of co-workers, it instantly becomes public and hence loses all its value. It is the reverse of a Midas touch: once those attending the meeting touch it, the information is not gold anymore.

The exposition partitioned into two parts also suggests a loose coupling between the symbolic and the concrete (Weick, 1976), where the legitimacy to establish abstract perspectives is reserved to a

few leading members whereas the dealing with the concrete aspects of the company existence is held by everybody else. The exegesis of symbolic meanings belongs to Mr. de Labave, which concurs with the notion that leaders in France should express ambitious visions in masterful language but refrain from stating precise goals that could be perceived as distrusting and interfering with the coded honor of the many groups (d'Iribarne, 1989, p. 44). Deliberately imprecise instructions help to preserve the implicit coordination of tasks (d'Iribarne, 1989, p. 97) and tend to signalize trust and respect for the subordinates' scope of action (Chevrier & Viegas-Pires, 2013, p. 432).

Mr. de Labave's language also bemuses Dominique who may perceive it as a mere display of snobbism and is unaware that in France "the ability to speak with eloquence in front of a respectable audience" (Altman & Bournois, 2004) contributes to reaffirming hierarchy arrangements. Overall, Dominique finds himself amidst a high-context, very implicit, and homogeneous cultural setting that he is unable to decode. His difficulty may be amplified by a misleading assumption of cultural similarity between French and French-Canadians (Dupuis, 2005) and by his lack of familiarity with the role of leaders in France. Offering an insider perspective, Jean-Luc Placet (2001)—a *grande école* alumnus, head of a Parisian consulting firm, and instructor at HEC and ENA—argues that the expectations on a French *chef d'entreprise* [i.e., a business director, business owner, or company manager] are extremely difficult to be fulfilled. He enunciates:

"The *chef d'entreprise* is not just a manager anymore; he is a financial expert, a marketing-person, the responsible for human resources, and someone in charge of the commercial front. He should be all of this at once and also: strategist, visionary, orator, French and international, active and reflexive, pragmatic and imaginative, prudent and reckless, diplomat and impetuous, warm and reserved, always in good health, knowing how to communicate but only as much as needed. Add to this bouquet some family talents, altruistic or artistic, and he will be celebrated by media and public opinion" (Placet, 2001, p. 76, my translation, use of masculine gender in original).

Some pages ahead he proceeds to describe eight distinctive attributes of a French mode of management, namely: the French language; the French spirit; the familiarity with French literary oeuvres; the French philosophic heritage; the passionate interest towards history; the richness of the miscegenation; the taste for the good and for the beautiful; and the *savoir-vivre*.⁵ From such perspective, Mr. de Labave's reference to Montesquieu is not misplaced; the very contrary, it reinforces his legitimacy as French leader by demonstrating his masterly familiarity with French language, literature, philosophy, history, *etc.* Knowledge in these domains, which are part of

⁵ In the original: "*la langue française; l'esprit français; la familiarité avec les œuvres littéraires; l'héritage des philosophes; l'intérêt passionné pour l'histoire; la richesse des métissages; le goût du beau, le goût du bon; and le savoir-vivre*" (Placet, 2001: 77-78).

France's schooling curriculum, are strengthened during the years of *classes préparatoires* and tested on the *grands concours*. What Dominique sees as pointless dilettantism is hence a necessary demonstration of erudition. And the audience welcomes it because they are people who grew familiar with intellectual debates on newspapers, radio, and TV, and who came to accept and appreciate erudition as a marker of human enlightenment and social position.

A first take on French organizational hierarchy could characterize it as typical of a *society of ascription*. In its most classic sense, *societies of ascription* are hereditary caste systems where social positions are fixed, status is unequally distributed, and seeking consensus makes little sense. These are opposed to *societies of achievement*, where positions are ideally redefined through individual ability and effort only. The case of France as an ascription society requires however some nuance. Mr. de Labave's speech, for instance, signalize that he is a *cultivated* person, meaning that his position actually results from of a long trajectory of dedication to *cultivate oneself* and to prove it through exams, selections, and debates. This suggests that France is a society of ascription mostly in the sense that trajectories tend to be life-long and that re-starting is rarely an option. Equality of opportunities and initial conditions are certainly imperfect but, still, positions are typically constructed over time. A corporate leader therefore proves his or her legitimacy by showing his or her retrospective trajectory, and not only by proving that he or she can get more (or better) things done than others.

