Hans Hasselbladh & Fotis Theodoridis

CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

A CRITIQUE OF THE DOMINANT ASSUMPTIONS OF IDENTITY AND DETERMINACY

FÖRETAGSEKONOMISKA INSTITUTIONEN
UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

Department of Business Studies
Uppsala University
1996-04-22
Abstract

The instituted assumptions of identity and determinacy are elucidated regarding their implications for our understanding of the sources of constitution and change of social and organizational action. Built upon these assumptions, mainstream organizational research locates these sources in exogenous environmental forces and ascribes to the significative aspects of action and language a reflective-representational ontological status. We question these assumptions and their implications upon two premisses. First, that practical aspects of action and perceived environmental constraints lack any intrinsic meaning, since meaning is ascribed to them by the significative aspects of action and language, mainly by the instituted central imaginary significations of society or civilization. Second, that these latter lack any inherent determination of meaning, for they constitute magmas of meaning. An alternative approach is outlined upon these premisses.

Central concepts: organizational change, determinacy, identity, institutionalized significations, magma, social discourses and practices, elucidation, articulations-instrumentation, objectification-constitution.

1. Introduction

In recent decades the causes and processes of change in organizations have been subject of growing interest. Our main argument in this article is that mainstream research on the constitution of organizational action and changes in such action, builds upon two central assumptions. These assumptions, by delimiting the range of the intellectual and empirical questions that can be raised and the ways in which empirical observations can be pursued, interpreted and understood, can seriously restrict our understanding of the phenomena of organizational action and change. These two assumptions are derived from the historically deeply rooted logic and ontology of the empiricist-positivist tradition in the social sciences, but they intrude by implication into investigations committed to other intellectual traditions, which in turn limits the novelty of the theoretical and empirical interpretations that such investigations could have provided. Even more importantly, since they are not spelled out explicitly, these dominating assumptions also hamper the debate among scholars committed to different intellectual traditions, creating misunderstandings and fruitless controversies.

The first assumption concerns the identity relations between the significative and practical aspects of social action, and between the patterns of meaning and the patterns of behavior that constitute such action. In more general terms, it concerns the...
claim that, at least in principle, there is a potential identity between a society’s world of meaning and its world of things and relations; between the significations of language and its referents; between the signifier, the signified and the referent. In less general terms, it concerns the claim that a potential identity exists between representations of social reality or social action and the reality or action itself; between saying and doing, or between speech and action. Clearly, the potential identity may be claimed from both directions of the dyadic relation. Either it can be established as the truthful reflection and articulation of the practical aspects of action into significative aspects (of patterns of behavior into patterns of meaning, of doing into saying, or of action into speech), in which case it is assumed that there exists a true meaning that corresponds to or is inherent in the practical aspects. Or it can be established by the consistent instrumentation of the significative aspects into practical ones (of patterns of meaning into patterns of behavior, etc.), in which case it is assumed that there exists a consistent set of practical aspects that correspond to the significative ones. We will refer to this first assumption as the “assumption of identity”.

The second assumption concerns the nature of social reality in general, and the nature of social action in particular. It is claimed that social reality and social action are outcomes of causal relations, and that they can be explained by reductions into chains of cause-effect relations. Inevitably, this claim constitute a determinacy-indeterminacy continuum: either these chains of cause-effect relations are themselves reducible to a general or final cause of their determination, to an original link that represents the essence of social reality and social action and, consequently, the ultimate source of their meaning; or they are irreducible and thus undetermined, which means that we have to invent such original links repeatedly on an ad hoc basis, for the explanation of specific situations, without being able to assert their generality. Indeterminacy in the above continuum appears as an ineffectual attempt at determination and can be defined only negatively, as the absence of determinacy. We will refer to this second assumption as “the assumption of causal reducibility” or “the assumption of determinacy”. The two assumptions naturally presuppose one another, constituting a closed tautological circle: the assumption that social reality is causally reducible to its alleged essence presupposes a kind of identity (unity, consistency, algorithmic order) between that essence and the different manifestations of social reality - an identity which, established between the links in the chains of causal relations that are assumed to have formed social reality, could in principle be reflected or asymptotically approximated by social representations.

Research on organizational action and change presupposes a set of more or less explicit premises providing “ideal” conceptions about the constitution of organizational action, and about the sources, processes and outcomes of change in such action. The
premises underlying the “ideal” conceptions to which mainstream research on organizational action and change is committed, build - albeit most of the time implicitly - upon the aforementioned assumptions of identity and determinacy. First, in a topological separation of the organization and its environment, organizational action is conceived as being determined by various environmental "forces". By imposing constraints on the organization in its striving for survival or for the achievement of diverse sets of individual and collective goals, these forces exert upon the organization’s administrative, work and exchange structures and processes a functional pressure to adapt. The constitution of organizational action is then conceived in terms of causal relations (or co-variations) between environmental forces and organizational structures and processes. The reduction of these last to their effectiveness in handling the environmental forces in the context of different sets of goals (or the Paramount goal of survival) accounts for their inherent meaningfulness to researchers and the relevant actors involved alike.

Second, following from the above causal reductions, the sources of organizational change are located in the environment and are conceived as changes of the initial constraints imposed on the focal organization and always exogenous to it. The processes of organizational change are then conceived as more or less consensual, deliberately designed and rationally controlled processes of adaptation. These processes are then analyzed: (a) as various forms of cognitive processes through which the environmental changes are more or less identically reflected in the significative aspects of organizational action and articulated in the representational frameworks that convey the meanings ascribed to organizational action; and (b) as processes of more or less consistent instrumentation of the practical aspects of organizational action, i.e. of its administrative, work and exchange structures and processes. In brief, the processes of adaptation involve the processes of change in both the significative and the practical aspects of organizational action, whereby the former may reflect the environmental changes more or less identically and shape the latter more or less consistently.

Third, following the above idealtype claims regarding identity and consistency, the outcome of organizational change is almost routinely conceived and analyzed in an empiricist mode attaching to an unreflective realist ontology. Thus, real change primarily concerns the transformation of the practical aspects of organizational action, which thereby assume an ontological priority in relation to the significative or symbolic aspects. Change in the latter without observable effects on the former is not considered to be a “real” change but is seen as a lack of identity or consistency between the two aspects, as a kind of deviation that has to be explained in some way.

Imbued as they are by the assumptions of causal reducibility and identity, the above conceptions of organizational change, of its sources, processes and outcomes,
ascribe to the significative aspects of organizational action and to human language in general a reflective-representational ontological status. Human language is regarded as a sign or code system providing the conceptual means for reflecting and representing a social and organizational reality that is assumed to be ontologically independent of it. Consequently, the semantic field of language, i.e. the meanings that are conveyed by the significations of language, is conceived as reflecting and mediating - more or less identically or correctly - the "real" or "true" meanings that are inherent in the social and organizational reality itself.

