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**Book Review Essay : Karl E. Weick: Sensemaking in Organizations:
1995, London: Sage. 231 pages**

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Book Review Essay

The Book Review Essay is designed to review and discuss outstanding books on organizational issues in more depth without the space limitations which normally constrain book reviews. The second review in this new section appears below.

Book Review Essays are published occasionally, on invitation only. If, in our opinion, an obviously outstanding book has been published, a scholar will be asked to write an essay-length review. We hope that these essays will stimulate further discussion and place organizational issues into a broader perspective.

Book Review Editor

Karl E. Weick: Sensemaking in Organizations

1995, London: Sage. 231 pages.

The Making and Unmaking of Sense*

Introduction

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This book appeared in a series entitled 'Foundations for Organizational Science' published by Sage. The author has become one of the leading figures of the 'alternative' paradigm in organizational sciences following the publication of his book *Social Psychology of Organizing* in 1979. The series itself, as the introductory manifesto of the series editor, David Whetten, amply demonstrates, has been born out of the dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs in organizational sciences. Whetten writes of a vision of the emerging 'virtual university' and reference to this vision clearly indicates dissatisfaction with the academic and institutional limitations imposed on the growth of the sciences of management and organization. The term 'virtual' has a rather vague meaning in organizational sciences. It usually means 'potentially ready to emerge when activated'. In the above context, it means that a university, whose faculty would promote a new paradigm, does not exist as a set of buildings and an organizational structure. Nevertheless, potential members of a faculty-to-be are already present (known, traceable, networked) — and should we decide to open such a university, we could easily identify and approach them.

Indeed, reading the latest book by Karl Weick one has the impression that a spectre is haunting organizational sciences, a spectre of a new paradigm. However, the followers of the new paradigm evoke a 'virtual' university (in the above-mentioned sense) since, apart from this 'virtual' presence, the new paradigm remains — virtually — homeless. The homelessness of a new, emerging paradigm is nothing new in the history of science. Ever since the Kuhnian revolution, in our understanding

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of the structure of scientific revolutions, we have been aware of the fierce resistance of the old paradigm owners and followers. What remains less well known is the fact that 'history has many cunning passages' and that some of these passages, bypassing the guarded castles of the established paradigms, have been used by the rebels, the alternative paradigm owners, to provide their respective paradigms with a 'homeland', a 'foothold' in a 'real world' of institutions, associations, states, markets and academic politics. Reading Weick, I have the impression that this is exactly what happens at present in the sciences of organization; the impression does not fade away when I read the titles of the other books in the series. The preceding volume in the series is *Publishing in the Organizational Sciences*, which makes me think that the editors of the series want to help their readers to conquer the printed word. They want to assist them in navigating the dire straits of the academic publishing industry. Moreover, the book by Weick is followed by a study of *Institutions and Organizations* and, more importantly, by the *Rhythms of Academic Life* (by Peter Frost and Susan Taylor). The latter, which was unavailable at the time of this present writing, certainly promises to be a useful introduction — should a paradigmatic war break out. In other words, I think that, in reading Weick, I can sense his overall aim — a kind of mobilization of organizational scientists who are dissatisfied with their discipline. Weick must have come across many such scientists when heading the prestigious *A.S.Q.* There were many symptoms of dissatisfaction with the established paradigms in organizational sciences. In the early 1980s, a network on Organizational Symbolism and Culture was established in the United States. Europe followed with a Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (having participated in the Milan conference of 1987, the present author witnessed the birth of a number of future networks and publishing ventures).

Before we focus on Weick's book, let us make a general observation on the types of organizational competence which usually get 'translated' into a 'theory' of organizational behaviour, change, development or management. First, in virtually all companies, institutions and organizations there is a distinctly *local competence*, which is usually phrased in a very specific idiom and handled as one of the major resources in power struggles within an organization. It is infrequently studied and described and if it surfaces at all, it appears as a 'thick description' of a company (viewed as a 'wild tribe') or as a penetrating aesthetic 'critique' of some pathological features of organizational reality. In order to illustrate my point, let me evoke two interesting examples. During my courses on 'Cross-Cultural Management' I have often exposed students to a Nagisa Oshima movie 'Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence'. The film demonstrates very convincingly that we can easily become hostages of our cultural prejudice if we do not allow our intuitions and emotions to shape our relationships with others. Moreover, from the point of view of organizational management it is vital to have the actual

'hands-on' managers of daily agendas and affairs (sergeant Hara and captain Lawrence), who can concretize abstract orders and play the role of a third party if conflicts break out. All this happens in the extreme situation of a Japanese POW camp on Java, during WWII. Another film I have been using during the HRM courses is David Mammet's 'Glengary Glenn Ross' where a ruthlessly competitive managerial strategy results in personal and organizational disaster. My older colleagues have been using Sidney Lumet's '12 Angry Men' to illustrate similar points about local competence and the processes of organizing.

Second, there are various *consultant's 'bags of tricks'* which are based on professional consulting competence. They are usually marketed as special, copyrighted 'recipes', but marketing is usually done by individuals with academic credentials, so some claims to 'disinterested objectivity' can be (and often are) made. For instance, the latest *Toolbook for Organizational Change* by J. Jonker (Van Gorcum, Assen, 1995) has, for instance, a subtitle 'A practical approach for managers' and an advertising catchphrase on the front cover: 'The definitive working manual based on the most extensive international research'. In the introduction, the author qualifies this announcement by stating that: 'This toolbox was developed and written at the request of Philips electronics. The aim was to provide their operational management with a set of basic hands-on and easy-to-use instruments. *To develop this toolbox, a multitude of sources around the world has been consulted*' (p. 3, italics mine).

Clearly, no extensive international research took place and the author has just read a few books in foreign languages. However, the advertisement is printed on the front cover while the plain fact is reported at the end of a small-print introduction. Even then, though, it is preceded by a proud announcement that a giant multinational corporation commissioned and paid for the book in question, which somehow offsets the impact of the confession about it being the result of 'the most extensive international research'.

Finally, our academic institutions, for instance departments of organizational sciences at the universities or in schools of management and scientific research institutes (which tend to overlap with consulting companies) produce *theories about organizations* and train managers (thus standardizing those who subsequently go off to run the organizations we are describing).