The meeting also fulfills a function of behavioral control where participants are observed—and even judged—in relation to their positions in the organization micro-sociology. Dominique realized that solutions would not be debated there and kept his mouth shut. But had he voiced a divergent perspective, even if with genuinely constructive intention, it could be mistaken for questioning authority. As the circulation of information is restricted and hidden agendas can potentially clash against each other, an unassuming expression of ideas can be feared as a move in favor of an obscure interest. This is particularly true in a system where the processes of acquisition and maintenance of one's status are largely implicit (Flamant, 2002, p. 189) and where the hierarchical structure becomes a frame of a permanent struggle to build professional and social accessions (Flamant, 2002, p. 206).

Finally, there should be other factors explaining how Avenioia endures even if its working practices may seem less efficient than that of its international competitors. I list three here. First, a possible lack of efficiency is counterbalanced by a robust cultural homogeneity built upon a history of a well-defined territory, language, literature, and model of civilization that allows workers and managers to synchronize action and to read the subtly communication clues that are invisible to Dominique.

Second, the asymmetric information preserves the concentration of power that has allowed a *capitalism of organization* (Rosanvallon, 2011) to flourish in France. And, third, a certain postcolonial legacy—as could be the case of a contract in Côte d’Ivoire—remains and occasionally gives some competitive edge to French companies in the Francophone world of its former colonies.

The apparent nonsense of meetings becoming the ceremonial dumping of *faits accomplis* is therefore nested into cultural, institutional, and even geopolitical traditions. And these traits intertwine to form a functioning system that is more coherent than Dominique could suppose.

3: When absurdity is naturalized as normal organizational practice

Vignette #3: Bottom-up innovation at Platry-Cochon

Pierre Labalele was the energetic floor supervisor of the sausage lines at one of the plants of Platry-Cochon, a traditional French meat processing company. He was receiving the plant General Director, François Duboeuf, and his entourage of top managers on their customary Tuesday morning tour of the plant. Pierre was eager to tell them about a possible improvement to the production of turkey sausage to export to Middle-East markets. And so he did: —“I believe we can optimize the level of water saturation of the batches of turkey meat. At the current setup, which has been modeled after our pork lines, the meat comes pre-saturated with 32% of water, which obliges us to extract a lot of it using negative pressure during the last precooking phase. It is a matter of setup. If we tune down the initial saturation, we can save energy, production time, and money.”

All eyes turned to Alain Piveteau, Head of R&D, who ultimately responded for the technical setup of the lines. Trying to conceal his annoyance at having the work of his office challenged in front of the direction, he replied: —“Mr. Labalele, we have, of course, looked at this matter very carefully. It is too complex to explain but I assure you that this line is running at the optimal hydro-saturation level. What you are not taking into account is that this process has to comply with EU H5-77 phytosanitary regulations and also with Halal requirements. It adds parameters and contour conditions that make the overall process... let’s say... A little more complex than you seem to be able to appreciate.”

That was definitely not the reaction Pierre expected... how couldn’t they recognize such an obvious improvement to the process? He remained unconvinced. As far as he knew, Halal and EU requirements had nothing to do with water content: —“Mr. Piveteau, I know the line is H5-77 and Halal, but still, the current level of...” he got interrupted by Frédéric Legros, the Commercial Director: —“Well... it looks like we need to apply the ‘principle of 5 Cs’ to this case.” Pierre, relieved that those at the commercial department were sensible to a suggestion that would reduce costs, asked: —“Yes, but what exactly is that?” to which Mr. Legros quipped: —“*La règle des 5 C: c’est con mais c’est comme ça*” [The principle of 5 Cs: that’s stupid but that is the way it is]. They all burst out laughing. As they said Pierre goodbye and followed Mr. Duboeuf to the next line, some were still repeating “*la règle des 5 C!*, that’s a good one!”

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Returning to his office the plant director made a mental note: “That was well played! I need to congratulate Fréd.” They both knew that the weight of added water allowed them a faster reclaiming of the tax subsidy granted by the *département* (one of the 101 administrative divisions of the 27 *régions* of France). They got that subsidy when negotiating a way out of the 47-day strike of 2011. The union ended

by avoiding the suppression of 71 permanent positions and the *département* managed to sell it to the public as a tax incentive to exports, capped at €43.2million, at the rate of €78.45 per ton of meat processed by the export lines. Too bad, thought François Duboeuf, that the government had changed and that the position of Platry-Cochon at their *Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie* was not as strong as some years ago... these happier times were gone. At any rate, it was already very difficult to present some positive quarterly figures to the board. The last thing he needed now was an overexcited sausage-line supervisor calling attention to the water in the turkey.