In what follows we will explicate the above conception of organizational change and its underlying assumptions in order to throw some light on their implications for our understanding of these questions. In a rather tentative manner, we will indicate the outlines of an alternative conception of the constitution of social and organizational action, and of changes in such action, which builds upon another way of conceiving the semantic field or the significations of human language and, thus, of the significative aspects of social and organizational action.

2. Conventional Conceptions of Organizational Change

A debate between Brunsson (1989b, 1992) and Löwstedt (1991) epitomizes mainstream research on organizational change. It will be presented here as an illustration of the main conceptions adopted in this branch of research. The authors commit themselves to partly different intellectual traditions. Brunsson's analysis of administrative and organizational change is in many ways typical of the new institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 19830991). However, similar reasoning can be found in research based on resource-dependence and power perspectives (Edelman, 1976; Pfeffer, 1981). Löwstedt's theoretical framework of organizational action and change, on the other hand, is committed to functional, rational-cognitive and socio-cognitive perspectives, as it combines three conventional approaches to organizational analysis, namely contingency theory, decision-making theory and enactment theory. Apart from this difference in their commitment, the authors' reasoning is based upon rather similar conceptions of change and of its sources, processes and results. In both their cases the assumptions of identity and causal reducibility never seem far away - although because of the above difference, they can pose different theoretical and empirical questions and make different interpretations of their empirical observations.

As regards the sources of change, the authors adopt the conventional separation between the organization and its environment, and distinguish between exogenous
(external) and endogenous (internal) sources. Both, in fact, locate the causal sources of change in the exogenous environment. According to their reasoning, endogenous sources of change are not causes; rather, they are alternative ways whereby the processes of change are initiated and subsequently evolve within the organization. In Löwstedt’s view, exogenous factors such as a drop in demand, technological developments or the emergence of new institutionalized values compel organizations to adapt or face extinction. Similarly Brunsson seems to make a distinction between technological-competitive and institutional environments. The first of these constrains organizational action by exerting a functional pressure to attain efficiency and effectiveness; the second, consisting of institutionalized norms prescribing appropriate forms of organizational action, constrains action by exerting pressure to gain or maintain legitimacy. Organizations then have to adapt to changes encountered in both environments.

The endogenous sources of change, in other words the very processes of adaptation, are described by Löwstedt in two ways: as strategic choices or enactment processes. Change is then either imposed from the top as a consequence of the strategic decisions of management, or it emerges as a result of ongoing interactions among actors. Change of the first kind appears in the shape of reform. Change of the second kind emerges from collective organizational processes of adaptation. Within these processes, organizational actors continuously "enact" their environment, as an intersubjective reality, by interpretations of recurrent frictions between previous experiences and expectations and current constraining contingencies. Change emerges as the interpretation of these frictions gradually modify the previously established cognitive schemata, giving rise to new patterns of meaning and behavior, and subsequently to new formal structures. Naturally, these two internal triggers of change may occur simultaneously, either contradicting or complementing each other.

In sum, we have a relation of causal reductions between, on the one side, two exogenous sources of change or environmental determinants of organizational adaptation and survival, namely the technological-competitive and institutional environment, and on the other, two endogenous processes of organizational adaptation, namely strategic choices and enactments. In fact the causal reductions concern the relations between environmental determinants and the actual results of the processes of adaptation, i.e. the practical aspects of organizational action - the structures and processes of administration, work and exchange. Here we are encountering the peculiarities pertaining to any social determination in general and functional determination in particular, namely that the chain of cause-effect relations constituting such determinations must always be mediated by a factor which, at least for the relations in question, is itself neither cause nor effect. In the case of social
determination, whether functional or not, this mediating factor is assumed to be human consciousness and its cognitive (reflective-representational), willed and rational capacity. In the case concerning us here it is the significative aspects of organizational action as collective manifestations of the above capacities. It is here that the assumption of identity and its practical counterpart of consistency come into play. All conventional perspectives on social and organizational action and change treat this mediating factor in terms of identity and consistency. First, environmental constraints are assumed to be more or less identically reflected in the significative aspects of organizational action (ideas, theories and ideologies) and subsequently articulated into more or less coherent representational frameworks (strategies, programs, plans) and into more or less closed patterns of meaning (chains of means-ends relations). Second, it is assumed that, by the transformation of such significations, frameworks and patterns into technology, the practical aspects of organizational action are more or less consistently instrumented into more or less stable patterns of behavior, i.e. into administrative structures and processes by which the work and exchange structures and processes are controlled as regards their efficiency and effectiveness and coordinated as regards their means and ends. To put it briefly, it is assumed that the causal relations between environmental constraints and organizational structures and processes are mediated by a conscious, individual or collective dimension, which identically reflects the former and consistently instruments the latter.

Conventional approaches make idealttype constructions of these causal relations by taking the identity and consistency in the above mediation as given, or by presupposing it by assuming rationality on the part of the conscious dimension pursuing it. The whole development of these approaches and the different branches within them (including decision-making theory, as it will be maintained below) may be interpreted as the outcome of an effort to explain - theoretically and empirically - what appear to be inconsistencies or deviations from the idealttype constructions in the observable social and organizational actions and changes, in the relations between environments, organizational representations, and organizational structures and processes. This obsession with consistency, and the assumptions regarding identity and determinacy which underpin it, is still present even when authors such as Brunsson are mainly interested in understanding the sources of social and organizational inconsistencies or deviations from idealttype constructions. For just as bounded rationality or irrationality presuppose the notion of perfect rationality, at least as an ideal construction, so does inconsistency presuppose the notion of consistency: the inconsistent can be understood and empirically observed only in relation to the consistent.
The dispute between Brunsson and Löwstedt does not concern their different conceptions of change, as they build their reasoning upon almost the same idealtype construction of its sources, processes and outcomes; rather, it is a consequence of the fact that they emphasize different aspects of that idealtype construction, thus also explaining in different ways what may be considered as deviations from it in empirical observations. The crucial claim in Brunsson (1989b) is thus that the technological-competitive and institutional environments - in particular the institutionalized norms composing the institutional environment - are inconsistent with one another. These inconsistencies must then shape the adaptation processes and the ways by which organizations deal with their environment, regardless of whether these ways are the results of strategic decisions (reforms) or enactment processes. To the extent that inconsistencies are inherent aspects of the environment, organizations will come up against a stream of recurrent and in practice unsolvable problems, frictions and tensions. Moreover, the various norms of the institutional environment will supply organizations with general problem definitions and solutions which are incompatible with each other and uncertain as to the cause-effects relations between organizational forms and outcomes that they prescribe and advocate. According to Brunsson “organizations usually deal with inconsistent norms by reflecting them in their structures, processes and ideologies, which then also become inconsistent. Inconsistent norms create conflict structures, problem-oriented processes and hypocrisy” (ibid, p. 34). Hypocrisy provides a means of dealing with inconsistent institutionalized norms by reflecting them in the structures, processes and ideologies of organizations. This implies the systematic creation of inconsistencies between organizational talk, organizational decisions and organizational actions, in the sense that talk relies and draws upon one set of norms, decisions upon another, and action upon a third (ibid, p. 35).

