Carlo Ginzburg and the Paradox of the Large in the Small

> These are essentially mute forms of knowledge in the sense that their precepts do not lend themselves to being either formalized or spoken. No one learns to be a connoisseur or diagnostician by restricting himself to practising only pre-existent rules. In knowledge of this type imponderable elements come into play: instinct, insight, intuition.
>
> Carlo Ginzburg, Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method, pp. 124–125

An instance worth a thousand.

J. W. v. Goethe, Theory of Colors, p. 109

The paradox of the large in the small

Probably the most important as well as the most difficult to understand phenomenon found in transformational processes relates to the connection between the "small" and the "large." Do everyday work situations say anything about the quality and progress of large-scale change projects, and if so, what? Understanding this requires a special approach that does not view these two dimensions separately, but instead regards them in a reciprocal relationship.

In sociology, preference is given in multiple ways to the "large," the structural, when it is presumed that the norms, discourses and expectations cultivated over time and permeating society have a pivotal influence on individual behavior (e. g. Émile Durkheim,[214] Talcott Parsons[215] or Niklas Luhmann[216]). Alternatively, the focus since the 1980s has increasingly shifted to individual behavior, and authors have raised doubts that such a thing as "society" exists at all (e. g. Alain Touraine,[217] Philippe Descola[218] or Bruno Latour[219])[220]. In this chapter, I intend to de-

214 Durkheim, É. (1966)

215 Parsons, T. (1966)

216 Luhmann, N. (2012/2013)

217 Touraine, A. (2013)

218 Descola, P. (2013)

219 Latour, B. (2005)

220 For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that, in contrast to these two theoretical strands, another one has developed that takes a non-essentialist approach to the concept of society, but also does not understand it in terms of the individual. Representatives of

scribe a third option, a paradoxical path that combines both aspects and classifies the impact of transformation managers in a special way.

For the sake of my argument, I am assuming that individuals, through their manifold interactions in their local environments, create overarching patterns in the social fabric that we perceive—as noted by George H. Mead[221]—as social[222] rather than physical objects. Participation in a social experience of this type has the effect of creating an identity while *simultaneously* having repercussions on the individuals who cause the social object (e. g. a transformation process) to appear through their interactions. Paradoxically, the "small" and the "large" as seen from this perspective mutually define each other. As we will see later, this also affects our understanding of the phenomenon of "leadership"—namely, not only as the impact of individuals who can be understood as distinct from other group members, but rather also as a paradox as described by the organizational theorist Chris Mowles: "… [T]he social conditions choose the authority figure as much as the authority figure shapes the social conditions."[223]

Mowles refers to sociologists who have succeeded in establishing a relationship between the micro and macro perspectives and who emphasize the impossibility of drawing a sharp line of demarcation between them.[224] As understood by these thinkers, the two are mutually dependent. However, all of them also point out that the relationship is not a linear one. When lo-

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this strand include Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), Claude Lefort (1990), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2020), Marcel Gauchet (1991) and Oliver Marchart (2013).

221 Mead, G. H. (1934, 1970)

222 Such social objects are characterized by the fact that different people react similarly under similar circumstances, e. g. because they are members of an organizational constellation, a company.

223 Mowles, C. (2022), p. 135

224 Mowles refers primarily to Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias.

cal action triggers global phenomena or when more extensive phenomena affect individuals, unexpected repetitions, ramifications, resistance and unpredictable amplification and attenuation occur. Keeping this non-linearity in mind is an extremely difficult task for anyone managing transformations because it means that the planning of large-scale change projects must reckon with events and circumstances beyond our reckoning, as Hannah Arendt would say.

A group that has been endowed with authorization to act and adequate resources can try to set a transformation in motion. But even processes that foresee the participation of the concerned parties or put their trust in winning over a critical mass in the number of people committed to the new cause, crossing a tipping point and mobilizing the entire organization, rarely run a direct course to the final goal. The underlying error in common planning and implementation practices is the frequent failure to consider the non-linear quality of the interconnectedness of the local and the global, as tight as the relationships may be.

The nature of the local and the global as two sides of the same coin becomes apparent at the latest when a seemingly logical approach presented by the company management is thwarted by counter-logical arguments within the workforce. These counter-logical arguments can be imagined as currents in the social fabric that point to connecting lines between the local and the global. They are so difficult to grasp because they do not so much exist as insist, as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would put it.

Since the connections between the local and the global have an insistent effect and are not linear, they are difficult to predict and essentially almost impossible to control. It is tempting to suppress the associated complexity or to simplify it so that you and others are given the impression that you do in fact have everything under control. But we never really have everything under control. Intentional, unintentional and unexpected elements are always happening at the same time. As explained in

the chapter on Ralph Stacey, this does not mean that nothing can be done. Rather, it means that you must intervene in a particular way. Repression or simplification means that we are inevitably and constantly surprised by counter-logical arguments because we underestimate their complexity.

This simplification and repression is typically indicated by a language noteworthy for its excessive use of abstractions obscuring the actual complexity of the connecting lines among the various local actors and the overarching patterns in the social fabric. For example, it may speak of the necessity to achieve strategic goals or a call to shape sustainable change as depicted in grand visions without explaining how exactly this is to be achieved. Unless the steps for achieving these goals and their significance in daily practice are described, however, they can never be more than lofty dreams. The representatives of top management often find it difficult to help to translate these dreams into actual practice. Either they interfere in day-to-day operations to such a degree that directly reporting employees are given the impression of being tutored on how to do their job or the abstract ideas remain so general that they have no recognizable value. A pause for reflection that fosters the understanding of all involved parties or even critical questioning of the stated objectives that would result in the adoption of these objectives in the discourse often fails to materialize.

