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SOME LESSONS FROM THE NORDIC WAY OF DOING SCIENCE

Jean-Claude THOENIG¹

What has happened in Northern European countries in the last part of the 20th century shall remain as a milestone for the development of knowledge in social sciences. Examples are quite few of remarkable and lasting contributions made by a wide set of scholars: the Ecole des Annales in history, the Cowes Commission in economics, the Aston school in the 1970s, the Carnegie Mellon neo-behavioral approach in the 1950s and early 1960s in the field of sociology of organizations.

It has become common practice to characterize the contributions of French school known as Les Annales as placing emphasis on long-term periods and socio-economic contexts, or to call the perspective developed by Herbert Simon and his disciples a behavioral revolution. To define in a few words a distinctive Nordic style is not an easy endeavor. The Nordic colleagues themselves do not feel at ease when listing the distinctive features of their style.

Many of them refer to their countries of origin. Historical and cultural backgrounds such as that of the Vikings are said to be relevant factor explaining the longevity and the intensity of Nordic studies. Reference is also made to legacies such as a common agenda about democracy, the status of the state, the

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nature of political consent or the style of business management (Byrkjeflot 2003). A third factor often mentioned is the fact that members of the Nordic wave share a common enemy, namely normal science. NATO, or North American Theory of Organizations, would be the challenge or the danger to fight (Czarniawska and Sevon 2003).

There is no doubt that the Nordic contributions are a unique phenomenon in the field of organization theory. Non-Nordic scholars are struck by the fact that this wave has combined several characteristics in a unique manner:

- * a collective dynamics running of more than 25 years of duration
- * a couple of thousand publications in high-ranking journals and books²,
- * close to one hundred collaborative research projects³,
- * a lasting common identity shared by its many members, despite the fact that most of them show rather diversified research interests and agendas, and explore rather heterogeneous paradigms,
- * a high degree of collaboration and dialogue between individuals who speak different native languages and belong to academic institutions located in countries which in the past were not very close allies, to put it mildly.

While it is quite difficult to capture in a few sentences the intellectual core – if such a core exists, which is still an open question – of the Nordic way or open school, and while such a list would be quite unfair to many of its members and their contributions, given the variety of perspectives, etc.-, the next-best ambition might be to name the institutional conditions that have facilitated the existence of such a strong and lasting cooperative and communitarian scientific enterprise. They may also provide lessons for knowledge production to the scientific community at large.

The Nordic way blends local embeddedness and global visibility. It has strong roots in specific social science disciplines while being open to cross-disciplinary approaches. It avoids normal science syndromes, and has created a virtuous circle of regional identity and debate.

Global and local

The first fact relates to publication practices. The Nordic open school has been able to develop a global presence while keeping roots in its own region. For instance, note the way its authors consider publishing matters. They write very

² This number has to be considered a rough conservative estimate. It updates numbers cited by Engwall (2003)

³ This order of magnitude results from an informal estimate made with the help of three Nordic colleagues.

actively in prestigious top-ranked international journals. Nevertheless, they have not neglected to send manuscripts to local or regional journals. They publish in English but also write in their native languages. Publishing in your native language suggests that English is not the only ultimate sign of success and quality. And sending your most ambitious papers not only to global journals but also to Nordic journals maintains, keeps a local publishing capacity alive both economically and scientifically. Another striking fact is that journal articles are not considered the main, or the only, legitimate criterion of scientific relevance. Books also matter as scientific achievements. They still provide a major channel of information and publications (Engwall 2003).

Nordic research has, therefore, at the same time benefited from and kept alive favorable pre-conditions at a time such as the latter part of the 20th century, when the geo-political landscape of organization science was changed in a dramatic manner. These factors have, at the same time, fueled distinctiveness and kept a local tissue of stimuli available while improving access to and visibility on the international scene. Nordic scholars probably rank among those having had the longest professional stays in foreign countries (Europe as well as the USA) among the organization theory community. They travel abroad, and they make an effort to understand how their foreign guests are doing research. Intensive exchange with non-Nordic colleagues induces Nordic scholars to avoid becoming prisoners of a regional ghetto in terms of ways of thinking, and to refrain from abandoning their own agenda or style for the purpose of becoming more universal.

