

## THOUGHTS ON UNDERSTANDING OUR ORGANIZATIONS

### *Abstract*

*The development of new public organizations require new analytical perspectives. It seems, for example, necessary to face a set of questions concerning the management of a variety of cultural groups within one organization. If we consider them to be a complexity of professional, generational, gender etc. cultures, these systems will appear in new light showing new details when revisiting conventional topics of analysis such as processes, communication, management, leadership or organizational design and development. A new challenge of the postmodern age is to build a state that will be stable and adaptive at the same time – to identify where to show which of these qualities, however, the adoption of value-centred thinking will be essential.*

*Az új közszervezetek létrejötte új elemzési szempontokat vet fel. Az egyik lehetőség a kulturális sokrétűség kezelésének kérdéscsoportja. Ha és amennyiben szervezeteinket szakmai, generációs, gender- stb. kultúrák komplex rendszereként fogjuk fel, a tradicionalista társadalmi háttér előtt új színekben fog feltűnni mindaz, amit a folyamatok, kommunikáció, vezetés vagy szervezetfejlesztés tekintetében az új szempont megmutat. A posztmodern kor egyik kihívása, hogy olyan államot építsünk, mely a megfelelő területeken lesz ellenállás- és alkalmazkodásképes, ehhez viszont az értékvezéreltség elvi és gyakorlati alkalmazása elengedhetetlen.*

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## TRADITION AND ORDER

Our organizations seem to follow patterns that go back to the 19th century or even earlier. The birth the combination of centralization, bureaucratic operations, territorial or professional divisions, or even functional organizations go back to at least to the modern age royal absolute states where such great organizers as Richelieu or Mazarin in France and others tried to ensure that fiscal incomes covered both military and luxury expenditures of the ruler they served, thereby building up structures, organizations and institutions that became the corns from which the state (as we understood the term until, let's say, the 1960s) and its organizations developed. The French example, spread by the cultural fashions of the Age of Enlightenment and reinforced by the effects of the Napoleonic wars, created a Europe where financial operations and fiscal health was seemingly impossible without standardized, formal, bureaucratic operations executed by a professional apparatus. The continuous modernization of the state was also forced to further develop throughout the 19th century social and political movements so that by the time the modern bourgeois state structure becomes the norm in most of Europe, modern management thinking may start with criticising the practices of business and public organizations along the very same criteria we seem to use today too.

Today's public organizations, or the state, as we call the super-system they constitute, may be described, analyzed and criticized by the very same structural categories as in the times of Weber or Fayol. Even the modernest textbooks on organization behaviour list, explain and use such terms as „work specialisation”, „hierarchy”, „span of control”, „chain of command”, „departmentalization”, „formalization” or „centralization” [4].

The world itself, however, has changed – the categories may be similar, but the values given are pretty much different, even the opposite than they were a hundred years ago:

- Work specialization, for example, that was seen as a key to efficiency in the first decade of the 20th century, nowadays is criticized as a source of boring, demotivating jobs that offer no challenge or opportunity for development.
- Tall hierarchies are thought to add little value to the work, while flat ones are usually associated with professional, even multi-professional decision-making and operations.
- A relatively narrow span of control, which used to be a premise of direct managerial control, seems to have lost much of its relevance with the appearance of self-managing, highly educated and motivated co-workers, democratic team-management, multiprofessional project teams, etc.
- The chain of command as a communication channel of the hierarchical organization has lost much of its importance due to the improvement and strengthening of a number of other vertical, lateral, and usually more informal communication channels, its role being limited practically to the bureaucratic registration and documentation of certain types of “hard” data in certain more or less standardized (and therefore limited) forms. Those organizations where managers seem to almost exclusively build on formal vertical communication may suffer of insufficient information input for decision-making.
- Formalization has become to be seen as a probable hindrance in terms of organizational innovation and creativity, adaptability and proactivity partly by filtering out “soft”, tacit knowledge from communication, partly by limiting access to people, partly by leading to reductionist thinking and avoidance of informal, chaotic, emotive processes present in any “organic” organization. The mere amount of rules and regulations may press the air out of an organization and its members, hinder the understanding the “big picture”, and cause misconduct.
- Centralization was originally meant ensure that knowledge, power and authority are together at the top of the organization to produce quality decisions. Nowadays,

however, it seems rather to hinder the proper functioning of decision-making processes, especially when unnecessarily putting a distance between the problem, the knowledge or solution and the authority needed.