From the methodological point of view, these co-existing types of organizational competence have an important consequence: new paradigms in organizational sciences have to be tested not only against the background of their predecessors, i.e. older paradigms, but also against the background of new challenges to the theories of organizing processes. Some of these new challenges are fascinating. What does Disney organize in Disneyland? What does CNN network, when it works? What is Coca-cola when it is 'IT'? Can Weick's book pass not only this latter test, but the former one as well?

None of the above-mentioned 'embeddings' of competence is neutral from the point of view of theoretical elaboration and pragmatic applications. The institutional embeddings are not 'neutral' carriers of our cognitive processes (including inter-paradigmatic wars). They imprint their social 'logo' on our 'products'. This imprinting, which Giddens calls 'structuration', consists of 'structuring', i.e. of a selection of rules and resources by a social agent, who then proceeds to the construction of a social system. All the organizations we have known so far are involved and entangled in a number of 'structuring' networks (i.e. actual relationships between social 'agents' and 'agencies' and their embeddings), which often, but not always, escape self-reflection. The concept of 'agents' (or 'actors') and 'agencies' has been re-introduced to modern social sciences by sociologists such as Giddens, Bourdieu and Archer, who were trying to provide an explanation of social actions which would not be reducible to the list of structural constraints on actual choices made by human individuals and organizations. This renewed interest in agents and agencies has, in turn, stimulated methodological interest in cognitive mapping and 'sensemaking'. Some of the metaphors we live by reveal their ambiguities slowly and incompletely, as our theoretical reflection proceeds step by step towards the re-negotiation of 'what they mean'. Let us take, for instance, a concept of 'macdonaldization'. I have chosen Ritzer's 'macdonaldization' in order not to repeat a more commonly encountered formula, such as, for instance, 'globalization', because the more frequently a given formula is used, the more difficult it is to separate it from various incidental ideological embellishments. Thus the term 'globalization' is clearly defined in only two cases — when it describes the exposure of all parts of the globe to the satellite-linked telecommunications (as prophesied by Marshall McLuhan) and when it describes the impossibility of constructing an isolated, self-sustainable economy at the turn of the present century (as conceptualized by Immanuel Wallerstein and his collaborators in the F. Braudel Center for the Study of Civilizations at SUNY in Binghamton).

Within the traditional paradigm in the organizational sciences there is nothing wrong with the global success of the formula of 'McDonald's'. Ritzer (Ritzer 1993) correctly points out that the famous hamburger joints offer efficiency and predictability. He notices that they control their employees and their customers with simple non-human technologies. He also observes that their perfect rationality breeds irrationality, turns food consumption into a 'filling break' in a mad pursuit of something else, dehumanizes the employees and breeds pathological arrogance of power among McDonald's management. Meanwhile, the very term 'macdonaldization' has become an abbreviation for 'fast standardized services' and organizational scientists have become increasingly uneasy about their ignorance of this process. We do not understand the organizational and cultural sources of the success of this formula and we lack a more profound analysis of some consequences for, let us say,

the labour market, the part-time ('temp') inclusion of teenagers, the influence upon the overall consumption pattern (has Big Mac begotten a microwave oven?), and the drilling and training of consumers since early childhood, etc. It is against the background of our uneasy ignorance of such embeddings of organizational processes that one reads theoretical studies on sensemaking.

Weick begins cautiously by outlining some theses which, so far, have only been tacitly assumed by the community of researchers in organizational sciences. The implication is that his book is devoted to everything we always wanted to know about the forthcoming paradigm in the sciences of organizing and managing — but were afraid to talk about publicly. In other words, he announces that he will try to explain the new rules of the methodological game in social and organizational sciences and their linkage to the intersubjective creation and maintenance of organizations as 'systems of meanings' which are constantly and ceaselessly negotiated, revised and submitted to critical dialogue. The linkage of these new rules with the maintenance of an organization is likened to an ongoing conversation (one of Weick's favourite similes at the beginning of the book). In other words, Weick claims that modern theoreticians of organizations are tacitly using the conversational metaphor when they attempt to reconstruct organizational realities and distinguish the components of the organizing processes (organizations, like some humans, do not always know what and who they are before they spell it out): 'Organizations are presumed to talk to themselves over and over to find out what they are thinking' (pp. 133–134).

Weick continues in the same vein and even says explicitly:

'That's what this entire book is about. The basic recipe coordinates with organizing in the way outlined in Figure 5.3 (saying = enactment, selection = seeing what I say, retention = knowledge of what I said). The organism or group enacts equivocal raw talk, the talk is viewed retrospectively, sense is made of it, and this sense is then stored as knowledge in the retention process. The aim of each process has been to reduce equivocality and to get some idea of what has occurred' (*ibid.*).

Early in his book, however, he adds a word of caution for those who could be swept away by the symbolic interactionist undercurrent. Power games are not to be forgotten and structural constraints on actions and interpretations are to be taken seriously: 'Sense may be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders vote and the majority rules' (p. 6).

Organizing as Sensemaking

The warning expressed in the formula that no amount of beauty in the eye of the beholder can change the rules of the voting game in organizational reality should be heeded by those who think that processual- and sensemaking-focused approaches to the theory of organizing are 'soft', almost by definition, and thus beyond any methodological redemption.

My own interest in the above warning flows from my profound conviction that we need a new concept of agency in social sciences and that some constraints imposed on human individuals and their clusters can best be reconstructed and accounted for within the processual and not the structural approach. A member of an organization can have the wildest phantasies about his company, like a jungle filled with predators — but when he votes against a bloodied tiger of a CEO, he gets a chance to turn his firm into a more civilized place.

Weick does not begin his book with a clean slate. He certainly did much in the past to present organizations as 'bundles' of organizing processes, clusters of 'loosely coupled sub-systems', streams of organizing processes rather than as solid 'chunks' of organizational structures. However, this shifting focus does not mean that organizations have all but disappeared under the multiple layers of horizontal networks and informal co-agencies. As Peter Berger once succinctly observed — organizing is a particularly human form of providing an ordered reality for individuals. Berger says *expressis verbis* (Berger 1970: 339–347): 'The contemporary mode of antiinstitutionalism is unlikely to last . . . Man's fundamental constitution is such that, just about inevitably, he will once more construct institutions to provide an ordered reality for himself' (*ibid.*).

