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Introduction

The introduction of new media of communication forces a society to introduce novel ways to handle the surplus of meaning going with them. The introduction of writing in ancient Greek, for instance, demands ways to both take account of and keep at a distance meaning produced outside the orally integrated interaction. The introduction of the printing press in modern Europe demands ways to both encourage and discourage meaning produced by readers (and writers) when comparing texts among each other and developing styles to emphasize and criticize artificial generalizations and ambiguous specifications. Niklas Luhmann (1997, 409-12) advances the hypothesis that society in order to be able to handle new kinds of meaning surplus introduced by new media of communication needs culture forms able to both compare and control the meaning made available. These culture forms do not rule over the meaning surplus but provide ways to selectively exploit it while not being overwhelmed by it.

Luhmann’s suggests that Aristotle’s telos is the culture form able to handle the meaning surplus introduced by writing. There is no need to fear, or to emphasize, the infinity of further reasons and effects – beyond, that is, the interaction at hand – as long as there is, at any instance, the possibility to ask for the possible purpose being pursued (e.g., Metaphysics, Book II, 994b). As long as one focuses on purpose it seems easy to distinguish states of perfection from states of corruption and to deduce actions transforming the latter into the former.

As regards the culture form able to handle the meaning surplus introduced by the printing press Luhmann suggests Descartes’ restlessness introduced in order to flesh out a principle surviving both comparison and critique. This principle today goes by the name of self-reference. Descartes (Discours de la méthode, chap. 4) called it by the principle of »je pense, donc je suis« and did not notice that this principle did not lead to further evident knowledge secured by scientific method but to the ability to act and think by the rules of the »morale par provision« (chap. 3) considered by him to be of only temporary need and relevance. This »morale par provision« proved to be the only one apt for modern society. Any attempt to generalize and specify it towards a normative culture of values turned out to feed further comparison and critique, such that only the self-referential awareness of nevertheless being able to move on provided a certain support.

New communication media such as radio and television, on the one hand, and the computer, on the other, introduce new kinds of meaning surplus and wait for yet another culture form to handle it. Radio and television, the telecommu-
unication of sound and picture, transform the whole world into perception being communicated without forcing the communication, as the oral and the literal still did, to distinguish between communication and perception, and without enabling the communication, as a bonus to that distinction, to know how to answer the communication with either yes or no. It is as difficult to reject the communication of sound and picture as it is difficult to accept it. The computer adds to that by presenting its user (and observer) with a self-evident surface, the screen, being the intransparent effect of an unknown mechanism hidden inside the machine or outside in the Internet. Luhmann does not suggest a specific culture form able to handle the effects of the social introduction of radio, television, and computer. We may speculate on Marshall McLuhan’s media and George Spencer-Brown’s form being possible candidates since the former makes the invisible visible (“the medium is the message», McLuhan 1964) and the latter is an attempt to calculate with unmarked states (“draw a distinction“, Spencer-Brown 1972).

The essays presented at the workshop »Management Out of Networks and Systems« organized at the University of Witten/Herdecke on April 5, 2001, and published in this issue do not attempt to develop a theory of society perspective on management. And they are far from trying to figure out a possible culture form of management. Instead, they focus on the question whether there is a possible sociology of management and what type of argument such a sociology would pursue. Yet while exploring a range of quite different ways to answer that question they surprisingly exhibit a common thread. They are all, in some way or other, interested in the notion of emptiness. More than any one of the papers, the discussion at the workshop fleshed out that common thread. While being haunted by the usual suspicion that an interest in emptiness proves of a certain frivolity and is typical of an academic style too much impressed by light-handed (if not »empty«, sic!) intellectual thinking, the concept popped up nevertheless in the discussion of any one paper.

Thus, Eric M. Leifer’s concepts of target and content ambiguity, made evident by the help of dog stories, show how successful management has to take into account how status is to be gained and to be lost. Not being able to be sure who is addressed by managerial communication and about what question opens up a field of organizational potential that would get unnoticed and unused by any explicit, that is full and clear communication. Leifer’s General Principle about the advantage of reaction over action should be read in the perspective of being able to let emerge the roles suited to exploit the potential of a situation. Knowing in advance what this potential may be, kills it off.

