Seminar Cultural Organization and cultural entrepreneurship
Essay 4: What is Creativity in the organization?

In the last seminar, we tried to understand 'creativity as a distinctive force in society and in organizations'. We have highlighted the creative process in its recognition of a context, its attitude towards problems (and its value as a problem-solving process) and its peculiar metaphoric character (making new combinations). But, with these elements, we have not been able to get a satisfactory understanding of creativity…

If we claim that creativity is active each time one makes new combinations of ideas, then creativity is present almost everywhere. Then, what becomes difficult is to identify non-creative behaviour: moments of completely routinized action and thinking following pre-established rules entirely and never spreading out of a specific domain of application.

On the contrary, I claimed that *creation* is a rare phenomenon that has to be separated from *innovation*. The issue is very tricky here because there are two sets of definitions of creation/innovation that are relevant here:

- One can see *innovation* as an improvement of something, in what some organization scientists would call a process of single-loop learning. The new combinations made here are not farfetched; they are the product of a logical and rational thinking. *Creation* involves a more radical lateral thinking, making very farfetched combinations that come out of a thinking process beyond rationality, breaking through conceptual spaces[1]. Organizations hosting creation do so because they engage in processes of double-loop learning (learning how to learn _I'll come back to the learning organization later in this essay_)

- Another way to look at creation vs. innovation is to say that *innovation* is the conversion of ideas into a shared product that allows the exploitation of the ideas for the sake of the organization (commercial revenue streams in the case of for-profit organizations). Idea *creation* is simply the starting point. Debra M. Amidon[2] uses the notions of an Idea Quotient (the percentage of employees with good ideas) and Innovation Quotient (the percentage of those people whose ideas finally make it into practice), within an organization.

What is common in both definitions is that creation is separated from its recognition in a social context. Arjo Klamer claimed during the seminar that *if it's not recognized, it cannot be claimed as a creative act*. Indeed, an unrecognized creation goes unnoticed and cannot be spread out (becoming an *innovation* in the second sense). But such a claim is a tautology (what is not socially identified does not socially exist) and doesn't help in defining what the *creation* is. It merely tells us that creation can only be beneficial to an organization and society at large if a group gets persuaded of the quality of the creative act and if that act gets implemented in some way (the last element, implementation, being fiercely fought against by most conceptual artists!). Of course, we need to be aware of, but it is the second step. The first step is to be able to pin down the meaning of creativity _and its meaning in the organization. That's what I'll try to do in the following lines, with the use of a typical sociologist's tool: the ideal-type.

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[1] Hans van de Braak, in Dutch, writes about "het doorbreken van grenzen" and "uit een conceptuele ruimte breken".
[2] *Innovation Strategy for the Knowledge Economy: The Ken Awakening,* Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997.

I think that what we need, in order to get some basic level of understanding of any social phenomenon, creativity in the present case, is to resort to ideal-types as defined by Max Weber. An ideal-type is the 'idealized' form of a phenomenon, looking for the essential characteristics. An interesting feature of the ideal-type is that while it is universal, you must tailor it to fit each specific example.

Let me borrow one famous economist's definition: "An ideal type is not a class concept, because its description does not indicate the marks whose presence definitely and unambiguously determines class membership. An ideal type cannot be defined: it must be characterized by an enumeration of those features whose presence by and large decides whether in a concrete instance we are or are not faced with a specimen belonging to the ideal type in question. It is peculiar to the ideal type that not all its characteristics need to be present in any one example. Whether or not the absence of some characteristics prevents the inclusion of a concrete specimen in the ideal type in question, depends on a relevance judgment by understanding. The ideal type itself is an outcome of an understanding of the motives, ideas, and aims of the acting individuals and of the means they apply." (Ludwig von Mises, *Human action*)

Here, attempting at an ideal-type could help in understanding creativity. The claim I made in the seminar went in that direction: not to fantasize about an absolutist creativity to which most human actions would not belong[3], but to shape an idealized creativity, with its various characteristics, to which human actions would get more or less close. Creativity as an ideal-type would involve (as opposed to "routinivity", a dummy-ideal-type to oppose to it):