This Nordic attitude was a major point of reference when, during the EGOS conference in Barcelona in 2002, David Wilson, Roland Calori and Jean-Claude Thoenig drafted a text defining what the EGOS values should be. EGOS, as a European based initiative, was to express European knowledge styles and intellectual traditions while at the same time being wide open to other perspectives and to the world at large. EGOS also understood the importance of establishing pre-conditions such as publication support or encounter opportunities with other regions and associations.

Disciplinary roots combined with interdisciplinary openness

A second fact addresses intellectual creativity and scientific rigor.

The Nordic research has maintained strong, explicit linkages with humanities areas such as philosophy, and with basic social science disciplines. This is clearly the case with regard to political science. Other disciplines such as ethnology, linguistics or cognitive psychology, just to name a few, also served as dynamic sources of inspiration and reference. Sociology as such seems to

have been less involved, which may surprise some continental colleagues. The way the Nordic movement or school handles interfaces and interactions with the area of economics should also be a source of inspiration for non-Nordic colleagues. Nordic colleagues have avoided behaving passively and become over-fascinated by this discipline, borrowing its latest fads or becoming overly intrigued by this discipline, borrowing its latest fads or replicating its dominant criteria of methodological excellence.

When comparing the Nordic situation with that of other European and non-European countries, it is remarkable to see that several business administration-oriented departments and schools were established quite early on, and that they had forged rather close connections with older universities. In other terms, they were not emerging - as sometimes occurred in other national settings - as parallel or even alternative models to the traditional academic institutional core. Nordic university reforms were usually handled as a balanced compromise between innovation and tradition, enabling business professors to maintain an academic ethos in daily professional life. More than in many other countries interdisciplinary pluralism and cooperation have therefore been kept alive. Dialoguing with basic disciplines has helped the organization theory perspective to pursue a broader intellectual and societal agenda, even when rooted in an action or management perspective. But it has not neglected epistemological issues, in any case.

Pluralism

The Nordic way also deals in a unique manner with paradigmatic and empirical pluralism.

Some approaches have been a major source of inspiration for the Nordic way, at least as measured in quantitative terms. The most conspicuous illustration of this is the overwhelming influence of an agenda for institutional theory. Other sources of inspiration are linked to the sociology of translation and to critical sociology. Most of the time the founding fathers were not Nordic scholars, but their American, French or German colleagues. At the same time, and this is a remarkable achievement, Nordic scholars have not produced clones or behaved as passive imitators of the masters. On the contrary, they have made decisive contributions in testing the models, refining when not transforming them. Nordic research has therefore co-authored knowledge in areas that are now universally recognized as key stages in the advancement of organization theory. Therefore, it is quite difficult to refer to a typical content profile of Nordic research. There are very different perspectives covering a variety of topics. At the same time, and to a large extent, peers conduct a dialogue and cooperate on common

research projects. . This openness, if not this broad coverage, may also be a condition for lasting success.

One should add that several Nordic scholars have not only been quite mobile in terms of specific topics, fields and theories, but also in taking part in specific ad hoc cooperative ventures. Niches that provide an income for life are not common. Scholars renew their research agendas, from the study of hypocrisy to the understanding of standardization, or from European integration to local government. Curiosity and creativity, these two challenges that most tenured faculty members do not handle easily, go hand in hand in the Nordic way. Two phenomena that often coincide with constraints on knowledge advancement, imagination, exploration and risk taking have been avoided.

One is the emergence of so-called schools or micro-sects governed by one charismatic and sometimes despotic academic figure. He or she controls resources such as career opportunities in a discretionary way, his or her clique of disciples being expected to do research in strict conformity with particular dogmas. Research becomes a way of building a monument to the master. Social and intellectual dependence are so important that any deviation from the common identity is punished by excommunication.