The above examples may probably be enough to show that there has been a considerable change in the second half of the 20th century. May one call it the appearance of knowledge societies, the „fourth wave” or the postmodern revolution, the main key to understanding it is to see that our societies and organizations, instead of unifying and standardizing relatively large masses of uneducated, unmotivated people in strict order, rather bracket educated and highly motivated, autonomous individuals, adult, colourful personalities with diverse values and interests in looser and much more flexible and changeable sets.

## **CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND TRADITIONAL ORDER**

Cultural diversity is there in both of our environments. Despite the probably rather uniform Hungarian national culture, our society is divided by various subcultures of different types. The term may be effectively used to describe not only geographic differences – if you think of the still surprisingly vivid contrasts between behavioural patterns and lifestyles of inhabitants originating from the territories west and east of the Danube, those of the capital and “the country”, townfolk and village dwellers, etc. – but it can also be adapted to similar contrasts between generations, professions, even genders [7].

Our environments abound with such differences. If you only take our University, it has been meant to become a melting pot of values characterising various professional groups of the military, the police, the catastrophe management, and, of course, those of the public administration sector. Neither of them are themselves uniform in their character. If you take the military, it is relatively easy to recognize that the air force and the army, the officers and the flag officers, the foot soldiers and the artillery represent culturally and politically well-distinguishable groups. Cultural differences between ranks and age groups may – but do not necessarily – interrelate. Also on the public administration side, the differences between the value systems of professionals coming from the world of law, politics, central or local administration, or education are easily palpable. People from various parts of the country, students and professors, researchers and educators, management and staff, sexes, age groups and those at various steps of the career ladder coexist in a colourful disharmony we call “university”.

Social processes of education, and those of higher education probably even more, may pretty well represent a society's workings. It consists a complicated network of participating individuals, groups, organizations and institutions, non-linear, very dynamic processes and multiple connections, and multi-looped feedback systems, that not only manages the cultural reproduction and development of future social complexities, but also is a product of the present ones, and therefore it may well serve as an analogue model for the whole society – we may observe the whole in the part, so to say. At the same time, of course, it is also necessary to keep in mind that this “social-cultural reproductive subsystem” is an integrated, only artificially separable part of the texture of society that shows qualities, effects and influences of its super-system – sometimes it may be misleading to forcefully try and tell the part from the whole [3].

The National University of Public Service may therefore be seen as a social-cultural experiment. Three bodies, three institutions, three culturally very different social organisms have been merged into her. Behind the purpose of creating such a unique educational institution (justified and unjustified) political and cultural motifs are usually identified, such as the historic traditions of the Royal Hungarian Ludovica Defence Academy, various international and national ideas and theories of public servant education, the aims and objectives of the national educational strategy, and the respective political will rooted in them [9]. No wonder that such

a complex institution with its complex organization and processes, its many-folded social and professional embedding and mutual interdependences with other spheres of society can only be understood if it is seen in its synchronic and diachronic environment, that is in its present state as well as a result of complex historical processes. The currently so fashionable “integrative” and “comprehensive” approach to its analysis is practically unavoidable. It all may probably sound a bit complicated, but perhaps you might also begin to feel the intellectual thrill, too, in our present situation: others have to travel to the Brazilian jungles to be part of a cultural anthropological research and spend enormous amounts of resources to identify, monitor and study rather slow social developments and wait for their consequences, while we practically live in the midst of a rapidly developing turmoil of processes and face the results of hectic social change day after day.