Weick does acknowledge his debt to Berger (and to Luckman) by listing their famous study from 1967 — *The Social Construction of Reality* — among the bibliographical resources for organizational sensemaking, and by describing it as follows: 'Over time, people act in patterned ways and take these patterns for granted as their reality, thereby socially constructing their reality' (p. 67).

While a reader may glance only furtively upon this summary of Berger and Luckman's study, he should, nevertheless, notice that Weick lists his own *Social Psychology of Organizing* immediately afterwards, making it appear as a sort of epistemological sequel to Berger and Luckman's work: 'an evolutionary epistemology is implicit in organizational sensemaking, which consists of retrospective interpretations built during interaction' (*ibid.*). Thus in the *Social Psychology of Organizing* we already find a focus on the interface between the material interactions of human agents and their symbolic negotiations of meanings attached and re-attached to their actions. It should come as no surprise then that *Sensemaking in Organizations* opens with a typical case of organizational *creatio ex nihilo*, with the discussion of a 'battered child syndrome'.

The above syndrome becomes a paradigmatic case; according to the author we are 'blind' to some obvious occurrences (e.g. child beating and abuse at home) until traces are identified, re-named and acquire the status of an autonomous problem. Children used to be beaten before the 'battered child syndrome' was recognized, but defining it was a necessary precondition for social perception of the problem. Before the syndrome was recognized (as a matter of fact it was as much discovered

as invented) professionals could ignore the symptoms or neglect them. After the discovery (invention) of the syndrome, professionals had to respond. Thus Weick's main initial point is that *sensemaking activities of interacting individuals (negotiating the perceptions and hypotheses and coming up with the 'battered child syndrome') are the core of the processes of organizing.*

What does sensemaking consist of? One should compare it to a navigation of social space with cultural maps at hand. Weick's theoretical framework includes, for instance, such categories as 'identity' (an individual makes sense of him/herself by assuming identity, i.e. identifying with some location on a cultural map and advertising it to the others), 'retrospect' (one examines the past interactions, or trails drawn on the cultural maps, and while doing so one tries to recover, change or confirm the meaning of one's tracks), and 'enactment' (a crucial category, for it forms a link between an interpretative background of 'sensemaking' and its simultaneous 'facticity', its embedding in a stream of interactions). The remaining categories are 'ongoing events', 'cues' and 'plausibility'.

The category of 'ongoing events' has philosophical underpinnings: Weick quotes Winograd and Flores in order to justify a Heideggerian theme of an approach to the human condition which stresses our 'immersion' in the flow of events ('situations of thrownness' in the sense of 'being thrown right into the middle of events'). While most of us would have few qualms about agreeing to a general philosophical statement on our ontological situation (we realize that there is no privileged point of departure for a critical analysis of our condition and we have to cope as best we can with a flow of events which carry us forward in time), some other philosophical conclusions are fairly controversial. Do we, for instance, have to accept Winograd and Flores' assumption that 'language is action' (quoted on p. 44)? 'Whenever people say something, they create rather than describe a situation, which means it is impossible to stay detached from whatever emerges unless you say nothing, which is such a strange way to react that the situation is deflected anyway' (*ibid.*).

I would think that it is precisely in the organizational setting where actions speak louder than words. If we decide that words *are* actions, an important distinction becomes blurred. Weick tries to avoid this problem of disappearing distinction by focusing on the emotional side of organizational interactions. Words are actions — but they are actions primarily in emotional scenarios of intense interactions between members of the same organization. Verbal clashes are a way of playing out tensions and conflicts without disturbing the overall organizational efficiency by recursing to 'real' (i.e. organizational, collective, material) actions. Weick uses the category of 'ongoingness' not to press philosophical assumptions on us, but to analyze the role of negative emotions in organizational settings and in the learning processes of an individual:

'When people perform an organized action sequence and are interrupted, they try to make sense of it. The longer they search, the higher the arousal, and the stronger the emotion. If the interruption slows the accomplishment of an organized sequence, people are likely to experience anger. If the interruption has accelerated accomplishment, then they are likely to experience pleasure. If people find that the interruption can be circumvented, they experience relief. If they find that the interruption has thwarted a higher level plan, then anger is likely to turn into rage, and if they find that the interruption has thwarted a minor behavioural sequence, they are likely to feel irritated.' (p. 48–49)

This is an interesting and crucial passage and it is a pity that Weick does not dwell on this typology of emotional responses. Had he done so, he would be charting unknown waters, he would be contributing to the construction of a theoretical framework for a theory of organizational sentiments. Should such theory emerge, managers and employees alike could receive an emotional compass for navigating organizational seas. However, Weick stops short of doing so. Instead, he simply states that emotions affect sensemaking by influencing recall and introspection, which tend to be 'mood congruent'. While undoubtedly true, it is not as interesting as further theoretical pursuit of the above-mentioned 'theory of organizational sentiments (and resentiments)', which the present author thinks long overdue. A theory of organizational emotions could help us explain organizational power processes (why is it that some men and women in organization succeed in mobilizing support and maintaining power, while others do not — in apparently equal circumstances?). It could offer us a methodology for an analysis of imbalances of power and powerlessness which determines the overall organizational 'climate' for the members of most organizations. It is very disappointing to read a brief but brilliant discussion of negative emotions in an organizational setting (Weick is right when he claims that organizations facilitate close, intensive, interdependent relationships between almost total strangers and that the likelihood of interruptions and flares of negative emotions is very high) only to find out that the author's conclusions are limited to a relatively trivial observation that '(an) attempt to use a feeling-based memory to solve current cognitive puzzles may make sensemaking more difficult' (p. 49). Nevertheless, since almost all memory is either feeling-based or feeling-activated one cannot avoid this problem. It is a pity that a scholar as creative and skilful as Weick does not take this point any further. This is perhaps the most important 'lost theoretical opportunity' in the whole study.