This vignette depicts an organizational configuration that hinders employee engagement and, in the long run, is likely to seed disempowerment and discourage innovation. It portrays, again, communication issues between direction and execution and it also illustrates how interwoven layers of regulations can contribute to preventing change. Overall—for better or for worse—Pierre Labalele’s failure to trigger a change also tells a tale of the preservation of status quo and of organizational stability.

A possible point of entry to decode this vignette is a closer look at how hierarchical structures tend to resist change and, by accumulating unsolved issues, can give origin to situations that make no sense. As a curious—even if now outdated—illustration, George Orwell describes the “elaborate caste system” in the Parisian hotel where he worked in the early decades of the last century. Strict codes separated, from top to bottom: the manager, the *maître d’hôtel*, the head waiter, the head cook, the *chef du personnel*, the cooks, the waiters, the laundresses and sewing women, the apprentice waiters, and the *plongeurs* (i.e., dishwasher or kitchen porter). That rigid hierarchy of occupations became a fertile space for the naturalization of absurdity, as, for instance, the principle that a *plongeur* could not wear a moustache:

“On my third day at the hotel the *chef du personnel*, who had generally spoken to me in quite a pleasant tone, called me up and said sharply: ‘Here, you, shave that moustache off at once! *Nom de Dieu*, who ever heard of a *plongeur* with a moustache?’

I began to protest, but he cut me short. ‘A *plongeur* with a moustache—nonsense! Take care I don’t see you with it tomorrow’” (Orwell, 1933, p. 69).

Arbitrary dispositions can therefore become crystallized as instances of as organizational nonsense. The *principle of 5 Cs* joke in the vignette is informative for at least two reasons. First, there is the irony of using humor to tell a deep truth and, yet, cut a conversation short. The phrase “*c’est con mais c’est comme ça*,” which is indeed quite laughable, has also some equivalent formulations that are commonplace in France to convey the sense of being obliged to live amongst what makes little sense—e.g., “*on n’y est pour rien, c’est comme ça*” [there is nothing we can do, that’s the way it is]. Indeed, even the language employed to talk to children tends to suggest the existence of established rules or norms to regulate one’s behaviour: for instance, instead of telling “*tu ne peux pas*” [you can’t], parents and schoolteachers often say “*tu n’as pas le droit*” [you don’t have the right]. Second,

by using a punch line to kill the conversation and allow the cortege to regain its tour, Mr. Legros taps into a cultural disposition that exists in the French society at large: he demonstrated *avoir de l'esprit* [lit.: to have spirit], in the sense of producing a “clever, erudite and often caustic wit” (Druckerman, 2015). He put the *overexcited sausage-line supervisor* back in his place by using the same micro-sociological mechanism that allows, for instance, a French child to save face by ridiculing another child in the schoolyard, or that allows a well-dressed debater on French TV to flash a satisfying smile after delivering an argument that he or she considers as a proof of superior intelligence (Druckerman, 2015). As reported by classic French sociology monographs, the importance of saving face partially explains the prevalence of apathy among young people who avoid the risks of responsibilities (Bernot & Blancard, 1953). The fear of being embarrassed in public can hence hinder individual initiatives can drastically reduce creativity and innovation in organizations. As an example, an American executive expatriated once told me of when he first met his French assistant. Freshly arrived in France, he set a first meeting to introduce himself and ask what they could do to make her work better and more effective. But he got no answer. Instead, after an awkward period of perplexed silence, she just said that she would need to think more before answering. The impression he got, as he told me, was of a bird that lived its entire life in a cage and once the door was open had no idea of what to do or was just too afraid to step outside.

The Platry-Cochon vignette also shows Pierre’s failure to observe the codified rules of expressions of formal respect among different hierarchical levels. Crozier (1964) cornerstone study already showed that the coldness separating the levels within French organizations are often deliberate. Managers in large organizations often hold limited power to coerce workers to go beyond formally established duties and levels of performance because the labor law assures a virtually complete protection to those who abide by the rules. They have therefore developed tactics to trade informal recognition against some additional leeway to deal with their subordinates:

“Retreat and distance can be a way of governing. Giving or refusing consideration, calculated coldness, will keep workers on the soliciting side and will oblige the workers to recognize the director’s preserve” (Crozier, 1964, p. 88).

From the perspective of those at lower positions, to seek recognition from superiors remains nevertheless particularly complicated because it should not resemble an expression of dependence or, even worst, of servility, which represents a severe form of humiliation in France (Crozier, 1964, p. 306; d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 108; Chevrier & Viegas-Pires, 2013, p. 432). In some instances, the very idea of collaborating with those at leadership levels is perceived as suspicious. Actually, the very word *collaborateur* carries two very distinct connotations in French: of someone who collaborates to

certain activities or causes; and of a traitor who collaborates with the enemy—as notably the case of those who supported the Nazi regime during the German occupation.