Christoph Deutschmann shows that the recent regime of consultants and shareholders does not lead to an abolition of the former regime of managers but forces this regime to upgrade to an impression management directed at inside and outside observers alike that excels in symbolic behavior, hypocrisy,
and mimicry. Anybody being able to look into that kind of symbolic behavior called by the general name of »governance« would discover an emptiness which veils a very different kind of managerial behavior the language of consultants and shareholders in different ways is ignorant of. Michael Power’s paper extends on this argument by pointing out that procedural, that is content free, definition of new standards in accounting, quality, and risk management enable the management to free different kinds of organizations from the »imperial« influence of a regulation setting (locally failing) substantial standards. Instead any organization is made part of an organizational field exhibiting a »neoliberal« kind of control. Of course, any standard is nothing else but its performance, but here again the old knowledge of French moralists (and Kant) holds that beginning with empty motives yet pursuing the standards of your milieu you end up living and being these very standards. There is no other way, the Günther Ortmann’s and Harold Salzman’s paper seems to say, when dealing in strategy but to introduce emptiness in order to get the necessary space for recursiveness and structuration. Emptiness, introduced by the acknowledgment of the future being unknown, is the frame of a possible exploration of possible futures in a present that is the only time available for any kind of action. Power, the authors add, is essential for being able to survive, and to turn into one’s profit, such a risky game. Yet reading their paper the reader may as well assume that the power being present both seduces everybody else into submission and forces them to realize the real emptiness behind it. Power once again frames material emptiness by social order. It depends on the situation whether the frame or the content being framed receives the most attention. Harrison C. White’s paper delivers the theory to that function of emptiness by showing how strategies contingent on identities being always under threat either try to mobilize or to be mobilized in order to receive the resources considered necessary. One way to get strategy at all therefore consists in mobilizing the identities being at stake. Strategies are the result and the objective of attempts at social engineering that end up, as any marriage is able to show as well, in bounding oneself into the bonds offered to the other. Because it is not difficult to notice the ensuing dilemma of being bound, strategy has to include degrees of freedom, copied into the form of strategy out of the form of the »liberal society«. This way it is possible to replenish the awareness of any identity of being out of control and therefore having to relate to some form of control or other. Thomas Khurana shows how the seemingly introvert language of literary and philosophical deconstruction recently has become subject of the most extrovert consultancy concepts. Derrida’s phrase »deconstruction is the case« proves to be right nowhere more so than in the area of company reorganization that in concepts like that of the »business migration« goes so far as to
abandon even ideas like core competencies and clear-cut boundaries. Yet Khura
cana shows as well that the deconstruction of the company stops short of the
issue which is most at stake in Derridian writing, the issue of identity. No con-
sultant risks emptying that very anchor of any self-reference able to motivate
the next move on. Thus, deconstruction in consultancy exactly covers any pos-
sible aspect of company structures, yet falls short of showing the company the
»impossibility« of its autopoiesis as well.
And there is no way and perhaps no need to do so, argues Fritz B. Simon in his
paper. The consultant is indeed deconstructing any authority of the manager
sticking to any specific structure of the company, only to reconstruct that very
authority by enabling the manager to invest his or her knowledge and subtlety
into the stimulation of intelligent communication processes instead. An
»intelligent« communication process once again is triggered by insights into
the emptiness of any definition of any structure and purpose that the organi-
ization may be tempted to rely on in order to secure its reality and future.
My paper finally is trying to show using a model of Lenin’s Bolshevik revolu-
tion that any management consists in identifying the void attracting possible
identities to invest their unfulfilled possibilities into that void. That strikes a
familiar, if not male, sound. But it attracts the female gaze as well.
The idea of emptiness is revealing in our context of a possible sociology of
management because it works like a bridge concept. It deconstructs any teleo-
logical management thinking cherished by German Betriebswirtschaftslehre and
Anglo-Saxon Management Studies alike, still accepts modern restlessness, yet
already opens up the area of research for a possible new culture form. This new
culture form may consist in being able both to turn any possible form into the
medium of a possible different form and to consider any of these forms as a cal-
culation on the codependence of marked states and unmarked states.
This is the reason why we looked at the workshop and in the papers published
here for a sociology of management »out of networks and systems«. Both the
network perspective and the systems perspective answer the classical Hegel
problem of transition between one state and the next one. The systems per-
spective points to a way of reproduction made as attractive as unavoidable by
any one selection being a selection among other possible selections awaiting
their once again selective realization. This is why Luhmann (2000) analyzed
the communication of the decision as unit act of any organization. There is no
way to decide upon anything without thereby producing uno actu the aware-
ness of possible alternatives to be made invisible or to be exploited afterwards
depending on the states of the organization. The network perspective proves
useful in modeling how marked and unmarked states are both distinguished
and codependent giving way to oscillations between actual and possible states
that calculate possible next states. This is why White (2002) analyzes asymme-
tries of production networks. These asymmetries indicate at any instant where
to rely on when seeking ties to that network, on one or the other side of the asymmetry, consequences of that choice already being visible. Systems and networks together provide ways to check on the forms being useful to explore the invisible space of possible media.

Management today does not stop with setting goals and compensating for any choice of goals by staying restless. It certainly dreams of having to do just with the culture forms going by the names of Aristotle and Descartes. Yet any serious kind of management studies should go beyond that dream and look for management’s ways to chart the territory of organization, society, human beings, technology, and nature alike. The papers published in this issue try to show that there is something inherently social even to management in its ability to link states not in a technical, that is causal, way but in ways of distinction, relation, and codependence, that is in ways of communication. Management is not just a way to secure efficient and effective operation. It is a way, and even a practice, of nesting different possibilities (work, profit, service, tax) inside each other. In a way, it transcends organization being at any instant its most unfaithful yet most knowledgeable observer. Somehow there is a new culture form hidden inside the social practice of management. It may not be the only one able to handle the meaning surplus produced by radio, television, and computer. But it may be an interesting one. We need more sociology to research into that kind of questions.

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