The mechanism of emergence ('genesis') of the components of organizational (and social) reality consists thus of sensemaking, i.e. inventing a new meaning (interpretation) for something that has already occurred during the organizing processes *but does not yet have a name*, has never before been recognized as a separate, autonomous process, object, event. To put it in a nutshell, Weick looks at the interface between interpretations and actions and, having blurred the difference between words and actions, proclaims that sensemaking is an activity which

'creates facticity' — by virtue of constructing, filtering, framing and expressing personal perceptions and interpretations — by rendering 'the subjective into something more tangible' (*ibid.*: 14).

Having criticized Weick for stopping short of developing a theory of emotional management of organizing processes (i.e. having criticized him for not following our own wishful thinking) let us concentrate on what Weick did develop. This means returning to the core category of enactment, which is crucial because products of sensemaking which remain the personal property of one's own mind, without prompting behaviour, would resemble Kantian *Dinge an sich*. Individuals construct organizational reality, or, as Weick writes, following Pondy and Mitroff, — 'produce the environment they face' and 'construct reality through authoritative acts'. He illustrates his thesis with cases of pure enactment such as the famous flying of an American flag on a Kuwaiti oil tanker in 1987 (although from the point of view of a complete theory, one would have to analyze cognitive maps of those in the conflict, to be able to interpret the enactment in question). The ship's name had been changed and the tanker was promptly surrounded by U.S. warships. Obviously, all this was done in order to produce the desired effect on other groups (e.g. the Iranian and Iraqi air and naval forces), because as people comprise the most significant part of the human environment, they modify the circumstances and thus create both threats and opportunities for further actions. More importantly, it is precisely due to this constant human intervention (i.e. sensemaking as the shaping of a material environment with symbolic interpretations) that the very ('ontological' — one is tempted to say) reality undergoes constant 'oscillating' change. Should we be unduly worried about this process of oscillation? Contrary to Burrell and Morgan, Weick thinks that we should not. If individuals are, as Mead once said, 'parliaments of selves', i.e. if they assume multiple identities and are forced to cope with changing realities — then we should be lenient as far as ontological purity is concerned. In other words: human (social, organizational, socio-psychological, cultural) reality is an outcome of the continuous process of sensemaking. Since, subsequently, the perceived social reality is conceptualized by human actors as offering threats ('constraints') to their planned actions — the sensemaking is actually a prerequisite (and the 'feedstock') for institutionalization, which should be understood as one of the essential outcomes of 'enactments'.

It is also, according to Weick, a source of a Cartesian anxiety (named so after Varela 1991). Weick follows Varela in claiming that Cartesian anxiety is a tendency to think in sharp polar opposites. It is 'best put as a dilemma: either we have a fixed and stable foundation for knowledge, a point where knowledge starts, is grounded, and rests, or we cannot escape some sort of darkness, chaos, and confusion. Either there is an absolute ground or foundation or everything falls apart' (Varela et al. 1991: 140). Clearly, we are dealing with a fear that there is 'no there out there', i.e. no stable world 'out there'. If there is no stable

frame of reference for human agents, we are in constant danger of succumbing to idealism (i.e. a view that it is our imagination which actually creates the world 'out there'), nihilism (nothing is worth more than anything else) or subjectivism (the world is what it seems to me to be like).

This theme of cognitive ambiguity and of an element of risk in sensemaking unfortunately is not pursued by Weick. He rounds his discussion up with a brief reference to the deconstructionists represented by Derrida, Eagleton, and Hassard and Parker as the editors of 'Postmodernism and Organizations' and . . . to William James. William James is evoked as the pioneer of the 'sensemaking' approach in social psychology. By asking his famous question 'is life worth living?' and by answering that if we answer 'yes' — it will actually become worth living, James had, according to Weick, laid the foundations of the theory of sensemaking and enactment. Needless to say, the deconstructionists are praised only for the negative contribution to sensemaking, i.e. for demonstrating the relativity and multiplicity of meanings we attach to processes and situations. However, the generalized scepticism of the deconstructionists goes too far in undermining the motivation ('faith' and 'belief') to engage in sensemaking at all (what is the point if the result is no better than the results of all previous sensemaking activities?). Weick draws different conclusions from the observation that in social worlds there is no simple and uniform 'world out there'. If there is no world 'out there' to vouchsafe for our choices and actions, we are not innocent when interpreting the world's events and aspects. In every interpretation there is already a hint of suggestion for action, an act of faith that the enactment of this particular interpretation can succeed — a self-fulfilling prophecy mechanism which may be set in motion. Moreover, this self-fulfilling potential is strongly reinforced with the advent of patterned interactions and with the networking of intersubjectively shared interpretations of organizational settings in the same or different organizational frameworks.

This is the second case where Weick hesitates to take up an interesting theoretical opening created by a definition of organizing as sensemaking. He does, though, mention the socialization of newcomers as an important step in what is, in fact, a pre-standardization of individuals (i.e. they have to be given some sensemaking clues) before they are admitted to full group membership. What about the fascinating cases of the 'brainwashing' of fresh arrivals in consulting companies and in the paradigmatically defined faculties of our universities? Are they not cases of a conscious conditioning (pre-fabricating) of expected sensemaking activities in new organizational settings? What about the 'logic' of interparadigmatic transformation? Deconstructionism is perhaps a response to the rigorous indoctrination by structuralists and functionalists, by freudians and marxians. Is it perhaps an equivalent of the sensemaking theory in non-organizational sciences (especially in the literary and aesthetic studies)?