The institutional reaction to the unforeseeability of its future and the instabilities characterizing the first phases of the organizational life cycle naturally result in efforts of stabilization. Due to, among others, the European traditions of *étatisme*, the matter-of-fact answer to such a challenge is to try and regulate behaviour. Both Hungarian culture and political tradition have a definitive legal component – it is enough to think of Arany János's poem, *The Nightingale*, that everybody reads (and probably also tries to memorize) at primary school, or to check the educational background of the modern-age Hungarian politicians of ours to agree to the validity of this statement. Also, representative figures of the present political *élite* or even the management of our University come from the legal profession. The other professional cultures represented at the strategic top management and above also prefer this type of solutions. No wonder therefore that since its birth the University is actively indulged in regulating procedures and aspects of the daily life of its members.

Documents such as our Organizational Operations Regulations Manual (NKE 2015), the Quality Strategy Manual (NKE 2013-2015) or the Institutional Development Plan (NKE 2012-2015) rightly define the University as an institution supporting innovation and organizational learning to facilitate its long-term survival, that aims at identifying its opportunities and utilizing them for the sake of its own operations and development. However, as the essence of education is the awakening of curiosity and interest, where it is the educator's task to set the way (e.g. by providing a curriculum), and to set up a creative environment in which students in cooperation may identify and process new areas of knowledge together, without their active involvement central regulations may easily miss the target and reduce education, unwillingly, to a traditionalist process of mental programming, where the educator is in the roles of the filter, the funnel and/or the megaphone, that is, they can – following central regulations – select knowledge gained, provide a comfortable, though not too efficient channel to the student to get the necessary knowledge delivered to them, or function as active representatives of the will of the centre. Nobody wants that, of course. We live, after all, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [11, 12, 13].

## **KNOWLEDGE, STRATEGY, DYNAMISM**

In an extremely *étatiste* mind the state, that is the whole of our public administration system together with the government and “high” politics, seems to be somewhat personified. It serves as the one and true operative and institutional environment, the final organizer, facilitator and coordinator, the final “task owner” and job provider. As a private person (and I would by no means say here “individual”), as a member of the state, the final community, as a tax payer (which is probably a far more close synonym to “citizen” in such a culture), and as job assignee each and every of us is due to be part of its hierarchies, dutifully operating its processes, adding our own resources (time, work, sometimes even thoughts and ideas) to the realization of its plans and objectives. We are in the State and the State is in us. Such a 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century

“modern” thinking is an integral part of the European heritage and, undeniably, also our national culture.

In an extremely individualist mind, the citizens as the owners and financers of the state reserve the right to form it according to their needs, wants, wishes and desires, as a whole and in its parts, in its formal and informal manifestations, always keeping in mind that the main aim of any group, community, society, together with their organizations and institutions, is to make that one life everybody has better, improving circumstances from generation to generation, and to help the individual to make the best of it. What is actually “the best”, is practically no one's business but that of the individual. The citizens do not give over part of their rights, work and other resources to any community, let alone the state – they keep ownership. Groups, organizations, public administration bodies and even the state itself is but mental constructs helping the individual to live a fulfilled life without taking away the same opportunity from others. Their personalization is a dangerous mental simplification. Such thinking, originating in the New World, is probably becoming more and more widely accepted in Europe too due to the development of her democracies as well as the popularization of “post-modern”, deconstructive attitude and ideas.

Social realities are probably somewhere in between. We tend to believe a stronger state is necessary where we are not able to easily defend our own interests and defy it when its seems to work against us. We seem to prefer “authority” when we have it, and become “resistant” when we don't. But if a successful society is one with citizens who are in a position to live a full life, then organizations (including the state) are there to help those who can't do it on their own to reach there. And this responsibility cannot be put on any formal and legalized mental construct – it always lies with the individuals. Such a world, however, needs organizations that help the individuals – or rather help the individuals help each other so that together they may understand and follow the faster and faster changes in their world, use its opportunities, strengthen each other, influence, but at the same time, let them evolve and follow their own ambitions. We still have to learn how to build, maintain, develop and run such organizations. The West seems to have been facing this problem since probably the 70s, we from the end of the 80s, early 90s. There are therefore models available for consideration when looking forward to new solutions.