In more general terms hypocrisy refers to the systemic creation of inconsistencies between the saying and doing of organizations, between the significative or symbolic and the practical aspects of organizational action, or between administrative structures, processes and ideologies and the structures and processes of work and exchange. This “irrationality” becomes the prerequisite for organizational action since, given the environmental inconsistencies, the rationalization of organizational action - i.e. the striving to achieve consistency between talk, decisions and actions - would otherwise paralyse any action. This is a line of argument to which Brunsson returns in a more recent work, where justification and hypocrisy are presented as alternatives to the conventional assumptions of consistency and control, i.e. to the assumptions that ideas and actions are consistent, and that ideas control
actions (Brunsson, 1995). In our explication, the conventional assumptions in question are outcomes of the assumptions of determinacy and identity.

The above conception of the environment as imposing inherently inconsistent demands on the organization, underpins Brunsson’s main conclusion, namely that administrative reforms, or changes as the result of strategic decisions, have become routine elements of organizational stability rather than of change. This is because such an environment leads to conflict structures and problem-oriented processes which can only be dealt with by recurrent changes of the administrative structures, processes and ideologies, even though these changes leave the work and exchange structures and processes more or less intact. In other words inconsistent environmental demands can be dealt with only by creating hypocrisy, which becomes an intrinsic part not only of administrative reforms but also of organizational action. These are the conclusions that Löwstedt (1991) criticizes so fiercely, calling for a firmer empirical foundation for the claim that reforms have become a matter of routine and a means for achieving organizational stability. In particular Löwstedt questions the notion of hypocrisy that arises out of this claim. Hypocrisy, accounting to Löwstedt, should presupposes the unstated assumption that organizational members act cynically, that cynicism is a personal attribute of management.

The conception of the environment as inherently inconsistent in the sense of imposing conflicting demands on organizational action, is not a new idea in the branch of mainstream organizational research, committed to the assumptions of causal reducibility and identity. It can be encountered in the development of decision making theory and in various political or power perspectives, where organizational action is variously regarded as the result of bargaining processes mediated by resource dependencies or by relative power relations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1979; Pettigrew, 1985). Such conventional approaches appear to explain inconsistencies without resort to the morally problematic notions of hypocrisy and cynicism. In any case, if we accept Brunsson’s description of the organizational environment, then his conclusions about reforms and his notion of hypocrisy as a means for dealing with inconsistencies are fairly reasonable. However, we must also admit that the use of such means presupposes some degree of cynicism on the part of those concerned, albeit not necessarily as a personal attribute but rather as an attribute of their administrative position: if hypocrisy is an intrinsic aspect of administrative reforms in particular and organizational action in general, cynicism is an intrinsic aspect of management.

What seems to us to be problematic about Brunsson’s conclusions is not the claims about reforms and the notions of hypocrisy and cynicism that logically underlie them, but two aspects of his reasoning - or rather, two implicit assumptions - whose implications are not immediately obvious. First, administrative reforms or changes in
administrative structures, processes and ideologies which do not have tangible effects on the everyday operations of an organization, on its work and exchange structures and processes, are regarded not as real changes but as inconsistencies engendered by hypocrisy. This view is symptomatic of the way mainstream research on organizational change conceives the content of change: naturally change involves the significative aspects of action, but a change is “real” or "true" only when it has observable effects on the practical aspects of action. Such an approach ascribes to the semantic field of language a reflective ontological status.

Second, the very distinction between a technological-competitive and an institutional environment, first introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), is problematic. It ascribes to institutions a reflective-regulative rather than an objectifying-constitutive effect. They are assumed to reflect more or less identically in terms of social norms - as carriers of social significations and cognitive and normative principles - the determining requirements of the technological-competitive environment, and to regulate more or less consistently - through the appropriate organizational forms which they prescribe and advocate - the organization’s administrative, work and exchange structures and processes.

The implications for our understanding of social and organizational action and change that arise from this way of viewing the significative aspects of action and of social institutions will now be examined closer.

3. Change as Spatio-Temporal Movement

Empirical observations in which administrative reforms are often characterized by “organizational talk” about change at the management level while everyday operations continue as before, and in which talk about change exists side by side with an absence of change in day-to-day activities, may be interpreted as manifestations of inconsistency between talk and action, between saying and doing or between the significative and practical aspects of organizational action (Brunsson, 1989a). However, such an interpretation can be problematized on at least two counts. First, it may be a logical result of the very way the content of change is implicitly defined in mainstream research on organizational change. The criterion for change seems to be that it must be manifest, observable and linked to some concrete transformation of resources. Anything that can be referred to the symbolic and significative sphere of human action, to the meaning-creating, meaning-conveying and meaning-ascribing functions of language, is regarded as secondary and less “real” or “true” relative to the more practical sphere of action. It is what we do rather than what we say that is
regarded as important, i.e. the observable interactions among actors and resources located in physical space and time, rather than the way the interactions are interpreted and understood in social space and time.

Second, the interpretation of the relations between the significative and practical aspects of action in terms of inconsistencies, presupposes that the latter can, at least in principle, be identically reflected by the former, since only then can we assert any inconsistency between them. If the assumption of causal reducibility accounts for the independent ontological status of the practical aspects of action, as a means for dealing with environmental constraints, the assumption of identity accounts for the reflexive-representative ontological status that is ascribed to the significative aspects of action. These assumptions converge in a claim that the practical aspects of action have a “real” or “true” meaning in themselves, which the significative aspects may reflect more or less identically or approximate asymptotically.

To assume, even as an “ideal” principle, a possible identity, unity or consistency between saying and doing or between the significative and practical aspects of social action - as an attribute intrinsic to their relation, rather than an institutionalized norm which is superimposed to and constitutive of social action - makes it impossible to Capture important aspects of organizational and societal processes. What is at stake here is that the study of social phenomena must be freed from topological thinking and metaphors derived from physics, engineering and biology (Kallinikos, 1993). The relation between physical, biological or mechanical processes and the formal or artificial language by which we reflect and instrument them may be successfully approached in terms of identity and consistency. But the relation between the significative-symbolic and the practical aspects of social action differ from that between natural-mechanical processes and formal-artificial language not simply in degree - in the sense that the former is more complex than the latter, something that should make the achievement of identity and consistency a matter of asymptotic approximation - but in kind. The relation between the two aspects of social action is primarily a relation of meaning, which is not an epiphenomenon of social action but constitutive of it. We may then approach this relation in other ways than that of the identical reflections by the significative aspects of the “true” meaning inherent in the practical ones or the consistent instrumentation of the latter by the former.