The vignette also shows the directors attempting to deflect attention and conceal the more convoluted purpose served by the *water in the turkey*. The head of R&D made the first attempt to kill the conversation by invoking a supposedly complicated entanglement of regulations. The tendency to save face or to avoid risk by saying that something cannot be done is indeed frequent in France (Druckerman, 2015) and, as it goes, members of organizations frequently refer to pieces of overlapping laws, bylaws, rules, and regulations to claim that something cannot be done. Some of the usual suspects are “because of insurance,” “safety norms,” “ministerial regulations,” and “EU norms” (the last being particularly handy because sounding distant and yet powerful). Interestingly, it is usually safe to claim that something is forbidden even when ignoring the existence of the actual rule. As the president of a class association in France confessed to me: people rarely verify it, in particular if it may signalize questioning authority, and, if they do, chances are such rule can be found somewhere. Unsurprisingly, the coexistence of many regulations and of players who have become skillful to act in such contexts often generate additional organizational nonsense.

Moreover, confusing regulations become mechanisms of control because some individuals hold discretionary power to choose and enforce just a few rules. Such power is amplified by the possible severe sanctions equipping many rules, by the power some individual may hold to rewrite (or creatively reinterpret) parts of the systems of rules, and by the possibility of keeping a flow of official documentation partially detached from reality to create a façade of compliance (Crozier, 1964, p. 88; d’Iribarne, 2005, p. 159). Overall, inspired by Kurt Lewin’s metaphor of peaches and coconuts, I argue that the complex accumulation of regulations in France creates a sort of coconut-bureaucracy: to those who are outside it is a hard, bulletproof shell that tells that the law is rigid and universal; but the inner side is filled with a cozy and soft particularism that allows the powerful ones to casuistically decide which rules should be applied and how. Interestingly, in his critique of the *Ancien Régime* that preceded the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville (1866, p. 99) already denounced that the monarchy ruled with “*une règle rigide, une pratique molle*” [a rigid rule, a lax practice] where those who did not abide by the strict rules would often see themselves pleading for the favour of avoiding sanctions.

On top of communication issues and asymmetric information that jeopardize potential improvements, this last vignette fictionalizes on a certain subsidy deal negotiated with the regional government to resolve a labor contention. Labor relations and the practice of strikes and protests in

France are indeed peculiar (Morel, 1991). Differently from most countries, a tradition of vigorous protests by workers in France preceded the establishment of workers unions. I argue that public demonstrations in France find support in a seminal tradition—notably tied to the French Revolution mythology—that grants a notably broad cultural license to protests, even when the public considers these as exaggerated or unreasonable. During the *Trente Glorieuses*, this cultural disposition has consolidated a mode of negotiation called *régulation conflictuelle* [regulation through conflict] where upfront demonstrations of power, typically strikes, precede any meaningful negotiation (Morel, 1991; Sirot, 2011, p. 108-110). Protests and strikes in France have also become ritualized reactions by workers to protect acquired rights and against the ultimate humiliation of servitude (Chevrier & Viegas-Pires, 2013, p. 432).

Overall, the struggle about the *water-in-the-turkey* issue also illustrates how decision-making in France typically happens within a peculiar entanglement of formal and informal systems. Normal decision-making—often more idealized than real—would happen as information systematically flows to the top, becoming consolidated at each level, and as decisions flow down, being dismembered into arrays of lesser decisions at each level. It is also expected that, in cases of disagreement at a certain level, a higher member in the hierarchy is requested to use his or her authority to rule on conflictive matters (Chevrier, 2003, p. 148), or to *descendre pour intervenir* [come down to intervene] (d’Iribarne, 1989), acting as the “final arbitrator for keeping peace and order” in an organization (Crozier, 1964, p. 142). Often however action happens beyond the scope of formality and ultimately depends on individuals’ skills to navigate the grey areas created by asymmetrical distributions of information, by mazes of regulations, and by complex arrangements with instances of government and labor representation. I even argue that, despite the discourse of idealized formality and order, French managers not only master the navigation of grey areas but also tacitly contribute to create and maintain them as spaces of action.

Contributions

I begin by presenting and discussing the cultural interpretation that has emerged from the examination of organizational nonsense in French corporate cultures; and I conclude by reassessing the limitations and the more general, or generalizable, contributions of this paper.