Another phenomenon that has been avoided is concerned with the evasion of processes that engender normal science effects. In too many countries outside the Nordic region, doctoral topics and paradigms are selected by students because they are currently considered fashionable in terms of publications by top-ranked journalists, or as opportunistic ways of entering the academic job markets. The danger lies in studying phenomena with stereotyped perspectives, and in producing a decreasing return on knowledge. Paradigmatic differentiation coupled with “publish or perish” policies foster overspecialized niches, repetitive agendas and over-formalized approaches. Technicians take over intellectuals. Nordic conditions favor the exact opposite. They allow people to take scientific risks at all ages, to explore new challenges without having to pay too high a cost for non-conformism to dominant paradigms. One may well argue that there are not many Nordic contributions that are rooted in quantitative as well as in highly formalized approaches. If we want to legitimize inductive research once again as a way of good science, we should take the Nordic tradition since the 1970s into close consideration.

Co-constructed identities

A fourth observation suggests how a common identity and scientific fate are engendered.

Nordic achievements should not be perceived as the outcome of a Prussian army type of integration. Institutional polycentrism, some forms of free riding, and strong national as well as linguistic and historical diversities, are all parts of the scene. At the same time, some processes have hindered centrifugal forces and have established socialization and cooperation processes that should not be underestimated: regional professional associations, ad hoc meetings, and ambitious cross-national projects.

Therefore, introducing regional cooperation settings and research agendas is not incompatible with building up a European scene, just as well as the establishment of the European base of EGOS is not contradictory to dialoguing at the international level with North America or Asia. One well-known example of the Nordic way is the Stanford consortium founded in 1988.

SCANCOR (the Scandinavian Consortium for Organizational Research) generated a program of more than thirty field studies conducted on public sector organizations, especially in Norway and Sweden. Incidentally it is worth noting that a US scholar, James March, played a major role as the founding father of a European cooperative effort, as was the case with EGOS when Michael Aiken, in 1993, convinced continental scholars to create a European forum. This program has been equally important as some other pluri-annual projects such as the Aston program on the formal structures of organization or the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations program on public administration in the 1960s and early 1970s. It has brought together a new generation of scholars and has generated many field studies. Last, but not least, it has provided a masterful demonstration of the fallacy of New Public Management, rational choice and agency theory, linking a normative approach of institutions with a powerful analytical tool kit for organizational functioning.

The point to be made here is that it has created a virtuous circle of identity. Nordic scholars have published quite a few collective books devoted specifically to Nordic studies. In a way, they have become excellent marketers in the field of science. Not only do they offer original and innovative products, but they also build a brand around them. Instead of aggressively pushing a new theory with an -ism at the end, they have found seductive ways to package a series of different perspectives and agendas under a common umbrella. Reviewing the March (Brunsson and Olsen 1998) and the Olsen (Egeberg and Laegreid 1999) Festschriften, Thoenig compares organization theory in Northern European countries to professional basketball in the USA (Thoenig 2000). The Scandinavian League, like the NBA, celebrates Most Valuable Players, identifies Rookies of the Year and shares rites. In any case, ethnographers should pay close attention to such an unusual dynamic, considering the factors that allow the participants to apparently find compromises between

differentiation and integration, between the pursuit of specific sub-identities or vested interests, on the one hand, and more collective identities, on the other .

Concluding remarks

Any reference to the Nordic area made by a non-Nordic resident should be handled with care. Starting in the 1930s, the Nordic area was considered by the rest of the world as the region where utopias became reality. Their grass was considered greener in all kinds of aspects of social life: the emancipation of women, industrial relations, participative democracies, the humane quality of work organizations, consensus building, etc. As far as organization theory is concerned, one should not overemphasize the non-Nordic academic vices and over-idealize Nordic academic virtues. At the same time, facts show that Nordic scholars have delivered. Even the theoretical and interpretative limits of their discoveries should be considered challenges for further research, by them as well as by all scholars around the world who belong to other traditions (Thoenig 2003). The Nordic contributions have paved a new way for our understanding of organizations as social configurations, of quasi-organized action setups, and of organizing processes. All of us around the world owe them a great deal.

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