As a first premise of our own approach (the second will be presented in the next section), we assert that the practical aspects of social and organizational action (like physical, biological and mechanical processes) lack any inherent meaning and that meaning is always ascribed to them by the significative aspects of action - or by a signifying action that draws upon the significative field of language, a field which, as we will argue subsequently, can never be reduced to a formal or artificial code system.
Some general ideas and arguments that imply a radical departure from the assumptions of determinacy and identity are associated with this premise.

First, it is argued that the relation between the two aspects of social and organizational action is always determinable without thereby being determined (cf. Castoriadis, 1987). On the one side, the relation is determinable because we can always (and in the case of instrumental action, we have to) determine it, as the significative aspects always ascribe a meaning to the practical ones. On the other, this determinability is not an intrinsic attribute of that relation: taken in itself, the relation is not determined, as there is no exogenous foundation from which an ascribed meaning can claim exclusivity, uniqueness or truth. Social and organizational action in specific contexts is articulated as regards its significative aspects, and instrumented as regards its practical aspects, within the frameworks of institutionalized social discourses and social practices. These frameworks provide the general, decontextual determinations of the relation between the two aspects of action, and the general criteria for their identity and consistency. In other words, the relation between the two aspects of social action is determinable not because of any intrinsic attributes but because it is always already institutionalized. However, such determinations may differ between alternative discourses or between alternative representational frameworks within one and the same discourse, without any one of them being more real, correct or true - even though, within the significative horizon of a discourse, it might be regarded as reasonable to a greater or lesser extent.

Second, institutionalized social discourses and social practices are themselves articulated and instrumented into representational frameworks of general, decontextual social patterns of meaning and behavior around sets of instituted social significations - such as democracy, the rule of law, markets, bureaucracy, individual freedom, evolution, progress and rationality - which are central to a society or civilization in that it constitutes itself as society or as civilization in terms of just these significations. Castoriadis (1987) designates them as “imaginary”, in the sense that they are irreducible social-historital creations, while Meyer et al. (1987), referring to similar significations albeit from a rather different perspective, calls them "cultural myths". In any case, based upon such instituted imaginary significations or cultural myths, and by articulating them to social discourses and instrumenting them into social practices, a society objectifies and constitutes different fields of knowledge and action considered as real and true. In other words, social discourses produce outcomes of truth (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 60).

Third, it is argued that the institutionalized social (and scientific) discourses and practices of modernity almost always depart from the assumptions of identity and determinacy, when articulated as discourses and instrumented as practices into various
representational frameworks of meaning and behavior. They objectify and constitute the social reality and its different social fields of knowledge and action, upon the illusion that they symbolically reflect in their articulations, and practically realize in their instrumentations, the meanings that are conceived as inherent to that reality or those fields. Social discourses present themselves as representations of truth or as true discourses (Foucault, 1980) only upon the assumptions of determinacy and identity.

Fourth and last, the articulations and instrumentations of social discourse and practices are always pursued within and are the results of relations and strategies of power and resistance, regardless of whether or not these involve structures of domination and hierarchy. Relations and strategies of power can in fact only be exercised by providing a kind of determination between the two aspects of action, a relation that is almost always established by reference to some “exogenous” foundations.

The relation between the two aspects of action may then be treated as determinable, but not itself determined. It cannot be given an intrinsic, distinct and definitive definition, or be reduced to any objective source of determination. Thus, we cannot talk about any inherent inconsistency between the two aspects. Inconsistency can be ascribed to their relation by alternative social discourses, by alternative representational frameworks developed within one and the same discourse, or by the same framework that underlies their initial articulation and instrumentation - but only on the basis of consistency criteria which are provided by these discourses and frameworks and which are susceptible of alternative interpretation and reinterpretation. It can be strongly perceived by Observers and actors alike, but only through interpretations and reinterpretations of the practical aspects of action on a basis of previous or new representational frameworks, as is usually the case when management imposes a reform.

To sum up: in so far as change is conceived in terms of consistency between the significative and practical aspects of social and organizational action, researchers and organizational actors will be constantly confronted with situations which they will be experience as inconsistencies. Within the universe of possibilities circumscribed by the assumptions of identity and causal reducibility, inconsistencies can then be explained in several ways:

(a) They may be explained in terms of symbolic functionalism, as in early formulations of the new institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and in some instances of the so-talled "symbolic tum" in organizational research (Pfeffer, 1981), whereby the inconsistencies between the significative(symbolic) and practical aspects are interpreted as a result of system-maintaining and legitimizing activities.
Decoupling, rituals of confidence and good faith, and the avoidance of inspection and effective evaluation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), or hypocrisy and justification (Brunsson, 1989, 1994), are the tools of leading actors, who wittingly or unwittingly, try to deal with contradictory external demands and pressures.

(b) They may be interpreted within the framework of a power perspective, and can be seen as expressions of “the secrets of power” (Bobbio, 1987), or of “unobtrusive control” (Perrow, 1986), where cynicism is only one possible aspect of the exercise of power. Brunsson’s discussion of legitimation and hypocrisy as alternatives to control has its place here (Brunsson, 1994).

(c) They may be interpreted in line with a rational-cognitive, functionalist or individualist approach, being regarded as expressions of bounded rationality and uncertainty, i.e. complexity and unpredictability (March and Olsen, 1976), magnified by the problems of learning, scarcity of attention, interest conflicts, ambiguity and symbolism (Match, 1981);

(d) Finally, they may also be understood in an interpretivist or a social-constructivist perspective, being regarded as manifestations of the loosely coupled nature of organizational processes, as shortcomings in the processes of enactment of organizational reality, or as results of alternative lines of intersubjective interpretations upon which actors give meaning to their actions (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

However, all these interpretations are based on the assumption that the relation between the significative and practical aspects of action can in principle, or as an “idealtype” possibility, be determined. It is assumed that there is an essential meaning in the practical aspects of action which is both exclusive and true. It may be unknown, concealed or distorted, but it is there, waiting to be discovered, revealed, reflected, identified and clarified with the progressive growth of knowledge. Thus, it should be possible to penetrate the legitimizing facade, to reveal the secrets of power and the unobtrusive forms of control; it should be possible for rationality to abolish uncertainty and ambiguity, or to bridge the communication gap between individuals.
4. Change as the Altering of Meaning

A huge area of intellectual and empirical questions about change is opened up with the aforementioned premise that the practical aspects of action, taken in their mere facticity, lack intrinsic meaning, and that meaning is ascribed to them by social significations, social discourses and representational frameworks. As a consequence, one and the same observable, stable and recurrent pattern of behavior may assume an infinite variety of different meanings, articulated upon the same or different representational frameworks, social discourses and social imaginary significations. Obviously, every specific discourse and framework may determine the meaning of the practical aspects of action on the basis of the assumptions of identity and determinacy - thus generating its own consistency problems - but without any one of the different determinations being able to make valid claims to either exclusiveness or truth.

