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Organizational and Biographical Change: Transformations of Inclusion

Paper for the Session "Biographical Perspectives on European Societies" at the European Sociological Association Conference, 27 - 30 August 1997, University of Essex, Colchester

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1. Inclusion of biographies in organizations

Our contribution considers the relationship of organizations and biographies under the perspective of inclusion. First, we are going to point out how we use this term, then going to present the example of the German Telekom and its reorganization as a private enterprise, and finally to explore the way one employee makes sense of this reorganization process in biographical terms.

Traditionally, organization theory conceives of the exclusion of the personal and of the private sphere as characteristic of modern formal organizations. However, organizations and biographies are mutually dependent and penetrate each other in contingent and historically and empirically specific ways. Organizations structure and include members' biographies by means of incomes, social security arrangements, careers, recruitment and socialization procedures, and also by symbolic endowments all of which translate into biographical blueprints. Individuals in turn make biographical sense of work roles, organizational demands and expectations, and they acquire their more or less formal skills and motivations in their biographies. So organizations and their members' biographies draw on one another, structure one another and fill gaps and contingencies for one another.

Such processes cannot be shaped in a purely strategical way by either side. Organizations and their members cannot always assume they know what they are doing. They may find themselves up against unintended consequences, externalizations, and path dependencies which result from previous structurations. Or, they may be doing the functional thing (recruit a particular type of employee, take a particular opportunity) for entirely dysfunctional reasons.

Traditionally, this interdependence could be neatly wrapped up in the concept of circumscribed work roles. However, the concept of work or membership roles in an organization assumes mutually stable orientations and expectations and a functional fit of both: Organizations need to be able to 'know' (or to believe they do) which kind of subjective inputs and, consequently, which type of member they are going to need. Individuals need to know (or be able to negotiate) what is expected of them and what they can expect in return.

Exactly this assumption is becoming more and more questionable. Organizations face turbulent markets, unstable environmental conditions and internal processes of change with uncertain

outcomes. Hence, they tend to manage discontinuity rather than continuity, to keep ties reversible and options open. Individuals also need to handle discontinuities and uncertainties in the spheres of work and life and to maintain a sense of identity and self-responsibility.

Organizations then require rather more diffuse potentials and commitments from their employees:

- the ability and willingness to learn and learn anew rather than skill,
- sensitivity to weak signals and intuition to make sense of intransparent situations rather than experience,
- instant motivation and involvement instead of loyalty which is based upon a sense of belonging,
- abilities to implement change and to take opportunities, rather than steadiness and discipline.

("Ability" in this context is shorthand for biographically acquired subjective resources.) In turn, organizations offer their members less security and less stable expectations and rewards. Thus, individuals need such abilities not just in the interest of their employers but also in their own: To cope with discontinuity or manage continuity, to maintain skills, to handle work demands and challenges as well as the demands of everyday and social life.

Whether both sides come to fit together and to co-develop, is an empirically open question. This would mean that individuals and organizations draw on one another in a highly reflexive and mutually enabling way while each pursue their own agenda as well (cf. Sabel 1991). On the other hand, organizational demands may erode exactly those abilities of their members which they need - or individuals may exploit and erode 'their' organizations' resources or flexibilities.

2. The Deutsche Telekom AG

We find a particularly striking example of a change in the relations of inclusion in the privatization of the Deutsche Telekom AG, which used to be the telecommunications branch of the West-German Post Office. It used to offer stable, predictable careers as a branch of the civil service, complemented by segments of low-skilled, flexible part-time, predominantly female etc. work (e.g. directory enquiries). It was possible to relate to these offers of stability in different biographical modes: The Post Office may have attracted personalities with a corresponding bureaucratic mentality, but employees also have balanced security in their employment with mobility and risk-taking in other fields.

The genuinely Fordist ensemble of bureaucratic career, state monopoly and standardized technology is dissolving as Telekom becomes a corporation at a time when such organizations themselves are undergoing massive changes. Economic orientations and objectives are being implemented externally and internally. Decisions and responsibilities have been decentralized on to the level of local branches. Currently, for the strategically important sales departments this structure is overlaid by a matrix organization with centralized and multiplied reporting relationships as well. Customer-orientation is the uppermost aim, and it oscillates between customer-specific tailoring of products and services and (re-)standardization. As you can see from this very rough sketch, re-organization has become a continuous issue. Organizational structures and positions are implemented for the time

being and under continuous revision, expectations of performance are being reformulated in terms of success rather than output, careers becoming less predictable. All of this means that jobs are becoming less secure, traditional systems of rewards are being turned into sophisticated evaluation mechanisms, and career prospects are becoming vaguer while workloads, demands and responsibilities are increased.

Yet, the old West-German civil servant status has been retained since it was legally impossible to abolish it. Hence, employment status and organizational practice are being pulled apart. Being a civil servant does no longer mean stable expectations and ordered upward mobility but rather an individualized protection against job loss, or even a liability in terms of career expectations.

Employees thus need to manage this kind of change by promoting themselves, by networking, by creating projects out of unstructured situations without getting too attached to these projects.