Weick limits himself to a crisp comment that 'faith is instrumental to sensemaking' (p. 38) and voices his preference for James rather than Derrida. I have to admit a certain disappointment at this point. I had expected Weick to analyze the organizational setting in which deconstructionists appear and the role played by 'guilty conscience' (of Paul de Man, for instance) in trying to generalize moral doubts onto all values and choices. I had expected Weick to risk a theory of organizational postmodernity, following those philosophers who are trying to make sense of humanity, and to venture to claim, for instance, that: 'The more the cultural diversity within the human race declines, and the more the world as a whole is shaped by structures characteristic of modernity, the more we need not to forget but to remind ourselves what a human life is, has been, and can be.' (Williams 1995: 88)

Dictatorship of a Gerund

Making sense we communicate. One of the interesting consequences of defining 'organizing' as 'sensemaking' is a discovery of an increased importance of the processes of communicating in organizations. As a matter of fact, Weick is not afraid of boldly claiming that organizations *are* their communicational activities. Should these communicational activities become confused, organizations are bound to malfunction; should these communicational activities stop, then organizations would cease to be. In other words, communicating is crucial to sensemaking and organizational settings survive only because of the communicational activities within them. A 'composite picture' of organizations (shifting continually between shared meanings and innovative interpretations negotiated at their expense) should thus include an explanation of a relative and temporary success in organizing joint action in spite of, and in addition to, an incessant renegotiation of organizational 'reality' by its members.

In order to account for what is being communicated, Weick introduces a new conceptual category, namely 'a unit of meaning', defined as 'a cue' plus 'a relation' plus 'a frame'. This tantalizingly simple definition clearly suggests an attempt to link the cognitive processes of organizing to their material, social, organizational counterparts and carriers. Let us take 'frame of reference'. For Weick, frames of reference are determined by the past socialization of human agents, both by general upbringing and by more recent organizational enculturation. 'Cues' are actually any present events and problems which 'trigger' sensemaking activities and force human agents or groups of agents to connect (i.e. 'relate') the present cues with previously formed frames of reference. As Weick himself puts it:

'The content of sensemaking is to be found in the frames and categories that summarize past experience, in the cues and labels that snare specifics of present experience, and in the ways these two settings of experience are connected. What is common among the diverse vocabularies of organizational sensemak-

ing, such as ideology, third-order controls, paradigms, theories of action, traditions and stories is that all of them describe either past moments, present moments or connections.' (p. 111)

Units of meaning are not communicated freely, since members of organizations tend to observe some assumptions and norms which are tacitly taken for granted and 'hover' above personal inhibitions and organizational constraints (they are communication controls of the 'third order'); but these 'third-order controls' are not simple and uniform. Organizations are not immutable and, in the course of communicating within and with other organizations, they often experience 'paradigmatic shifts'. One way of looking at the conflicts within sensemaking activities is to explain them in terms of struggles between and about various paradigms which are used by all members of the organizations. Paradigms are also about the protocols of communicating, but their primary function is to define and maintain mutual frames of reference. Paradigms should provide all members of an organization with standard operating rules, shared definitions of their environment and with the basic assumptions about power, authority and the procedures of applying them. In real life, they rarely do, since most organizations face considerable diversity both in the paradigms accepted by their members and in different interpretations of the same paradigm by groups or individuals. By fixing frames of reference — or by trying to limit their number — we are thus controlling the sensemaking activities; but fixing is temporary — since paradigms, like all elements of sensemaking, are negotiable and are, in fact, constantly challenged and renegotiated. How does Weick tackle this dynamic process?

He does not shy away from using theoretical categories from the philosophy of science. Thus he takes the concept of, let us say, paradigm, admits that the concept, originally applied in the history of science by Kuhn, had already been 'translated' into the language of organizational theory by Guba, Brown, Barley and Pfeiffer. Weick quotes Brown's definition of a paradigm in order to demonstrate the applicability of this category in explaining organizational conflict and decision-making:

'By paradigm we refer to those seats of assumptions, usually implicit, about what sorts of things make up the world, how they act, how they hang together, and how they may be known. In actual practice, such paradigms function as a means of imposing control as well as a resource that dissidents may use in organizing their awareness and action.' (Brown 1978: 373).

Having done so, Weick tries to explain conflicts within the sensemaking and communicating activities as struggles for, and between, paradigms. However, the interparadigmatic warfare in organizational settings is even less rational than Neopopperians would like to admit in the philosophy of science. In other words, whereas scientific communities struggle to uphold their paradigms within the realm of the methodological criteria of acceptance, organizations are much more pragmatic,

'emotional', power-oriented, bluntly non-methodological, or, as Weick himself admits — 'belief driven' and 'action driven'. Communicating is all important — thus meetings are the basic building blocks of organizational reality; they are the stages for paradigmatic struggles, and hence also the primary sites of sensemaking. Meetings are like miniature models of the whole organizations, they are, in a sense, laboratories of sensemaking.

The consequences of this paradigmatic approach for future research in organizational sciences are quite numerous, but three deserve particular attention. The first is summed up by Weick with a catchphrase 'every manager a historian'. What he means is that the decision-making process belongs to the flow of negotiations about meanings of actions. Thus a decision made by a manager in the course of organizing (i.e. sensemaking) is an interpretation of a problem in the light of past experiences, and not a unique, totally 'fresh' act of choice. This consequence is not likely to provoke too much opposition among the representatives of organizational sciences. After all, the ancients have already declared *historia magistra vitae*, and perhaps it was the interpretative nature of our decisions that they had in mind (by interpreting past attempts at sensemaking and the consequences of the actions they generated, we can train ourselves in future sensemaking ventures).

The second consequence is a little harder to swallow. Weick suggests that we devote more attention to meetings in organizations and try to make them more 'messy' in order to be able to tackle ambiguity and to address problems which offer too many uncertainties. Weick's plea to convoke meetings as the 'main sites where requisite variety can be mobilized in the interest of sensing and regulating more of the variety that confronts the organization' (p. 187) is certainly a very interesting appeal. In my view, it is a plea to guarantee an ongoing dialogue between members of an organization and thus to safeguard organizational democracy and flexibility (this conclusion may appear far-fetched, but mobilization of requisite variety seems to me to be incompatible with the authoritarian management of an organization). However, it has a number of side-effects which can be dangerous for organizational survival. To mention just one historical case, let us consider the Polish parliament prior to the partitions at the end of the 18th century. The Polish parliament's formal acceptance of the *liberum veto* principle in the late medieval period led — in a historical context different from that of the 18th century — to its paralysis and to the inability to pass any bills at all. Therefore, a principle which remained valid, but unused, for most of that parliament's history, provided an easy target for outsider manipulation and, once activated, facilitated a sabotage of the parliament's proceedings since a single vote against a given bill could prevent it from being passed through the parliament. This depressing outcome is perfectly compatible with Weickian praise: a paralyzed parliament reflects a variety of clashing forces, thus preserving a requisite variety much better than an efficient parliament led by

a dominant lobby ever would. The price, however, was the ultimate dismantling of the parliament and the partition of the kingdom among the neighbouring absolutist states.