The quality of the day-to-day functioning of public organizations is influenced by how their strategies are (1) created and (2) realized. In these processes it is essential to have the suitable human resources, i.e. the people with the right kind of intellectual capital (including knowledge, creativity, sensitivities etc.), behaviour, skills and capabilities, contacts and networks ... and to have such complex schemes of communication (let it be formal and informal, vertical, horizontal and diagonal(!), organized and spontaneous; and behind all this, of course, there should be a supportive culture) that ensures their participation and cooperation in both creating synergy. It may be difficult for us to think about the public sphere as a network and public organizations (or even the state) as (merely?) a framework holding public efforts together, but probably by the end of the present century we shall also learn how to do so.

It will probably also be not without any problem to accept even the possibility, feasibility or substantiality of such a continually fluctuating, unbalanced, or at least partially unstable, ever-altering, sometimes unforeseeably, even hectically changing organic super-system as an alternative form of “state” for social existence and organization. Presently we miss the solid knowledge and our value systems are also unready for such a task, but down in the deep one can feel the pulsation of the “new world”. New values, new forms of social behaviour, new forms of regrouping human and other resources, new links and networks, new systems of rule- and decision-making, new tits and bits data, information and knowledge, and new ways to manage them – this is but a part of what we are to acquire in our century so that we can understand it (and in it ourselves), utilize its opportunities and survive its challenges.

Change, however, usually starts first – understanding follows way back later. Probably it is only natural, it may even be good so. No one would ever tear down the existing faulty, but functioning building of a social subsystem to build a completely new one. It is far too resource-intensive, and societies are rarely hyperactive enough to demolish their own existing organizations.

There is, however, one particular constellation of factors when organization structures are to change: when changes in the environment make it evident that change is necessary, but the leadership of the organization is not in picture. They do not have the necessary information and knowledge to enforce meaningful alterations of their organizations. If you know what, why, and how to do, you start with reorganizing processes; if you don't, you start with organization structure. The past three or four decades of military reforms in Hungary focused on organization structure as changing anything on the process level would have required a concentrated action concerning the “Holy Trinity” of military management thinking: human resources, other (tangible and intangible) resources and tasks. Any modification of one of these induces changes in the rest. As no social investment was possible, they, for a time, remained untouched ... and as with time people retired and machines outdated, tasks were, on the quiet, “reinterpreted”. If any outside pressure forced the military system to modernize, it resulted in either one-time targeted investment (when the resources could be made available due to political support), regrouping the organization (centralizing, when “rationalization” was required or decentralizing, when personal interests requested new positions), or “modifying” the military education scheme (if sources were to be drawn away). Any of these were executed so that certain tasks became impossible to be carried out and were therefore stamped nominal. It could hardly be realized, what was going on – it is however evident, if you see the proceedings at a time scale of 20-40 years. And now, we see a military that cannot effectively stand against outside factors ... and once they will really be requiring military modernization, those generations who have been growing up at NATO schools and missions will possibly have also an idea what to do. The only missing factor remaining in this scheme is national financing, that will remain a problem unless economic developments turn to the better.

In one way or an other, the military went after social changes, but as it seems, ahead of organizational ones. While military reforms started with constant downsizing from the early 80s, and a radical centralization of financing and procurement (followed by privatization and outsourcing of support services) at the end of the same decade, the 1990 changes put the public sector at a very different starting point. Due to the local and central income resources the local governments were provided with so that they can finance their tasks, the organization of public administration sector followed another way where modernisation attempts were supported with enough money and know-how to prevent rapid downsizing but far from enough to modernise them. At the start, it seemed to provide a relatively large freedom for municipal governments to provide for their inhabitants and execute a relatively large scale of tasks locally. In the course of the next two decades, the logic behind the changes seems in retrospect something like this:

1. offer relative freedom and more or less enough sources for local governments to execute a large amount of tasks on spot;
2. due to central financing problems, reduce their central provisions, suggesting local cost-saving and “entrepreneurial” policies to be introduced to avoid local negative effects of decreasing budgets (“new public management”) – continue so regularly lowering central financial support;
3. when local financing makes it impossible to provide certain services, solve the problem with extra central financial injections to cover annual deficiencies and European resources without the necessary massive help (know-how, advice etc.) in the field of financial investments or local economic reinvigoration;

4. when central finances become more and more difficult, try strengthening the local “entrepreneurial” spirit by suggesting local investments to be financed by local borrowing, partially from international sources (e.g. Swiss franc loans);
5. when, due to the international financial crisis, local debts are becoming more and more difficult to redeem, and due to the lack of money local expenses are becoming evidently impossible to finance, offer state intervention on the one hand and, on the other hand, take away tasks and incomes from the local governments, using various techniques of centralization, nationalization and reorganization.