- The knowledge of the rules of the games in the context in which you are (vs. the fragmented and limited knowledge of your own position)
- The experience of diversity[4] and contradiction/paradoxes (vs. the experience of unity and consensus), fostered by a desire for freedom (vs. a desire for comfort)
- The ability to change the rules of the games, allowing to break through the conceptual space of the context and to break the taboos[5] (vs. conscious or subconscious adherence to the rules and within the game) _the following three points are closely linked to this one_ [6]
- The ability to think in analogical, lateral processes (vs. thinking only in logical, linear processes) stemming from cognitive fluidity (vs. cognitive rigidity _this should only be the case for non homo sapiens_ cognitive fluidity being shared by all humans)
- Systemic thinking, looking for connectedness and loose relationships (vs. systematic thinking, looking for boundaries and strict definitions)
- Thus, from the two previous: Risk-loaded "epistemological anarchism"[7] (vs. security-sounding well-rounded methodology)
- The ability to shape new abstract mental spaces, i.e. imagination (vs. lack of imagination, as identifiable when one performs poorly on a Rorschach test)
- Intrinsic motivation[8] and a strong personality (vs. sheep-behavior or bureaucratic conformity[9])

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[3] Refering to Klamer's comment that most theatre pieces by the Ro'theater would not be qualified as creative under such a stringent definition…
[4] Florida quoting Simonton, p. 33.
[5] The example of the shit-oil-tank is a good example of that… See Florida quoting Mokyr, p. 32 and p. 31 his quote of creativity as "the process of destroying one's gestalt in favor of a better one".
[6] It could have made one large point but I preferred to decompose it so that it is clearer.
[7] From Feyerabend's account of creativity among scientists (Galileo as his typical case).
[8] which for Van de Braak is tied to *play* _playing with rules and with constructed reality_ thus a play-drive.
[9] Davis and Scase oppose autonomy, nonconformity and indeterminacy to their bureaucratic counterparts…

Having identified an ideal-type for creativity, there seems to be two dimensions in which organizations can be creativity-friendly:

- Organizations can be perceived *a space **for** creativity*: A space allowing it to happen. That's the lesson to be drawn from Davis and Scase and from Florida. They explain how an organization should be set up in order to foster creative individuals and creative groups within its ranks ("let them be creative"[10]). For Davis and Scase, the organization should make room for autonomy, nonconformity and indeterminacy. For Florida, the organization should be a particular "social environment: one that is stable enough to allow continuity of effort, yet diverse and broad-minded enough to nourish creativity in al its subversive forms." This requires venues for "conversation and interaction" and cultural entrepreneurs (Klamer) or "public characters"[11] who are "performing a catalytic role in the community […] to connect people and ideas".

- Organizations, however, can go further, becoming *a space **of** creativity*: To the difference of the former, where the organization's form allows creativity, in this case the organization itself is supposed to be creative. A common creative process is unfolding for the whole organization. This can take place through a learning process in the organization, in which everybody in the organization as a group learn how to learn (a double-loop learning as evoked earlier in the essay). Here the organization can do more than just acknowledge creation within its ranks and turn it into innovations. It can ideally achieve collective creation. I'm here referring to the *learning organization* as described by Peter M. Senge[12]. Senge has identified five disciplines as essential to such an organization: the fifth and all-encompassing discipline is systems-thinking[13]. The four other disciplines are *personal mastery* (fosters personal motivation to continually deepen vision), *building shared vision* (fosters a commitment to a common identity and to the long term), *mental models* (learning to unearth our assumptions) and *team learning* (thinking together, helps looking for the larger picture beyond individual perspectives). "A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it."

These five disciplines are indeed compatible with the ideal-type of creativity described above, and they may allow for the creative organization to be more than a collection of creative people. They probably give us the clue to the organizational creativity (which Klamer claimed in our last seminar to be something different from individual creativity).

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[10] Florida, p. 40.
[11] Florida qoting Jacob, p. 42
[12] *The fifth discipline, the art and practice of the learning organization*
[13] see above in the ideal-type, its 5th point (it's the fifth too by pure accident)…