An interesting example of a similar, albeit unintended, process can be found in the recent case of the Chinese cultural revolution (1966–1972). The mobilization of the Red Guards was certainly not meant to increase the ‘requisite variety’. On the contrary, the top party elite saw this mobilization as a counter-measure intended to keep the various emergent lobbies and interest groups within the communist bureaucracy in check. However, one of the side-effects of the empowerment of the Red Guards was the increased influence that students had upon the curriculae at their universities. The spread of the cultural revolution, the role prescribed for the young generation by the absolutist ruler, Mao Tse Tung — all this contributed to the growing pressure from students to reduce the educational load and compensate insufficient intellectual skills with an increased political fervor. Needless to say, all this resulted in a rapid decline in the levels of intellectual achievement and contributed to the emergence of an ‘educational gap’ spanning the whole generation, not to mention a terrible price which had to be paid in human suffering and in the humiliation of academic teachers. Thus, by trying to control bureaucratic fractions, Mao had unleashed a student pressure group, which in turn almost dismantled the educational system. The unforeseen side-effect of mobilizing the students (justified at least partly by an anti-bureaucratic ideology of ‘returning to the masses’) was organizational decline and chaos (teachers could not function for fear that students would denounce them politically).

Thus the only reason why one could swallow the second of the Weickian consequences might be by viewing the unstructured and ‘messy’ meetings as the most opportune instrument to correct the routine functioning of overstructured ones. In other words, messiness could provide an interesting remedy against a proliferation of meetings which are convoked only in order to put a rubber stamp of approval on the top managers’ decisions. From this point of view the excesses of the Chinese cultural revolution are certainly a warning against possible misuses of this approach in organizational struggles.

It is, however, the third consequence, which Weick repeats from his previous book, that leads us towards the most interesting issues. The author suggests that we cross nouns out and stamp verbs in — in order to avoid nouns like ‘environment’ and ‘organization’. These nouns are actually reifications and conceal flows, changes, processes, oscillations, fluctuations which is what the business of reality is all about. Long live the gerunds!

The idea that by using verbs we will be better equipped to focus on the ongoing nature of interacting, sensemaking and organizing, is not new. As early as the beginnings of the present century, philosophers who had interpreted the theory of relativity suggested that we replace the ontology of matter with an ontology of events (Whitehead). How-

ever, the way in which Weick phrases his suggestion makes us suspect that he is presenting a stronger claim. He writes that 'verbs keep things moving' and adds that 'that includes the structures involved in sensemaking and the shifting demands to which those structures are trying to accommodate' (p. 188). There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his belief that verbs push things around and that they increase the flexibility of our organizing — i.e. of our sensemaking. However, he appears to suggest that a person who uses more verbs than nouns is also less conservative in managerial behaviour: 'People who think with verbs are more likely to accept life as ongoing events into which they are thrown, and less likely to think of it as a turf to be defended, levels of hierarchy to be ascended, or structure to be upended' (*ibid.*).

If we interpret it as a passionate methodological plea for a processual approach towards the organizing activities, then the suggestion is reasonable (one should avoid premature reifications and most of the mature ones) but trivial because the processual approach is, by now, firmly entrenched and established. Even classical managerial controls are geared more to the monitoring of production processes than to the checkup of the end products. It is also trivially true that one should avoid 'freezing' one's terminology if there are considerable and serious disagreements about the terms. However, what Weick probably means is that his 'verbalization' and 'de-noun—cing' of our theoretical language allows us to see the continuous negotiations about meanings more clearly; that it allows us a better understanding of the processes of sensemaking. In other words, with verbs we are — arguably, intersubjectively — closer to the objective view of the intersubjective reality than with the nouns. But are we? By official denial of a realist ontology and by embracing the social constructivist one ('words are actions, language is action') we have put ourselves in a difficult position: 'It is only from a point of view that we represent reality, but ontologically objective reality does not have a point of view' (Searle 1995: 176).

We are simply calling what used to be viewed as 'the world out there' or 'objective reality' in a classical realist ontology — *a socially constructed reality which had been intersubjectively agreed upon*. Searle, whom I quoted above, assumes that in order to be able to obtain a socially constructed reality which is an intersubjective outcome of subjective inputs of many individuals, we have to have some 'objective' reality as construction material. As Searle puts it: 'The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed' (*ibid.*: 191).

Searle thinks that those who opt for social constructivism neglect a basic difference between natural and cultural objects:

'Normal understanding of talk of both money and mountains requires external realism, but normal understanding of talk of money presupposes the existence of representations in a way that normal understanding of mountains does not. Money is understood as socially constructed; mountains are not understood as socially constructed' (*ibid.*: 194).

Language, according to Searle, cannot simply be an action in an external world, since it imposes arbitrary function on some 'brute physical entities', thus prefabricating the very external world which becomes, to a certain extent, domesticated:

'Certain sorts of sounds or marks count as words and sentences, and certain sorts of utterances count as speech acts. The agentive function is that of representing, in one or other of the possible speech act modes, objects and states of affairs in the world. Agents who can do this collectively have the fundamental precondition of all other institutional structures: Money, property, marriage, government and universities all exist by forms of human agreement that essentially involve the capacity to symbolize.' (*ibid.*: 228)

If we follow Searle in agreeing that social or cultural constructions are manifestations of collective intentionality and that language itself is an institutional structure, an organization on its own, then Weickian preference for gerunds begins to resemble a relatively minor choice within a very narrow range of cultural options. However, this minor linguistic choice has major implications for members of organizations — because ideas make a difference and linguistic choices are not neutral. The terms, names and gerunds which social scientists communicate to members of organizations co-shape the very organizational, social, cultural reality which the same social scientists are trying to describe. Thus even a minor methodological or theoretical shift can exert a profound influence upon the pragmatic, emotionally loaded and action driven behaviour of an organization's members.