This has a more direct empirical bearing on the understanding of organizational change processes. The meanings which are developed among a group of actors can be changed over time, without any corresponding changes occurring in action patterns. Moreover, these meanings can also be confronted, contradicted and changed as a result of the actions of other groups of actors. This is particularly evident in changes occurring in the form of organizational control. Such changes are imposed at the local level as a result of “reforms” or "strategic choices", and often are aimed not at changing the practical forms of everyday work but at redefining the goals and purposes of the organization, its way of seeing its environment and the character of its internal relations, and at creating new types of actors (cf. Meyer, 1994, Forssell, 1992, p. 188 f). In such change processes it is an open empirical question whether the various actors will continue to interpret and understand the practical aspects of their action in terms of previously established meanings, whether they will reinterpret them as something different from both previously established and imposed meanings, or whether they will adopt the new ones. Neither the existing pattern of meanings nor reinterpretations of these meanings can claim to represent the "true" meaning of the practical aspects.

While the practical aspects of social action lack any inherent meaning, the meaning of the significative aspects of action and the significations of language in general lack an inherent determination. This leads us to the second premise underlying our approach to the relations between the two aspects of action. The significations of language, the meanings that may be ascribed to them or are conveyed by them, constitute what Castoriadis (1987) calls “magma”. With the conception of the mode of being of the significations of language as a magmas, Castoriadis avoids the “impasse resulting from the ‘logical’ approach to language”, i.e from the approach based on the assumptions of determinacy and identity. According to this approach, “either
signification is not determinable nor determined in an identitary manner, and then it is nothing; or, it is something and then it is determinable and determined, hence it is the univocal relation between this ‘word’ and this ‘thing’ or this ‘idea’, each unambiguously determinable” (ibid, p. 346). According to Castoriadis, "a signification is indefinitely determinable (and the ‘indefinitely’ is obviously essential) without thereby being determined” (ibid, p. 346; italics in the original). With that, Castoriadis "locates" the mode of being of significations radically outside the continuum of determinacy-indeterminacy. A signification is neither determined nor undetermined: it is just determinable, not at least, by the very fact that we can always provide a distinct and definite definition of every signification. It constitutes neither a closed, identitary system, where the relations between the signifier, the signified and the referent should be distinctly and definitely determined; nor an open, chaotic system, where any kind of determination should be possible; and not either something placed between these two - but just a “magma” of meanings, something which is always determinable (by us), but never determined (in itself).¹

Consider, for example, some of the central social significations of the modern West, such as democracy, justice, freedom, progress, rationality, organization, exchange. The meaning of these significations is not chaotic: not any sentence (meaning, signified) and not any set of social phenomena (referents) can define them. By subjecting these significations to the assumptions of identity and determinacy, we can always provide a distinct and definite determination of their meaning or their referents. But, what is "democracy"? what is “freedom”? what is “progress”? and what is “environment”? While a set of alternative definitions may be conceived to constitute

1. For an explication of the notion of magma, see Castoriadis (1987, p. 340). The notion of “magma” is developed by Castoriadis within his conception of the social-historital as creation, positing, institution and altering of social imaginary significations. Juxtaposed to what he calls ensemblist-identitary logic and ontology - which is based on the assumptions of identity and determinacy - the notion of magma is used to ascribe another mode of being (ontology) to the social-historital and to the significations of human language, and thereby to provide another logic for their elucidation and understanding.

The magmatic mode of being is attributed by Castoriadis to the significations of human language that have a referent in “rational” or “real” elements, or correspond to what he calls “the first natural stratum of society” - the physical and biological world, which is partially organized in accordance to the assumptions of the ensemblist-identitary logic and ontology. But it is mainly attributed to what he calls “social imaginary significations”. These latter are imaginary, because they neither correspond to, nor can be exhausted as to their meaning by, “rational” or “real” elements, and because they are brought into being through creation. And they are social, because the can exist only by being instituted. The first significations are amenable to varied criteria of objective truth. The latter are not, for they are constitutive of whatever may be accounted as criterion of their truth, as they create the social reality with which they are confronted.

Two of the main etymological connotations of the word “magma” - that of something that is easily kneadable, and that of a solid or liquid sediment or mixture of sediments - may account for its above use. What is easily kneadable is the meaning of a signification, and what constitute its solid or liquid mixture of sediments is the inexhaustible meanings that have been attributed to it through its history.
concentric (co-extensive or co-intensive) circles of meanings approximating a central core of meaning, as the bull of a dartboard, there exist not any such an absolute core, the alleged "true" or "correct" one. Rather, an indefinite multiplicity of such determinable cores (or dartboards) may be created and posited as criteria of definition of meaning, without thereby the above questions (significations) being determined. And these cores of meaning may be compatible, complementary or incommensurable, irreconcilable or contradictory to each other.

Notwithstanding, a society can articulate its social discourses and instrument its social practices - i.e. objectify and constitute itself and its different fields of knowledge and action - only by providing more or less distinct and definite determinations of the significations of its language.

The four general arguments that we have advanced in connection with the first premise can now be qualified in the light of this second premise.

First, we have to elucidate and understand the relations between the two aspects of social and organizational action, where the practical aspects lack any inherent meaning since meaning is always ascribed to them by the significative aspects, and where the meaning of these last lack any intrinsic determination, as they constitute magmas of meanings. Consequently, the relation between the two aspects of social action also constitutes a magma: it is indefinitely determinable without thereby being determined. The determination of that relation, as it appears within the different specific settings of a social field of knowledge and action, is contingent upon a process of closing, “freezing” and “solidifying”, the magmatic meaning of the main significations that are involved in that field. In fact, such a process of closure brings historically into being, objectifies and constitutes that field, by articulating the closed meaning of its significations into social discourses and by instrumenting them into social practices. In that sense, the relation in question is always already predetermined, in the general and abstract (i.e. decontextualized) form of its social field, by the instituted social discourses and practices which underlie the objectification and constitution of that field. In its more specific and concrete (i.e. contextualized) form, the relation between the two aspects of action is more or less distinctly and definitely determined by further processes of closure of meaning, whereby instituted social discourses and practices are articulated and instrumented into context-dependent representational frameworks and patterns of meaning and behavior. However, the processes of closure of meaning can neither eliminate nor exhaust the magmatic mode of being of social significations. Thus, alternative definitions of the same significations are always possible, and actually already available, giving rise to alternative discourses or alternative representational frameworks within one and the same discourse, and thus to alternative determinations of the above relation. Moreover, alternative sets of social
significations may be evoked in a social field in order to ascribe an alternative meaning to the same practical aspects of action.

