

Seminar Cultural Organization and cultural entrepreneurship  
Essay 1: The problem of organizing culture/creativity

Some expressions of creativity are especially difficult to grasp. In the case of the arts, one radical example is that of the creator of *Art Brut* (or *Outsider Art*): having a creative impulse apparently freed from the rules of society and thus unorganized, resulting in an autistic yet amazingly meaningful creation. This example would seem to be perfect if one were to claim that artistic creativity cannot be organized by society. But, looking more closely at the objects in discussion, such a claim cannot stand.

When one starts dealing with culture, how could one claim not to deal with organization? Culture is itself an organization: It shapes collective world-views and the collective transmission of human experience. Therefore, it would be more meaningful to wonder how culture organizes us, rather than to wonder how we organize culture as if it was some specialized activity. (In the same perspective, I also wonder, together with Altug Yalcintas, whether we should not introduce culture into economics before applying economics to culture.)

Wondering about the organization of creativity makes much more sense, creativity being one human activity among others. Here creativity will be considered as an original psycho-cognitive process (which is still partly mysterious to us) implying a combination of cognitive fluidity (Mithen), social need for change and space for the unexpected (tolerance for non-utilitarian activities and absurd arbitrary choices). Therefore, social organizations may have some difficulties to cope with creativity.

But what do we mean by organizations in the first place? Organizations, to make it simple, can be seen as the formal materialization of repeated interactions between a limited number of human beings and following (un-)stated rules. If (after Aristotle) humans can be defined as 'social animals', organizations are no natural phenomenon, but they are nevertheless essential to social human life, as a social construct without which no individual being would be able to function properly.

I will make a short remark about the fairy-tale of the market, which is told by standard economics: Ideally, individuals would only focus on their own interests in the manner of autonomous cells within a broader organism<sup>1</sup>. But such a regime of anonymity, when perceived, mainly brings fear to the people in modern life... The organic society (dreamt of by founding economists but also by fascists and communists in their times) is in fact a society of terror in which individuals are left alone to face their new Total(itarian) God (be it the Market, the class-crushing Revolution or *Das Volk*). The *homo oeconomicus*, if taken seriously, would remove all the *rivets*<sup>2</sup> that help give meaning and self-esteem through the eyes of others.

Therefore, it is pointless to discuss whether one can do without organization. What is essential is to discuss how some types of organizations are more or less relevant to creative cultural activities.

To answer this question, I will first examine how the topic of organization calls for another approach on the part of economics, and then I will look at the specificities of creativity with respect to its organization.

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The mere existence of organizations has forced economists to review their theories, as the case of Coase illustrates. Although Coase has been clever enough to find a way out through *transaction costs*, it is yet another example of how a dominant theory can "fall back on its legs" by adding concepts to integrate anomalies (Feyerabend).

<sup>1</sup> That's the typical biological metaphor as mentioned by Coase in his article, p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> 'Rivets' as meant by Joseph Conrad.

Coase uses rational choice assumptions as an unquestioned basis for the explanation of the firm (p. 390), and this is why he misses the point: Why is the individual willing to give up some 'freedom' to the organization? Let us try to understand that without sticking to the nice story about rationality. Could it not be so that the individual is willing to give up some of his subjective uncertainties<sup>3</sup> and limitations of bounded rationality (Herbert Simon) in order to gain some collective thus objectified understanding?

Why bother and change the basic assumption? I will now take some time to justify the need for a constructivist (Watzlawick) approach (and for getting rid of positivist assumptions), before going any further in exploring organizations. The problem of any knowledge is the representation of a reality. If the world *as we know it* cannot exist by itself, in specific contexts we invent or construct images of reality that are adequate (giving way to no natural law but working out well). The only knowledge we have about reality is what it isn't. "Intelligence organizes the world while it organizes itself" (Piaget). The interaction between object and thought gives birth to a subjective reality of the object and gives it a constructed nature and function too. If someone else conceives the object differently and gives it another function, communication will be impossible. Humans thus need to adjust their views to construct together a common environment. This process allows a shared interpretation, thus coherence in behaviour. This brings about the *objectivation* of a given collective construction in comparison to an individual's own.