The Self-reflexive Twist

If social scientists (who organizational theoreticians and social psychologists certainly value as members of the academic world) do co-shape the very reality they are doing research upon, then a new methodological problem arises. What exactly does 'shape' mean? Weick recognizes this problem and introduces a concept of convergence of beliefs and expectations (with respect to the behaviour of the other members of organization) with what actually happens. According to the present reviewer's reconstruction of Weick's views, if we know what to expect and if our expectations are rewarded, this self-fulfilling prophecy confirms our belief that we function in a sensible world. While this view appears to me to present an accurate rendering of organizational processes, the following question arises. The results of even the most accurate convergence of what actually happens with our beliefs and expectations also carry a broad array of side-effects, discrepancies, unstable events and displays of unpredicted behaviour. Should discrepancies become too large to be bridged by a daily collusion of the organization's members (which is, according to Weick, the basic mechanism whereby some paradigmatic problems are swept under the rug) — a clash of rival sensemaking ideologies can occur.

Managers who listen to the consulting gurus talking about 'learning organization', 'fishnet structures', 'profit centres', about making giant corporations flexible, re-engineering them to be lean and mean, let their actions be guided by these ideas and thus produce material effects in social and physical reality. However, are they not simply reaping what they have sown? Are they not implementing what they subsequently claim to have learned? The author acknowledges the problem by stating, for instance, that: 'We need to know more about the boundary conditions for some of the sensemaking processes such as self-fulfilling prophecies, enactment, behavioural commitment, labelling, innovation, and the management of meaning.' (Weick *op. cit.*: 176)

Weick offers here a methodological suggestion which relies heavily on the interpretation of meaning attached by members of all organizations to their actions and environments. In a sense, Weick always treats agents as parliaments of selves before they embark upon some course of action, and he always views organizations as negotiation parlours before they embark upon a course of collective action. We can, therefore, safely assume that the author's methodology allows for a more egalitarian approach towards organizational processes and for a more democratic review of subjective meanings and intersubjective negotiation procedures than would otherwise be the case.

My addition of the terms 'egalitarian' and 'democratic' can be interpreted not only in political, but also in a methodological sense (i.e. as applied to the class of clusters of local organizational knowledge, local interpretations and 'sensemakings'), i.e. in the sense, not only of Rawls and Dworkin, but also of Popper and Feyerabend. Weick's concept of organizing as sensemaking can thus be considered a theoretical equivalent of the political anti-authoritarian movements of protest of the late sixties and early seventies (very much as Hegel's philosophy of history was a theoretical equivalent of the political experiences labelled 'the French Revolution'). The only difference between the representatives of the anti-authoritarian movements of the late sixties and Weick lies in the latter's prudence with respect to the epistemological and political issues (whereas the rebels of 1968 thought they could easily distinguish between right and wrong, and harboured few epistemological doubts about their ideological diagnoses of social reality). One wonders if a public debate with Weick, Cohn-Bendit, and Wallerstein on the one hand, and Fukuyama, Senge, Porter on the other might reveal this hidden 'cluster' of generational experiences of protest as a major dividing line in modern social sciences. Be it as it may, for the time being we can only observe that it is because of the changed concept of human agency (parliament of selves, negotiation parlour) that the cultural studies of a background and software of choices gained such importance, and it is because of the changed concept of the importance of variety of choices in formulating organizational alternatives that a less authoritarian approach gained ground.

However, Weickian methodology does not go far enough in applying

the procedures of rational analysis as developed by scientific communities centred around respective paradigms: *it lacks the self-reflexive twist*. Without a self-reflexive twist it is in danger of becoming just one of the very numerous consultants' bags of 'tricks', in spite of the promises of an alternative formal methodology. Weick touches upon self-reflexivity without quite putting his finger on it. He comments upon case studies which tend to confirm one's already accepted methodology and which are selected in a biased way: 'Observers mobilize a set of methodological tactics that enables them to deal with meanings rather than frequency counts. Methodologies are assembled in the service of gaining access to the situated generation of some kind of explanation' (*op. cit.*: 173).

Weick sets out to design a 'sensemaking' methodology of organizations understood as bunches of sensemaking processes, but stops short of linking the study of enactments to the comparative methodology of ranking them. In fact, he tacitly accepts a relative autonomy of the social (structural networking and interacting) and of the cultural (sensemaking) aspects of the organizational processes, while focusing on the cultural ones and investigating their influence upon the patterns and structures encountered in the course of organizing. In a sad tribute to the academic isolation of most of the branches of social sciences, Weick fails to quote a British sociologist, Margaret Archer, whose studies of agency and socio-cultural, structural constraints, include for instance this interesting passage on interactions between individuals, roles and cultural resources:

'Social interaction and socio-cultural interaction reinforce one another, leading to morphogenesis after intense competition, diversification, conflict and reorganization in the two domains. The process is not endless: the very fact that structural and cultural elaboration takes place, signals that some alliance has won out to a sufficient degree to entrench something of a change it sought — and thus to restart a new cycle of interaction embodying this change as part and parcel of its conditional influences. Fundamentally, the outcome at the end of these two coterminous cycles is highly dependent on the fortunes of the social groups involved in interaction; what results from it is equally dependent upon the ideas endorsed by the successful alliance. For, in turn, these will introduce their own situational logic — be it new efforts directed towards correction, elimination, protection or opportunity, depending on the nature of the victorious ideas. These will then exert their influence on subsequent interaction in the next cycle, whatever the new balance of material power turns out to be. Thus, in configurations where there is a conjunction between cultural and structural morphogenesis, the two processes are intimately intertwined but they retain their relative autonomy, not only during this cycle, but also in the next and thereafter.' (Archer 1992: 303–304)

Weick understands perfectly well that the cultural elements of the past, which became embodied in our interactively enacted networks and structures, present a formidable methodological problem. He understands it intuitively in empirical case studies (cf. an excellent reconstruction of the decision-making bottle-necks which led to the NASA's

Challenger disaster), but he fails to account for it in his theoretical, methodological constructs. He is ready to negotiate sensemaking activities with members of any organization, but he stops short of drawing the methodological conclusions from the negotiation pattern underlying all intersubjective constructs, including the theories of organization. On the other hand, we have to give him due credit for stating the problem quite clearly and for making us aware that no theory of organization can afford to ignore it.