Learning from the French: *savoir vivre* and the gentle cordiality of ascription

“Instead of the direct attainment of measurable production or financial goals, [...] the director’s primary objective is to maintain peace and order to keep a workable equilibrium between individuals and groups [...]” (Crozier, 1964, p. 86).

Stepping beyond the learning *about* French corporate cultures to start to learn *from* them, the organizational attributes reviewed in this paper almost unescapably referred to explanations supported by histories of cultural, sociological, and institutional factors that pertained to the French society at large and that also infiltrated its corporations. Metaphorically, a very central and pervasive explanation referred to the separation, but harmonious cohabitation, of nobles and commoners. As discussed, ancient categories of pure and impure (Goblot, 1925, pp. 126-127) have been renewed through specific sociological structures brought about by the new modes of cleavage (e.g., separate educational tracks, class postures, and uses of language) produced by the *méritocratie républicaine* (Krop, 2014). The current equivalent of the nobles within French corporations are the *cadres* issued from elite higher education institutions (Lazuech, 1999). The different professional groups of *non-cadres* stand therefore for the commons who nevertheless try to mitigate their inferior status by making their *métiers* honorable (d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 72). Interestingly, this process eventually secures working conditions, enlightenment aspirations, and an overall quality of life that are usually superior to that enjoyed by their counterparts in other countries.

Crozier (1964, p. 224) identified long ago that organizational systems in France allowed unusually large contingents of workers to enjoy some *bon plaisir*, in the sense of being free to live a good life. This trend, amplified by the *Trente Glorieuses* post-war recovery, gave workers in France the tranquility of a *de facto* job-stability backed by a welfare state. Nevertheless, although labor classes in France may afford an above-average affluent consumption, I posit that what distinguishes them the most is the importance given to entertain non-work activities of diverse nature, including cultural, intellectual, sportive, gastronomic, communitarian, and self-enlightening ones. To make these possibilities accessible to those who hold no university degree has been part of the ideal of the French primary and secondary school:

“When done efficiently, [the ideal of a proper French education] turned out highly polished men of the world, who did not need a university education, unless it was for vocational purposes, for they could write and talk with fluency and eloquence” (Zeldin, 2012, p. 173).

Therefore, the vigorous display of a distinguishably French quality of life happens mostly among friends and within families, communities, and associations. By cultivating these activities, workers in France also avoid internalizing a perception of inferiority (Crozier, 1964, p. 306) and, instead, edify a

quasi-autonomous existence dictated by their own usages and codes of honour. The very clear separation between life within and outside the workplace results in a mostly healthy work-life balance that is reinforced by generous rights to holidays, leaves, and other forms of disconnection. Such configuration also allows a peculiar sociological cohabitation within French corporations, where the previously discussed partial ascription leads to the maintenance of a sense of cordiality—and even an *art de vivre* (Barmeyer, 2007, pp. 138-139)—that is very much praised, if not fiercely protected, in France.

Such social peace can however be destabilized by a clumsy or deliberate action that breaches the unwritten—but deeply internalized—conventions of the proper roles of each group or class. These disturbances can abruptly expose tensions and trigger strong reactions. As an example, I summarize here an episode involving the former president Nicolas Sarkozy:

Touring the 2008 agricultural fair of Paris, Sarkozy was walking across a crowd and, as politicians so often do, gently greeting people by distributing polite *bonjours*, *mercis*, and *comment-allez-vous?* Amidst many rapid exchanges, he approaches a man who unexpectedly refuses to shake hands with him. Visibly annoyed, Sarkozy says “*eh ben, casse-toi alors, pauvre con!*” [so, get lost, poor idiot!], and carries on. The scene has been caught on camera and was soon on TV and internet...

This brief episode took no more than four seconds but provoked vast controversy and, feeding the French appetite for debate, became the matter for pieces on TV, radio, newspapers, academic research, and books. In cultural anthropology terms, Sarkozy’s response can be perceived as *matter out of place*, for it symbolizes the uncleanness or dirt that endangers the maintenance of a pattern (Douglas, 1966, p. 41; d’Iribarne, 1989, p. 66). In the parlance of organizational analysis, it can also characterize a cosmology episode “when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (Weick, 1993, p. 633). Indeed, most of the outcry and debate generated by that encounter can be metaphorically framed as the rupture of order created by a noble who unexpectedly employs the inferior language and attitude reserved to a commoner. Moreover, when refusing to shake hands with the president, Sarkozy’s interlocutor⁶ could be overheard saying: “*Touche-moi pas! Tu me salis*” [Don’t touch me! You dirt me], which reinforces the reversal of roles, for a noble should not be dirtier than a commoner. A historical analysis of discourses by French leaders corroborates such perspective: the presidential discourses by De Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard, and Mitterrand employed literary language, whereas Sarkozy has emulated popular