Therefore, the individual is no longer autonomous: The rationality and efficiency of his behaviour doesn't depend on his own calculations alone, but also on their degree of coherence and compatibility with his environment, which is constituted of *conventions*. Conventions are collective cognitive structures which give the individual points of reference to guide him. Being shared, they bring about efficient procedures. Thanks to constructivism and Simon's bounded rationality, we can understand situations of uncertainty: The individual's decision only has a relative meaning (relatively to his environment). Economic activity thus aims not at allowing individuals to use their private rationality, but at managing their behaviours towards a shared process in order to ensure a coherent functioning at the collective level. Intervention is rehabilitated, organization being its materialization, while the *market* needs institutions to be able to work. Such an approach can be found in economics in the school of Conventions with in France Laurent Thévenot (trust and feeling of justice), André Orléan (mimetic behaviour) and especially Pierre-Yves Gomez (conventionalist model of organizations).

Before heading to the problem of creativity with this new paradigm in mind, I'll make a last remark: Contrarily to what Bearle & Means claim about "individual initiative" (p. 349), I think there is still some room for individual initiative at all the levels of the organization. The formal hierarchy within the organization does not reveal the real power-struggles taking place between different groups. In this context, the individual can follow a strategy described by Michel Crozier<sup>4</sup> as that of the *secant-marginal*<sup>5</sup>: (reduce uncertainty for me by making others predictable, and augment uncertainty of others about me by being unpredictable and, if possible, drawing resources from outside the organization).

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Creative activities, as other human activities, cannot exist outside of any form of social organization. Even *art brut* benefits from general social organization (for example the welfare state taking care of the creator of art brut by providing him with a mental asylum or another organization within which the creator has the possibility to pursue his obsession). Art is no

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<sup>3</sup> Here the professor Knight (p. 399) may go farther than assumed by Coase, if the uncertainty cannot be removed by an individual but only by group-assessment of situations.

<sup>4</sup> In *L'acteur et le système (actors and systems)*: English version published in Chicago).

<sup>5</sup> *Marginal- sécant*

exception in that artists are embedded too in collective constructs and never get totally independent from them. But the problem lies within the interaction between the form of the organization and the processes of creativity (which are often non-conventional, thus need to be relatively free of the organization's conventions in order to develop themselves)...

Let us take some concrete examples within the arts. In Cinema and popular Music, industries are often in the form of corporate organizations offering standardized products (as described in Bearle and Means), but the original creators are often working in smaller organizations (such as a pop-music band) within which the individual motive of the artist (being his own 'entrepreneur') is less tied to the organizational constraints from the firm. In the case of theatre, one finds craft-like small-scale creations, with prototype-production, where no such large organizations apply.

The issue here being that creation be ideally freed from the limitations of binding standards. In the case of our extreme example, that of *art brut*, the creator is indeed autonomous enough to concentrate solely on his own obsession, but to the point of losing contact with society. This brings us to another problem for the artist in society: communication with others.

In the case of musea, experts or curators working in the name of the museum or of a large funding-organization can become powerful entrepreneurs (bearing some similarity to those described by Bearle and Means p. 355). In these cases, tensions can arise (involving arbitrary determination of aesthetic values, possible rent-seeking, etc.) though these 'entrepreneurs' play the essential role of gatekeepers in the corporation (Caves) or the State (Abbing).

The issue here being the communication of creations as an interactive social process, involving problems of power-struggle over information and values. Ultimately, as Klamer and Kombrink claim, the choice of a set of values determines a certain path for such an organization and thus determines the type of cultural creations that the organization will let 'pass through its gate'.

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Having presented these few points, it is still difficult to discuss which organizations can be relevant for creativity, because it means forging working concepts out of a combination of the following elements:

- the comprehension of conflicting historical-moral values (and their associated axium-rationality in the Weberian sense).
- the understanding of bounded rationality and the socio-psycho-cognitive determinants of actual behaviour.
- taking into account the dynamic feedback process in which culture (which is alive and affected by creativity) transforms constructed reality and thus the organizations (bringing culture to economics).
- the tension between conventions and creations.

The forthcoming discussion will thus need to allow an open thinking-process, close to that of an anarchist epistemology (Feyerabend).