3. Biographical processing of organizational change

All of this puts increased stress on employees' biographical resources, especially on their ability to structure uncertain situations both in the interest of the organization and their own. How they make biographical sense of such changes, change their expectations, seek new options or withdraw their commitments, is the question we are investigating.

With the following quote we would like to introduce a Telekom employee we interviewed, who positions herself in between a post-modern opening towards the contingencies of her career and a willingness meekly to subject herself to externally set conditions, which appears rather more pre-modern.

Ms "Kunz" is 26 years old and working for the marketing department of a local Telekom branch. Her job consists mainly in organizing presentations of Telekom products and services at trade fairs. Her life so far appears as a succession of very normal sequences of school, school-leaving examination equivalent to the British A-level (= Abitur), and the training period as a Telekom civil servant (which consists of studies at an administrative college and practical professional training). Her choice of career was influenced by her mother who worked for the post office some 30 years ago and found the work very easy and pleasant at that time.

[Also, Ms Kunz wanted to earn money immediately after school in order to be able to afford her childhood dream of a horse. This caused her some disappointment because after her training period she did not get her first appointment in her home town as she had expected but an hour's commute away which effectively didn't leave her enough time for horse-riding. Hence she had to sell her horse again, which must have been disappointing but she tells it in quite an uninvolved way.]

During the interview we asked her what kind of advice she would give a colleague on how to pursue a career with Telekom.

I should give her the same advice I've been given at the beginning of my trainee period. One head of department said: At Telekom we all are freelance artists. Basically, that's quite clear. After all, you need to organize all that yourself a bit. Well, it's hard to explain, I think it speaks for itself.

Q: In how far: organize yourself?

Well, not to organize yourself but everything - well, it's hard to explain. (pause, 10 sec.) To openly and flexibly take everything in. Keep building at your environment. Well, it's hard to explain.

...

Q: Do you sometimes get the feeling that - having just built something as a freelance artist, you need to start all over again?

No, it's not that. I think, that implies it. That's a contradiction. A freelance artist implies that you - as I said - accept that life is a continuous flow. And that you adapt to that again and again.¹

Here she is trying to explain what being a artist in a continuously changing organization means - and having some difficulty with it. Being an artist has two sides: The notion of creation of a work of art on the one hand, and the notion of flow, of process-orientation and absorption in what you are doing on the other. First it appears that she does talk about the creative side of building your environment. But when the interviewer takes her up on it and introduces the conditions of continuous reorganization, she turns the statement around. She takes a glimpse at the contradiction, we might say, but then she puts the stress firmly on the side of 'flow' which she explains as something you can only adapt to. So she quite emphatically moves away from the question of what exactly she is building and what happens to the works of art.

So on the one hand the statement can be read to point to a post-modern, de-centred 'post-subject', who is continuously redesigning herself. This is only possible for her by avoiding definite commitments to the past, by willingly leaving behind her own past work upon organizational demand. This attitude has an enabling side. She is not tied to the past either and she avoids experiences of loss or disappointment. A post-modernist might indeed interpret her as being well on the way to post-subjective wisdom in a kind of zen-buddhist way (e. g.- Willmott 1994).

However, to us it appears that in this case the avoidance of loss or disappointment and also of conflict rather erodes the sources of her artistic and organizational creativity. Disappointment is avoided at the cost of wanting nothing very much, and the price of adaptability is passivity. This is the reason why she is unable to describe the contents of creativity, for instance what she is building. By

¹ "Ich würde ihr den Rat geben, den ich auch ganz am Anfang meiner Anwärterzeit bekommen habe. Wo ein Ressortleiter gesagt hat: Wir bei der Telekom sind alles freischaffende Künstler. Ja, im Grunde genommen ist das auch klar. Letztendlich muß man das alles ein bißchen selbst organisieren. Ja, kann man schlecht erklären. Ich denke, das spricht so für sich selbst.

Q: Inwiefern für sich selbst organisieren?

Ja, nicht sich selbst organisieren, aber alles - ja, kann man schlecht erklären. (Pause 10 Sek.) Das flexibel und offen alles aufnehmen. Immer mit bauen an seiner Umwelt. Ja, kann man schlecht erklären.

...

Q: - daß Sie das Gefühl haben, kaum hat man mal was aufgebaut als freischaffende Künstlerin, schon muß man wieder ganz von vorne anfangen?

Nein, eben nicht. Ich denke, das beinhaltet ja das. Das ist ja ein Widerspruch. Freischaffende Künstler beinhaltet ja, daß man - wie gesagt, akzeptiert, daß das Leben ein ständiger Fluß ist. Und man sich dem immer neu anpaßt. (T 318, S. 25f.)

avoiding attachments to the past and positioning herself as universally adaptable she may be disabling herself. She finds herself at a loss in cases when efforts are called for to structure unstructured situations, to draw limits or to take decisions in both her own and the organization's interest. Then she has a problem drawing on experience, finding a position from which to reflect, taking a stand. In short, she is restricting her own ability to act and thus not just reproducing but subjectively enhancing constraints the reorganization puts upon employees.

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