Organizations in the Postmodern Mode

The case of a battered child syndrome, which opens Weick's study, has the symbolic significance of a paradigmatic 'holy scripture' of the postmodern approach to the processes of organizing. The crux of this case is that postmodern professionals are not 'imprisoned' in their organizational roles. While participating in the organizing processes, they retain a certain degree of autonomy and thus are able to extract information and perform a reconstruction of a major unrecognized activity by generating a reinterpretation which calls for mobilizing cultural resources and undertaking corrective action. Every paradigm opens methodological campaigns with promises of considerable cognitive progress — and the Weickian 'sensemaking' approach is no different. Tacitly we — the readers, fellow-scholars and scientists — are being encouraged to participate in the exciting search for other syndromes, equally invisible under the dictatorship of the present paradigms. Weick says it *expressis verbis* in the final fragments of his book. He suggests that if the neopositivist tendency to use a simplified, dry language is consciously opposed, we will be able to apply a much more sophisticated theoretical description to a complex organizational reality: 'Organizational analysts were handicapped because they use low-variety language to portray high-variety entities. Daft (...) demonstrated a growing gap between the complexity of models applied to organizations and the simplicity of the language used to discuss those models. The counsel here is simple. Do whatever you can to increase the variety of language with which you work.' (Weick: 196)

Weick's plea is not insignificant. Many authors claim that the academic literature in organizational studies moves away from a focus on interpretations and symbolic interactionism to good old positivism, behaviouralism and functionalism (e.g. Ingersoll and Adams 1992). They claim that rumours about the death of neopositivism 'are greatly exaggerated' (*ibid.*: 13).

It is hard to disagree with the above plea, but it appears to me equally difficult to come to believe that, by faithfully following the above advice, one arrives at the postmodernist mode of analyzing the organizing processes and of influencing them. The main reason I do not expect much cognitive progress should we follow Weickian advice is that I think he displays a fairly surprising disregard of macro-actors — par-

ticularly when he approaches the institutional constraints which only apparently assume the 'micro-interactional' appearance. In fact, I think that much of the criticism of contemporary sociology voiced by Mouzelis in his latest study (Mouzelis 1995) applies to the Weickian approach as well. The crux of Mouzelis' argument can be summarized as follows: 'Microsociologists who tend to forget the *actors*, because of their very unequal access to economic, political and cultural means of production, contribute just as unequally to the construction of social reality.' (Mouzelis 1995: 16)

Keeping one's word-hoard dry in order to continue making sense of organizing as sensemaking does not prepare us particularly well to understand those inequalities. More specifically, it fails to take into account various complex hierarchical embeddings of micro, meso and macro *actors* within organizational settings — and without knowing how they are embedded, how can we ever hope to understand what they mean, what rules they follow or what dynamics their intertwined activities display? To take Mouzelis' convincing illustration of a hierarchical differentiation of the space in which social games are being played — the conference of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin in Yalta in 1945 was not a micro-event, even though only three major leaders of the anti-nazi coalition met there. The results of this conference influenced the postwar map of Europe and determined the fate of millions of people. In other words, Weick hones only one of the instruments which are essential if we try to understand the processes of organizing — the analysis of an interactional-situational dimension of organizing games. The other instruments would have to be linked to the remaining dimensions of social games, which — according to other, more 'structuralist' paradigms — hierarchically determine social roles (normative logic of organizing) and the actors' dispositions (practical dimension, reflection of my past socializations).

However, in order to end on a more optimistic note, let us focus on an important similarity between the latest book by Weick and the study by Mouzelis. Both tend to agree that a personal, first-hand, autobiographical experience in organizations and institutions plays a very important role in shaping our theoretical insights. Both tend to agree that social and organizational sciences, as opposed to physics or biology, do not discover anything 'totally new', but let us comprehend what we have known all along in a much better way, opening up new, unforeseen possibilities of reshaping, re-engineering, re-structuring our organized, social environment. Both appear to agree that the remedy for the fragmentation of contemporary culture (including methodological fragmentation of social and organizational sciences) should be found in communication, not uniformity:

'Pursuing the therapeutic metaphor further, one reader has likened the current fragmentative character of the social sciences to a multiple personality disorder. As the therapist's task in such a case is to help the dissociated identities within the same person begin to make respectful contact with one another, so

the task of a dialogical narrative must be to help those who hold divergent narratives that define different disciplinary identities begin to communicate respectfully with one another.' (Levine 1995: 327)

Weick could not agree more. He considers the necessity to study sensemaking 'support systems' (p. 179) and sensemaking 'under conditions of low discretion' (p. 176, as close as he ever comes to the acknowledgement of inequalities, hierarchies and 'imposed' sensemaking patterns) and he agrees with his early reviewer, Bob Sutton (mentioned on p. 169) that empirical research has — so far at least — added 'depressingly little' to our knowledge of sensemaking in organizations. I could not agree more. The most exciting and potentially revealing organizational knowledge and know-how remain a challenge to all of us who pursue research in organizational science. After all, even Machiavelli did not write directly about political in-fighting in Florence, and Dante preferred to go to hell rather than provide a cool analysis of the circumstances leading to his own exile. The Weickian program, therefore, which includes a desire to 'provide researchers with an explicit statement of that which, up to now, has been largely implicit' (p. xii) does, after all, have a definitely postmodernist ring of open challenge to it. 'The probable truth is that moral choices are indeed choices, and dilemmas are indeed dilemmas — not the temporary and rectifiable effects of human weakness, ignorance and blunders. There are no hard-and-fast principles which one can learn, memorize and deploy in order to escape situations without a good outcome and spare oneself the bitter after-taste (call it scruples, guilty conscience or sin) which comes unsolicited in the wake of decisions taken and fulfilled. (. . .) Knowing that to be the truth (or just intuiting it, or going on as if one knew it) is to be *postmodern*. Postmodernity, one may say, is modernity without illusions (the obverse of which is that modernity is postmodernity refusing to accept its own truth).' (Bauman 1993: 32)

Note

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