Second, the instituted central social significations (or "myths") on a basis of which a society or civilization articulates and instruments its social discourses and practices, and thereby objectifies and constitutes its different fields of knowledge and action, are also magmas of meanings. Hence, not only the relation between the two aspects of social action, but also the totality of relations encountered within these fields, and within society in general, their very reality and truth, constitute a magma, or “magma of magmas”, always determinable without thereby being determined.

Third, the closure of the magmatic mode of being of social significations is undertaken on the assumption of identity and determinacy which, together with the assumption of rationality, progress and individual freedom, constitutes some of the central social “imaginary” significations or the "cultural myths” on the basis of which the societies of modern western civilization articulate and instrument their discourses and practices and objectify and constitute themselves as societies.

Fourth and last, the processes of closing the magmatic mode of being of social significations always involves relations and strategies of power and resistance, as these can be exercised only through social discourses and practices (cf. Foucault, 1980) which, in tum, can be articulated and instrumented only by such a closure.

The conception of the signification of language as magmas of meanings, determinable without being determined, has some important implications for the way we understand social and organizational action and changes of such action. When the meanings of significations are articulated, negotiated and reproduced by actors, there is an infinite chain of attempts to freeze and solidify them and the borderlines between them (Cooper, 1989). This project is always precarious and unstable, and the determinations and borderlines that are established, through the mediation of relations and strategies of power and resistance, are constantly being questioned, eroded and altered in daily interactions by these very relations and strategies. Thus it may perhaps be possible to identify a certain logic in the way the meaning of important significations has been defined in a society or an organization over a certain length of time, but the content of that meaning is not a "true" reflection of real experiences.

Rifts and inconsistencies in the meaning of different significations, and thus between the significative and practical aspects of action, are what always remains of our ambition to close and solidify meaning, regardless of whether this is done in intersubjective communication between equals or within relations of domination and hierarchy. The practical exercise of power is geared to a great extent to this; “social power (authority, law, organization) is the forcible transformation of undecidability into decidability” (Cooper, 1986, p. 323). The stabilization of meaning in organizations
is indissolubly connected with the very structuring of hierarchical relationships (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Hypocrisy and cynicism are evidently aspects of the relations and strategies of power and resistance, and are frequently encountered in relations of domination and hierarchy. What makes them possible and viable as social phenomena however, is the lack of any inherent meaning in the practical aspects of action and the magmatic nature of its significative aspects.

All the above arguments constitute points of departure for an alternative conception of social and organizational change. Naturally, organizational change may involve a process of reinstrumenting of the practical aspects of organizational action. But change also - or mainly - involves processes of rearticulation of the significative aspects of organizational action, of reopening and reclosing, destabilizing and restabilizing, decodifying and recodifying the patterns of meaning on a basis of which organizational actors interpret and understand their patterns of action. To put it briefly, organizational change involves the altering of the meaning of the central significations of organizational action and their replacement by alternative meanings or new significations.

Organizational change admittedly always concerns contextualized, organizational-specific patterns of meaning. But the central significations underlying the articulation of these patterns of meaning are never organizational-specific: they are instituted social significations belonging to one or more of the fields of knowledge and action that are encountered in a society or a civilization; and, as instituted significations, they underlie the social discourses that objectify and constitute the fields, the society or the civilization. Organizational changes are thus almost always initiated by an alteration in the meaning of these significations in the context of a field of social action, a society or a civilization. In this general context, change appears as social-historitical change, which is conceived by Castoriadis (1987) as altering of the meaning of the instituted central social imaginary significations on a basis of which a society or a civilization constitutes itself as a society or a civilization, and as creation, positing and institution of new meanings and new significations.

5. The Sources of Change as Exogenous Forces

The conventional conception of the causal sources of change emerges logically from the assumptions of identity and determinacy. The location of the causal sources of change in something that is spatially external and ontologically exogenous to what is being influenced and changed, is logically implicit in the assumption of causal reducibility. In its natural and biological version, this assumption claims the
immediacy of the cause-effect relation, in the sense that the cause is not mediated by something that is not itself part of the cause. The assumption of identity, on the other side, claims the uniqueness of the cause-effect relation, in the sense that the same set of causes, ceteris paribus, generates the same set of effects. In other words, these two assumptions claim a unique and unmediated effect.

It may then not surprise us that idealtype models of organizational action and change, like contingency theory and neo-classical economic theory, regard organizations and environments as separated by clearly definable borders, whereby environments are conceptualized in terms of objective forces determining the structures and processes of organizations in a unique and unmediated way. According to the tenets of neo-classical economic theory, which March (1981) refers to as “process irrelevance”, organizational actions are instantaneous and unique adaptations to an exogenous environment (ibid, p. 207). What we need to know in order to predict action are the organizational goals and the environmental constraints to which action has to adapt. The adaptation process itself is irrelevant, for action is totally determined by the objective environment. It may be added that, in the case of contingency theory we do not even need to know the organizational goals since, given the organizational striving for survival, goals are also determined by the environment. In March’s account of developments, it seems that the interest of researchers in the internal processes of organizational adaptation, at least regarding the research on organizational decision making, arose with the recognition that, in a complex and rapidly changing environment, adaptation is neither instantaneous nor unique (ibid, p. 208; see also Simon 1959, p. 255).

Nevertheless, the environment is regarded as consisting of "forces", whose status as causal sources of change and objective measures of the adaptation processes is assumed to be unproblematic. The assumptions of determinacy and identity have been slightly blunted, however, which opens up new areas of research. Exogenous causal sources of change are mediated by endogenous adaptation processes, whose outcomes may be variously successful in dealing with the changing environmental constraints. Second, the form of adaptation is not unique, since it is now assumed that the environment provides more than one action alternative, and while these may have different effects on the decision maker’s goal achievement, they are more or less equivalent as regards adaptation, thus leaving the possibility of the partial achievement of diverse or even contradictory goals. Research on the endogenous processes of organizational adaptation and change has subsequently developed along two theoretical and empirical lines which can be distinguished by the way they describe the forms whereby the processes of adaptation are mediated and the extent to which that
mediation can be guided by the accumulation of knowledge about the effects of the environmental forces.