The final result is that in exchange for saving the self-governments from their debts, they are stripped of their societal tasks, becoming practically local executors of the centralized state, that can be handled practically as any other central government body: they can be reorganized, rationalized, regulated, even eliminated. If they don't follow central command, they can fear to be left alone with the redemption of their debts. The way is open for étatiste reforms: the condemnation and anathemization of New Public Management, liberal political philosophy etc. and the introduction of a form of authoritative centralized governance.

Now practically the two spheres are in a relatively similar position: both the military and local government bodies are trying to find their place in the new centralized system and collect the necessary skills and know-how to do their job. The unstable environment, the lost social imbeddedness, the missing knowledge due both to the new situations and the retirement or rationalization of whole generations of colleagues, and the loss of decision-making authority to organization levels much higher up in the state hierarchy will have left no other way out for them to survive, just to see for new possibilities of recovery. [10]

## **ORGANIZATION CULTURE, COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL RECOVERY**

One possible key to their situation may be their organizational cultures – the schemes of shared values that define what behaviour patterns are to be followed and accepted within the profession and the organization, and also what individuals can expect in return for following them. These values may help or hinder that a creative, able, and competent leader or co-worker could use their creativity, skills and knowledge so that they protect, help and develop their environment [2].

We live in times richer and richer in data, information and knowledge, but scantier and scantier in time available. As they are faster and faster, so they become more and more similar, standardized, monotonous – consisting, together, that informational background noise that taking away capacities may slow down, or even freeze organizational processes. Due to the effectiveness of a number of (biological, psychological, social and technological) defence mechanisms, our decision-forming and decision-making processes can (and have to) work with a limited amount of them. To ensure that they do not get overburdened, a number of gates, closing and slowing blocks and barriers, filters, parking zones and roundabouts hinder, slower, select, order, delete or defer their flow so that they can either be filtered out, rejected for any reason or simply they get obsolete. If you build a new, artificial, “mechanical” system and concentrate on vertical, formal communication channels only, the organizations will simply not be able to function. Either too much unfiltered information will get through it to the colleagues, or far too little. It is impossible to get close to the ideal, unreachable target of organizational information systems, namely the case when every individual gets hold of enough data, information and knowledge, at the right time, right format and right place to do one's job.

Modern organizations, however, try to build cultures in which coherent, functional, effective and efficient operations of professional co-workers, their cooperative efforts, teamwork, individual and

shared ambitions, creativity and innovativeness are valued. Organizational processes built on such capabilities utilize and at the same time reproduce, even multiply such internal (“endogenous”) resources. To make use of them, however, we have to build complex, organic communities within the frameworks of simple, mechanical organizations.

Public organizations, military or civilian, though existing within the same environment, have different objectives and focuses, therefore they see themselves as well as their common environment in rather different ways. Some parts of the objective reality will come forward for one, while the same parts may remain peripheral or even hidden for the other. Although they are led by the national and societal values of the same country, due to the different organizational objectives and focuses they may see and assess them differently too. No wonder, therefore, that individuals socialized in different social subsystems do have (sometimes radically) different value systems and mindsets. Values such as “obedience” or “courage” may have a number of slightly (or sometimes even radically) different connotations in the military and the civilian sphere.

A common point in all public organizations is a set of core values including, for example, consciousness, purposefulness, and “regulatedness” or control. They prefer (duly or unduly) rational, target- and result-oriented, proper operations. An advantage of such thinking is that these organizations tend to be ready to provide for rational, target-oriented and regulated professional research and education necessary for their existence [4]. They can be, however, either blind, or even inimical to (1) non-rational, non-target-oriented, unregulated factors of their (inner and outer) environment, (2) research and education aimed at the creation of knowledge that would serve the recognition, understanding and management of such factors. Without acknowledging this weakness, without investing extra organizational resources and managerial efforts in compensating for it, no public organization may maintain a smooth and harmonic coexistence with its in most cases not rational, not purposeful, and ill-conditioned environments.