⁶ His exact identity remains unclear: it has been assumed he was a farmer but also told that he was a musician. A fictional character has been even created to fulfill this void: Fernand Buron, who concedes interviews, keeps a Facebook page, and has even published a book (Buron, 2011) elucidating unknown elements of context and consequences of the four-second episode.

discourses and promoted a “vulgarization of French politicians’ language” (Mayaffre, 2012). The departure from well-established symbolisms of erudition can indeed be a potential threat to the harmony of both a larger system in French society and smaller ones within its organizations. By not behaving as a noble, the noble disrespects the commons.

Different groups within French corporations hence mirror and reaffirm a system that has traditionally allowed a minimally harmonious coexistence. Therefore, instead of confronting the direction of Petit-LeGrand, Géraldine and her fellow workers craft *système-D* solutions that keep the lines running and reinforce their autonomy and honour code. The complicated language and divagation towards apparently irrelevant topics that puzzled the French-Canadian Dominique were, in fact, needed reinforcements of Mr. de Labave’s legitimacy to develop large-scale businesses abroad, an activity belonging to the sphere of geopolitics and symbolic discourse, not to the realm of geology and offshore technology. And Mr. Legros cuts short the *water-in-turkey-meat* exchange because he is devoted to navigating the company through a foggy business environment and to keep with the tradition of not disturbing the life of *non-cadres* with preoccupations belonging to *cadres*.

Under such light, part of the depicted organizational nonsense begins to make sense. The proposed interpretation depicts the typical French corporate cultures as systems of mostly ascribed positions where there is a permanent negotiation for a cordiality that allows different codes of honor to coexist. Overall, these systems should be capable of producing the conditions for a markedly superior *savoir vivre* to all groups. The fundamental lesson to be learnt from the apparent nonsense of French corporate cultures is therefore a simple and crucial one: how to live good lives.

Limitations, contributions, and some last comments

This study aimed to shed some new light on how and why organizational nonsense exists and endures. It intended to develop a better understanding of possible origins, functions, and consequences of traits of organizational cultures perceived as nonsensical. Its potential contributions are nevertheless limited by the methodological and theoretical choices. I call attention here to three limitations that refer specifically to: developing a case study, using fiction, and adopting a functionalist perspective of culture.

First, by addressing the case of French corporate cultures, this paper builds upon an emic perspective and hence produces non-generalizable results. This also derives from the assumption that, although organizational nonsense may exist everywhere, these cannot be understood in isolation but as the

result of local histories intertwining factors of diverse nature. Nevertheless, even if the proposed interpretation remains specific, the adopted methodological and theoretical stances can be employed to investigate other cases as well as disclose mechanisms that can help understand other contexts. For instance, as noted before (e.g., Dogan, 1979) and corroborated by recent studies (Chan, Clegg, & Warr, 2018), the control of the ideology of elite educational institutions has long-lasting consequences to socioeconomic systems and, in that regard, the relation between elite education and government in France holds an interesting parallel to the history of Chinese mandarin systems. Or, as another example, the French *dirigisme* produces a configuration that resembles that of a large Japanese *keiretsu* (Berggren & Nomura, 1997) because, even if attained by different means, both systems result in synchronization among powerful industrial, financial, and governmental players. Along the same lines, arguments about social rigidity and asymmetrical perception opportunities in France could arguably also be made about India, where systems of castes are literally and very deeply ingrained in the society. Resembling the *noble-commoner* discussion in France, the Indian society carries the legacy of ancient categories of pure and impure that, although organized differently and with greater complexity, also produce class systems that are reproduced in their institutions and organizations. Or, as a last example, does the French *système-D* hold parallels to the Brazilian *jeitinho* or the Indian *jugaad*? And, if it does, are the sociological conditions that gave origin to them similar? These are questions that remain to be answered by cross-cultural examinations. Limited by its single-case design, this investigation brings to light elements that are specific to France, without however claiming that these are exclusive to that country. As far as this study could go, it can only be said is that distinct histories of cultural, sociological, and institutional factors produce organizations that are typical of one culture but nevertheless can comprise traits that are similar those found in other cultures—even in apparently very distant ones—and can occasionally result in configurations that are analogous to those of other cultures.