The first line, associated mainly with the development of decision-making theory, conceives the processes of adaptation as being mediated by rational-cognitive processes. The three basic tenets of this approach are the wishfulness and rationality of action (March, 1981), and the claim that organizational decision makers may accumulate more or less correct knowledge, or "true" representations of the environmental constraints, and the organizational responses or action alternatives that these prescribe. Rationality, as the logically consistent connection between goals, environmental constraints and organizational action, then provides the meaningfulness of the action concerned. However, the development of decision-making theory from perfect rationality, through bounded rationality to garbage can models, implied a gradual problematization of these tenets. According to March the theoretical development, confronted by an empirical reality where “decision processes often appear to follow other kinds of logic" and where “the rational elements in decision making often appear to be more symbolic than real” (ibid p. 211), has proceeded via a number of refinements and modifications of its basic tenets so as to allow for bounded rationality, learning, interest conflicts, ambiguity, scarcity of attention and symbolism. March’s conclusions on this development are: (a) that the theory has become increasingly contextual, accounting for particular decision processes as outcomes of more incidental rather than of necessary and prescribable chains of independent events, which occur in the confluence of relatively autonomous streams of history, (b) it has become more interpretive, trying to close the schizophrenic gap between the rational-logitical theory of the researcher and the ordinary pragmatic knowledge and sense-making of the decision maker, by giving greater intellectual credibility to the logic of the latter, and (c) it has still not offered any universal propositions; providing neither precise explanations of the past or present nor making precise forecasts of the future, the theory offers (descriptively) interpretations of past and current events which are just incremental to those of the decision-makers, and contributes (normatively) with knowledge which is only marginal to the ordinary pragmatic one - “like good consultant theory”. In short, we have a shift towards contextual interpretations, just additional to those of the decision-makers, and propositions which are particular in their applicability.

Decision-making theory thus seems to be converging with the second theoretical and empirical line of pursuit, where the processes of adaptation are conceived as mediated by social-cognitive processes. The following are the two main tenets of this approach. First, relations between the organization and its environment must be approached and understood in terms of the intersubjective interpretations of the actors.
involved and of the adaptation processes that follow those interpretations. Second, it is not possible to view environmental constraints and the forms of adaptation which they may prescribe as enabling claims to greater “reality” or “truth” than the actors involved can provide. Actors do of course create representations of their environment, in the sense that they reflect or “enact” it conceptually, but this does not allow us to talk of their representations in terms of truth. In a collective process, in which actors seek to interpret and understand their environment, there are no given "precepts". The forms for adaptation emerge gradually as individuals articulate their interpretations of the environment on the basis of common understandings and shared classifications of reality (Weick, 1979). Thus an understanding of the “organizing process” involves not only the way the actors in a collective bring some order into the impressions from the exogenous environment that “reach” them, but also the way actors “enact” that environment, as actual perceptions of their common world are prestructured by earlier experiences and expectations and restructured by the currently experienced frictions. In a neo-evolutionist perspective, the emergent outcomes of adaptation processes are conceived as more or less successful realizations of a "structural potential". This is certainly circumscribed by the environment, but it is neither determined in its content, nor possible to predict or prescribe in advance (Tsoukas, 1993).

What, then, can we say about the way in which the above conception of the exogenous sources of change and the endogenous processes of adaptation can help us to increase our understanding of organizational change? Exogenous explanations, with varying amounts of detail, can indicate different "forces" - such as changes in demand, technological changes or declining legitimacy - which, it is assumed, compel organizations to make adaptations or to condemn themselves to ultimate extinction. The only way to make this idea meaningful within the framework of a study of social and organizational action is to combine it, as Löwstedt (1991) does, with theories about the way the adaptation process assumes the form of a rational-cognitive or socio-cognitive process - as top-down strategic choices in the organization or day-to-day interpretations and adaptations from below. Organizations thus change as the result of a perception of external relations as being full of friction, without any indication of its causes or of what should be done about it. Change thus arises from strategic decisions and proactive action programs, or from the emergent outcomes of the uncontrolled and constantly ongoing processes of enactment, as new action patterns and cognitive structures are transformed into formal organization. In any case, it seems that approaches of this kind are more suited to describing the actual processes of organizational change rather than its sources and the significative content of change.

In our interpretation, the development of the different approaches to the sources and processes of organizational change is the result of a painful effort to deal with the
problematic consequences of the assumptions of identity and determinacy. Even when these consequences have been more or less explicitly problematized and questioned, as in the case of the development of decision-making theory and neo-evolutionism, the initial assumptions are still there, blocking and channelizing the intellectual orientations and modes of reasoning.

What we see as problematic in research on the sources and processes of organizational change, are two interrelated points. First, the environment is still conceived as the ultimate source of change and the ultimate measure of the adequacy of the processes of adaptation. The determining force of the environment is present, albeit in different ways, in all the aforementioned approaches from neo-classical economic theory and contingency theory to decision making theory, enactment theory and neo-evolutionism (cf Fuenmajor, 1993 for the inherent determinism of this last). Second, the very forms of organizational adaptation, i.e. the different forms of hierarchic-bureaucratic structuring of the administrative, the work and the exchange processes, and their significative content are assumed to be determined by the constraints imposed by environmental forces. Whether they are created as strategic decisions based on more or less "true" representations of the environment, or whether they are the outcomes of emergent processes based on shared interpretations of this environment, the forms of organizational action and their meaning are assumed to emerge from the effort to deal with environmental constraints.

6. The Sources of Change as Instituted Forces

Starting from two premises concerning the lack of inherent meaning in the practical aspects of action and the magmatic mode of being of its significative aspects, we have outlined an alternative conception of the constitution of social and organizational action and the processes and content of changes in such action. We have argued that social and organizational action cannot be reduced to outcomes of chains of causal relationships. We have stressed the importance of understanding and elucidating the way in which social objectifications and constitutions occur, on a basis of the instituted central social significations of a society or civilization, and the instituted social discourses and practices to which they give rise. Action is articulated as regards its significative aspects and instrumented as regards its practical ones on a basis of these significations and discourses. We have also argued that organizational change may involve both the rearticulation of the significative aspects and the reinstrumentation of the practical ones. However, as their relation constitutes a magma, it cannot be viewed
in terms of identity and consistency, since either of the two aspects can change without there being change in the other.

To the two premises underlying our conception of social and organizational action we can now add a third: as in the case of the practical aspects of organizational action, whatever may be perceived, experienced or accounted by actors as an environmental constraints lacks any intrinsic meaning, for taken in themselves, in their mere facticity, such constraints are neither comprehensible nor action-generating. Evident and distinct changes such as the introduction of new competitive products, dramatic price changes or changes in legislation are not in themselves action-bearing (Fligstein, 1990). Lacking any inherent meaning, whatever is regarded as “environment” cannot constitute the sources of organizational change, nor can it determine the appropriate forms of organizational action. These sources and forms, and their relation, have to be searched for in the central social imaginary significations of a society or a civilization, in the instituted social discourses and practices that are articulated and instrumented around those significations, and in the ways these discourses and practices objectify and constitute the different fields of knowledge and action that are encountered in that society or a civilization. We will briefly indicate here three initial points of reference that such a project of elucidation might have in relation to western civilization.