A university may be the right place for such an investment. University culture supporting diversity, creativity and innovation, maintained by a traditional European form of consensual organization, is probably the one and only type of institution which may be made sensitive to topics concerning the “blind side” of public service culture. The National University of Public Service may be successful in strengthening the reproduction process of “endogenous” resources within public service organizations, as well as in providing the necessary attention to their “blind sides”, offering therefore a useful addition to the thinking of its uniformed and civilian leaders alike. [5, 6, 8]

## CONCLUSIONS

The heritage of the National University of Public Service, even more than those of many other public institutions in Hungary, is diverse. Each of our faculties represent different professions, development and history, and administrative environment. The idea of a unified public service career model is a the construct that presents them with a common ideology. This has been, however, a novelty – much has to be done till the institutionalization process will complete and structural unity will be filled with lively content. Until then, individuals as well as various units of the organization will have to face newer and newer challenges that require the acquisition of competences they do not yet dispose of. The identification of the presence of such competencies in other parts of the organization, as well as their diffusion are essential.

The diffusion of knowledge should involve both explicit and tacit sets. Due to the fact that the latter may be linked to the culture of a professional group relatively strongly, their effects are more difficult to calculate. Attention must be paid to situations where such information does creates a strong (rational and/or emotional) reaction in the receivers. Due to their dissimilar culture, values and perspectives, they may have a pretty different understanding and reactions.



Stronger reactions may bring more creative solutions, but also seclusion. Another possible danger may be that the “novelty” in the information gained falls to the “blind side” of the receivers' professional culture. Permanent, centrally encouraged, supported and furthered communication, however, may result in a gain in effectiveness on the long run. It has to be learnt also how to listen to each other, how to balance between old and new views, how to avoid “safer” but ineffective traditional responses and not to repel seemingly “riskier”, but probably more useful ones just because they are unusual. The dissimilarities of cultures may be harnessed as a source of organizational innovation.

A basic requirement in such situations would of course be that the leaders “do not follow the thinking of the autocratic manager who ensures that his potential opponents stay away, or who is incapable of recognizing the competence of his subordinates, because in this way the reference power of his co-workers and subordinates cannot develop.” [1]

In case of starting a new, multicultural organization, organizational development cannot be seen as a one-time investment. It is rather an on-going effort aiding the strengthening of interdependence, mutual communication, support and cooperation of differing groups at all formal and informal levels.

To manage and to develop a multi-cultural public service and its University effectively, new lines of management and organization thinking are to be followed. We cannot avoid the active adaptation and utilization of “post-modern” managerial thinking available from the 1970s. Project management, lean process control, knowledge management, cross-cultural communication are but four of the methodologies that offer some kind of solution to the present challenges. No traditional “statesmanship” can substitute honest and open replies to some sensitive questions such as:

- What cultural groups (ages, professions, gender, etc.) comprise our organization?
- Which of them are relevant?
- What set of values describe their ideas and ideology?
- What set of values do they use to describe themselves?
- What set of values describe their actions?
- Where are their culturally generated hindrances (“blind sides”, management myopias, biases, etc.)?
- Where are the common points between the main group cultures?
- How can we use them to build a common organizational culture with their help?
- Where will differing cultural values hinder understanding?
- How are group cultures distributed within the organization? What cultures dominate certain levels and parts of the organization?
- How do group cultures influence transformational, informational, decision-making and power processes of the organization?

The effectiveness and efficiency of public service education and practice will depend on, among others, the management of cultural diversity in our organizations. A bit of post-modern thinking may help recalibrate both individual, organizational and societal thinking so that instead of a future bringing the ineffective rule of grey, rigid, autocratic, and bureaucratic organizations, a system consisting of more humane, developing, challenging, colourful multicultural institutions will set the framework for the workings of our society [14].

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