Second, as already mentioned, the use of elements of fiction (and humor) to structure a conceptual discussion can be perceived as non-scientific. This derives from a choice of a non-traditional research method where views of reality have been converted into impressionist snapshots aiming at condensing a relatively broad collection of organizational nonsense. It should be noted however that the contribution of this paper does not reside in the production of the vignettes, but in the composition of a relatively coherent interpretation supported by specific literatures that address French society and organizations. In the last instance, the role played by the vignettes assumes some pedagogical colours: they offer the reader elements that are perhaps difficult to decode and usually denounced as mere nonsense; but a more careful examination of a particular history of cultural,

sociological, and institutional factors eventually helps him or her to understand how, and even why, certain instances of organizational nonsense came to be.

Third, by developing a cultural interpretation built upon a cultural functionalist epistemology, the study implicitly assumes that cultural dispositions have functions that can be potentially disclosed. As a risk intrinsic to interpretation, the search for hidden functions can lead to overinterpretation. Sometimes a cigar may be just a cigar and, as Geertz (1973, pp. 17-18) noted: “coherence cannot be [a] test of validity for a cultural interpretation.” In line with the tradition of cultural interpretation, this study aimed at proposing explanations that do not claim to be definitive or exhaustive. Instead, it should ideally invite future research on organizational nonsense to extend or challenge this study also by possibly verifying the empirical accuracy or significance of the proposed explanations.

Having commented on some limitations, I proceed to present and discuss three contributions made by this investigation of organizational nonsense. The first pertains to opening new paths of investigation in cultural research in management; the second refers to the identification and better understanding of the actual vulnerabilities of organization cultures; and the third addresses the fundamental question of how to disentangle what is stable from what changes in a culture.

First, concurring with theories of cultures as accumulation of histories (Sahlins, 1985; Denning, 1992), this study has shown that cultural interpretations can point to precise institutional, historical, and sociological dispositions that over time become naturalized as cultures (Bourdieu, 1994). This investigation treated cultures as inherently complex because intertwining elements of different origin (as in the Latin etymology of *complexus*: *com-* “within, inter” + *plectere* “to weave, braid, twine”), which corroborates the principle that cultural studies in management should—or at least could—deal with meanings and significances (Hatch, 2012). Therefore, even if the descriptions of typical national corporations end up communicated as repertoires of *organizational paradigms* (Guillén, 1994) suggesting self-sufficient units of analysis, this very literature is built upon the necessary observation of how these cultures are nested into their contexts, revealing the explanatory role of a myriad of effects built through histories that are national, but also international and global (Westney, 1987; d’Iribarne, 1989; Guillén, 2001; Djelic, 1998; Moore, 2005).

More specifically, this study has illustrated how the interaction of diverse effects happens through historical processes that can produce instances of organizational nonsense that nevertheless—and even if surfacing as absurd or laughable—keep a hidden coherence with the overall system that has generated them. The mechanisms that produce organizational nonsense have been depicted here as

intrinsically path-dependent and largely idiosyncratic, but additional research on other contexts can perhaps disclose some common underlying dynamics. Moreover, also pointing to a future research agenda, this study contributes to cultural research in management by establishing a precedent of employing an interdisciplinary hermeneutic built upon fictional representations to study organizational cultures. By so doing, it also engages in the on-going conversation of using fiction, stories, and humor in support of management research (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Vickers, 2010, 2015; Manz, 2014; Gabriel, 2017).

Second, as an effort to understand organizations, this paper has indicated that the investigation of organizational nonsense can reveal vulnerabilities of specific cultural configurations. Indeed, the proposed interpretation unveils some hidden cultural coherence but also discloses aspects of French corporate cultures that can be problematic because unfit to a changing environment. It may be argued, for instance, that some of its main pillars (*dirigisme*, postcolonial linkages, a strict but rigid education system...) do not produce the same comparative advantage they once did, which supports the call for a substantial reform of the socio-industrial project established in the *Trente Glorieuses* (Kuisel, 1984; Lazuech, 1999). A current proposition is that France should transition from a *capitalism of organization* towards a *capitalism of innovation* (Rosanvallon, 2011). French capitalism has been strongly consolidated through the large-scale orchestration promoted by the public sector (Placet, 2001, p. 49) that permeated the *dirigisme* and that, as discussed, has much older roots. Times have however changed and value is increasingly created through flexibility and innovation instead of regulations and uniformity. In more concrete terms, some of the identified dispositions of French corporate cultures, such as the concentration of information and power, the partially ascribed hierarchical positions, and the existence of parallel systems for compliance only, can become incompatible with a more contemporary or competitive model of management in France.