First, it may be argued that the societies of the modern West are the only ones hitherto known to us that have constituted themselves on the basis of an instituted image of their historical being as a state of incessant change. This image is conveyed by the social imaginary signification of evolution which, invested with positive, normative and moral-political values, appears as the imaginary signification of progress: of ceaseless economic, social, political and cultural development. The driving "forces" or the lineages of change may be found in what Castoriadis (1987) refers to as the instituted central imaginary significations of capitalism: the signification of unlimited scientific and technological development; the signification of the economy as the pivotal lever and the material basis of progress; and the signification of rationality - or of the unlimited expansion of the “rational domination” of the world (cf. Castoriadis, 1995, p. 20), the rational mastery over nature, society and human consciousness (and unconsciousness), and thereby over history and human destiny.

Second, around the instituted central imaginary signification of individual freedom (or autonomy), of market economy and of public and private bureaucracies (or hierarchies based on the rule of law), the western civilization has also articulated and instrumented its discourses and practices regarding the organizational forms in which progress - or the rational project of domination of the world - will be pursued.
Third, around each one of these (and other) social imaginary significations - and on the basis of the assumptions of determinacy and identity, which are themselves instituted imaginary significations, albeit not only of the western civilization - the western societies have articulated and instrumented one or more social discourses and practices, and they have objectified and constituted a social field of knowledge and action.

Thus, the sources of social and organizational change, the forms for handling with them, and the relation between these sources and forms, belong to a mode of being that is not organized in terms of determinacy and identity but in terms of magma: they are determinable (by our discourses and practices) but not determined, for determinacy belongs to a mode of being that is alien to them. There is no intrinsic, necessary and inevitable relation between perceived uncertainty in the exchange processes, for example, and a particular configuration of the hierarchic-bureaucratic form of organizational action, with regard to effectiveness, survival or whatever other measure of effect. The relation that is there is of a radically other sort. It is created, as a magma of magmas, by the confluence between at least three diverge forces of objectification and constitution: that of the instituted discourses and practices that objectify and constitute a field of knowledge and action and managed- depending on their internal dynamics, inconsistencies and contradictions - to closed it into more or less stable and recurrent (i.e. "certain") social patterns of meaning and behavior; that of the instituted discourses and practices developed around the human being which objectify and constitute it as social individual and as subject; and that of the discourses and practices of power, which objectify and constitute a social field of knowledge and action as a field of relations and strategies of power and resistance.

What are perceived as environmental constraints must be articulated within a representational framework in order to become subjectively and intersubjectively meaningful: meaning is ascribed to them by their articulation within such a framework, although different frameworks ascribe different meanings to them. We can not of course deny that the articulations of past and present experience and the instrumentations of current forms of organizational action adopted by actors, may be conceived by these actors as locally created and more or less tailored to locally perceived environmental constraints (Hasselbladh, 1995). However, both definitions of organizational problems and articulations and instrumentations of solutions are all, at least in their decontextualized form, institutionalized, and thus available as discourses for framing local interpretation and action. Problem definitions are hence powerfully prestructured by discourses embracing whole groups of organizations or even "organizations" in general. To these definitions variously developed action programs are linked (Scott, 1994). If a perceived friction in an organization is interpreted as a
problem of democracy, it can lead to a very different program of action than if it were seen as a problem of control (Hasselbladh, 1995). The idea that the change is "out there", that it “hits” the organization and then generates internal interpretations, is thus not reasonable. In order to get away from the spatial metaphor it is important to focus on the way problem formulations are constructed in organizations within the framework of discourses which go beyond the individual organization.

This is a crucial point made in the new institutional school, and a promising way to analyze how change processes are socially constructed in organizations (Fliqstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; Scott, 1994). This applies mainly to the recent formulation of the institutional perspective in Scott & Meyer (1994), which is closer to the conception we have outlined here. By that, institutions are not considered merely as regulative of social and organizational reality but primarily as constitutive of it. For example the distinction between the technological-competitive and institutional environments, which is deeply rooted in the assumptions of determinacy and identity, cannot be seen as a point of departure for analysis. Social constructions of that kind have to be analyzed and deconstructed. While some of the researchers committed to that school have managed to get rid of the assumption of determinacy, however, the whole school is still captured by the assumption of identity, as this is conveyed by the categories of isomorphism and homogeneity.

To sum up, the sources of change in the western civilization may be understood by the elucidation of three complementary and gradually more contextual levels of reference.

(a) The level of society or civilization, where the sources of change have to be sought for in what the society or civilization itself, or rather its instituted central imaginary significations and its varied social discourses and practices, articulate-instrument and objectify-constitute as its sources of change.

(b) The decontextual level of a particular social field of knowledge and action, where the sources of change have to be sought for in what the imaginary significations and the social discourses and practices that are particular to that field objectify and constitute as the sources of change in that field. But mainly, they have to be searched for in the frictions, inconsistencies and contradictions between the claims for outcomes or expectations (in terms of progress for instance), which society and individual and collective actors have invested in the significations, discourses and practices that are encountered in their field, on the one side, and the way society, individuals and collectives interpret and understand their experiences in that field. It is through such interpretations and understandings, and in order to make sense of their field of
knowledge and action, that social actors - involved in relations and strategies of power and resistance and in structures of domination and hierarchy - gradually alter the meaning of these significations, switch and change their initial meaning, or invoke alternative significations - giving in that way rise to new social discourses and practices, or new representational frameworks and patterns of meaning and behavior.

(c) The contextual level of a particular setting of organizational action, where the sources of change might be sought for in the perceived frictions, inconsistencies and contradictions between the significative aspects and the practical aspects of organizational action that individual and collective actors (differentiated by relations of domination and hierarchic structures) interpret and understand by invoking the instituted significations, discourses and practices that are available in their field, and by altering, switching and changing them through recurrent articulations-rearticulations and instrumentations-reinstrumentations of the significative and practical aspects of their actions.

Thus, for example, in elucidating the sources of change in a field of knowledge and action which we can call private and public bureaucracies, we might recognize that there is nothing resembling an exogenous technological-competitive environment to which bureaucracies adapt more or less rationally. What is there, in the “environment” of organizations, is the instituted imaginary significations and the instituted social discourses and practices on technological development, on free market competition, on bureaucracy and rationality, which have all been articulated and instrumented on a basis of the instituted assumptions of identity and determinacy, and which, on the basis of the same assumptions, have been objectified and constituted into "a world out there to be managed". We may then recognize that these significations, discourses and practices are not exogenous but endogenous, and that not only to every organization but also to the minds of all individual actors who articulate and instrument the significative and practical aspects of their action on their basis. Finally, and not surprisingly, we might recognize that the conceptions of organizational action and change that have been criticized here are variations of those instituted social discourses and are thus part of the subject matter of the elucidation project.
7. References