The examination of organizational nonsense helps therefore to locate some crucial vulnerabilities of specific configurations. As a cautionary note however, this study has also indicated that the transition towards new cultural configurations should take into account that cultures are inherently complex and contain partially hidden coherencies, which can make it impossible or very risky to try to change just one aspect. For instance, Western executives expatriated to France often consider that too much effort is put in control mechanisms to gather information and eventually sanction those singled out as non-compliant. An outsider reformer could therefore decide to untighten the control apparatus to allow novel initiatives to flourish. However, when many groups are engaged in tugs of war between control and resistance, the sudden reduction of control may create just a temporary void of power to

be almost instantaneously filled by one of the groups. An intended change is therefore likely to backfire if not accompanied by a more systemic effort to change other aspects of the culture.

Finally, the study also contributes to advance the debate around a fundamental question to cultural studies: how to set apart what changes from what remains stable in a culture. It does so because what occasionally surfaced as instances of organizational nonsense were in fact manifestations of fundamental aspects of a culture. Therefore, the proposition put forth by this study—even if mostly implicitly—is that there are deep cultural dispositions that remain remarkably stable, whereas the more visible aspects of artifacts, behaviors, and expressed values can more easily change over time. To the case of corporate cultures, it means that some foundational aspects of a national system are very stable and—corroborating the argument by Guillén (2001, p. 182) to the cases of Korea, Argentina, and Spain—that “organizational dynamics of development paths acquire a momentum of their own,” mostly driven by a larger historical trend.

The adoption of a more historical perspective can therefore help to distinguish aspects of the past that remain as mere archaisms from those that continue to be a fundamental part of a culture. To the French case, in particular, I argue that changes will happen but the fundamental distinction between the *two égalités* should remain mostly preserved. What is noble and what is common will be redefined, as it has been since the end of the monarchic rule. New nobles and commoners will emerge while some old ones will leave the scene. But the very idea of an existence defined by an opposition between them should remain essential to conduct business in France.

This study also indicates that the stability of certain aspects of a culture rests on factors that can be sociological or cultural. As an example of a sociological factor playing a conservative role, we have seen that the partial-ascription mechanisms built upon the *méritocratie républicaine* are perceived differently by those belonging to the *France d'en bas* and to the *France d'en haut*: those who remain below perceive these mechanisms as insurmountable barriers, but those who are on top perceive them as meritocratic, fair, and even democratic. This asymmetry of perception helps to explain how the apparently contradictory combination of proclaimed equality and stratification remains a very stable trait of French societies and organizations. As an example of a more generalizable cultural factor, this study offers support to the argument that some deeply engrained cultural features tend to remain stable because protected by a strong cultural myth. It may be argued, for instance, that the reality of low social mobility and increasing socioeconomic inequality in the US remains largely unchanged because opposed to the foundational myth of the self-made man (as in *the American dream, the land of opportunity, making America...*), which is virtually inextricable from the very

cultural identity of being American. Along similar lines, to add a second example, the myth of non-racism in Brazil and the celebration of a national identity defined by miscegenation and syncretism makes it difficult to confront the actual racism that exists there. Therefore, pertaining to France, the cultural mythology of *égalité*, which is central to its national identity, conceals the actual two-tier configurations of societies and organizations, making it difficult to acknowledge and effectively change it.

External form and visible aspects will therefore change faster than the very substance of a culture. Just to conclude with one last example, when the French business community recently turned its attention to entrepreneurship as a source of economic vigor, it had to re-appropriate the French word *entrepreneur* from its international usage. This has been problematic because, as understood in other languages, the word carries the possibly less noble symbolism of a try-and-error inventor and elevator-pitch seller. In result, the entrepreneur in France eventually became the *créateur d'entreprise*, literally the creator of companies, which embodies a more distinct symbolism than that of those who sweat in workshops to build things before going knocking from door to door to sell them. Their current effort to build a *capitalisme d'innovation* cannot therefore be dissociated from the ancestral noble-commoner dichotomy. Adding to the same example, French government and business community celebrated in 2017 the inauguration of the largest business incubator in the world: the *Station F* in Paris, designed to house more than one thousand start-ups. Not without irony, this grandiose initiative carries the familiar features of the good and old *dirigisme* and those running it are, to a very large extent, the ones who have walked the paths opened by the republican meritocracy, who entered the upper tier education systems of *grandes écoles*, and who are now legitimated to play the higher game.

Where is the real change then? Well... as we also learned from the French, independent of things making sense or not, we can always quote one of their old writers or philosophers:

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose
[the more things change, the more they stay the same]
(Jean-Baptiste Karr, in *Les Guêpes*, 1849).

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