In consequence, the expressed ideals are carried by individuals into their working groups in such a fashion that each one now tries to find his or her own path to move from the abstract to the concrete. In their efforts, directly reporting employees reassure themselves of their skills, are surprised at some of the seemingly strange comments "from above" or ignore theoretical wordings of objectives that offer them no help for implementation.

In addition, no matter how good the intentions of top management or the associates in charge of the transformation may be, there will inevitably be interpretations that were not in-

tended by anyone. From the multitude of entangled interpretations—intentional and unintentional—an event now emerges that paradoxically begins to have an impact *beyond the various local circumstances of the individuals* and supports the appearance of global phenomena, e. g. a transformation process.

If the influence of these various local interactions on the more general social fabric is to be understood, it is important to keep in mind that the underlying process is a social one, not a mechanistic-physical one. This fact is often ignored when, for example, organizations are discussed as layered constructs, systems or even living organisms.[225] Spatial metaphors illustrate the relationship of the local and the global. Understanding the *social* aspects, however, requires a temporal, i. e. a processual understanding, not a spatial one, as this makes it much easier to understand the unexpected dynamics that often make transformation processes so sluggish.

My aim in this chapter is to find a means of recognizing these dynamics and to demonstrate how we can interact productively with them, and so I will be introducing a form of reasoning that is rarely discussed: abduction. Most people are familiar with deduction (deriving the particular from the general) and induction (deriving the general from the particular). Abduction follows a completely different logic. It attempts to "infer(s) causes from their effects."[226]

The attitude associated with abduction is an openness to unexpected and surprising findings.[227] It is a case in which "… [T]he oldest act in the intellectual history of the human race:

225 This analogy is logical because the root of the words "organization" and "organism" is the same. In the Middle Ages, the term "organization" was thought of in relation to the human body and its parts; later, the organ was something that fulfilled a function.

226 Ginzburg, C. (1989), p. 104

227 Apel, K. O. (1981), p. 240

the hunter squatting on the ground, studying the tracks of his quarry."[228]

The microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg cites an old oriental fable as an example of this type of reasoning. A man has lost a camel, and during his search for the animal, he encounters three brothers. Although the man has not given them any information about the object of his search, they presume that it is a camel. They also know that it is carrying two skin-bags, one filled with oil and the other with wine. Indeed, they can give even more details. The man cannot believe that the brothers know all this without having seen the camel, and he suspects that they have stolen it. He has them arrested. Later, they are able to explain to the astonished judge in minute detail what tracks and clues they had read and how they were subsequently able to deduce what the man had lost. The story calls the three brothers the Princes of Serendip. It has long been retold in many different forms, including in Europe, where Horace Walpole coined the word *serendipity* in 1754 to describe the gift of repeatedly making happy discoveries based on attentive observations of the world.[229] This "gift" describes the essential elements of abduction. Abduction has been interpreted in different ways. I use it here in the following sense:

> … [L]ike a "working hypothesis" that can be modified, reconstructed and developed further. The focus is … on pursuitworthiness of an idea for further development, not whether it is to be accepted in the form it is in.[230]

Sami Paavola, Professor of Education, Learning, Culture and Interventions at the University of Helsinki, also mentions several strategies that promote abductive reasoning, among them: consciously looking for anomalies and surprising or conspicuous

228 Ginzburg, C. (1989), p. 105

229 Ibid., p. 116

230 Paavola, S. (2023), pp. 43–60

phenomena; paying special attention to small details; formulating hypotheses while simultaneously emphasizing that they are no more than that; and being attentive to patterns that lead to unexpected new contexts. He sums them up in the same place as follows: "A basis for such abductive strategies is the idea of reasoning used by detectives."[231]

In short, this chapter will be concerned with this form of reasoning and how it can be used to read clues in the social domain and from these clues to recognize unexpected inputs into and influences on transformation projects and to render the link between the local and the global understandable. My approach to the achievement of this goal will involve the examination of several examples from practice. These clues are not easy to find; they are concealed in small gestures, contradictions, emotional reactions, the presumably illogical and denials. Often enough, they come to light only when you hear what is not said in the spoken word or when you read texts against the grain, as Walter Benjamin has suggested.[232]

The thesis of this chapter proposes that often the inconspicuous or initially seemingly completely incomprehensible gestures are a valuable source of clues indicating what is actually happening in large-scale transformation projects. The reasons for resistance that would otherwise become noticeable at best as perceptible, but intangible, cold currents can be experienced in such gestures. Since these gestures often manifest themselves either in micro-practices or in surprising twists and turns that we tend to ignore because they make no sense at the moment, we need a special method to aid us in recognizing the contours of the shadowy existence of these practices. I submit that this recognition—as exemplified by the Princes of Serendip—becomes attainable solely through particular attention to detail and that explanations for phenomena on the larger scale can be found,

231 Ibid., p. 15

232 Ginzburg, C. (2012), p. 4

paradoxically, by viewing them with a magnifying glass that reduces the field of observation.

I call the fact that macroscopic relationships can be recognized especially well with the support of microscopic observations the paradox of the large in the small.

Microhistory

Probably no other discipline has been able to link local events to broader social dynamics as effectively as microhistory. It emerged in Italy and France in the 1970s as a counter-movement to the more quantifying Annales historiography of French historians and from there spread around the world. A few representatives should be mentioned here: Giovanni Levi, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, E. P. Thompson, Luis González and Natalie Zemon Davis. More recently, István M. Szijártó, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Matti Peltonen in particular have made contributions. But the best known of all microhistorians is probably the aforementioned Italian Carlo Ginzburg.[233]

The diversity of the authors and their backgrounds have led to significantly divergent interpretations of what actually characterizes microhistory. Nevertheless, they all share common features. Matti Peltonen from Finland emphasizes one aspect in particular when he describes how microhistorians begin with the concept of the *exceptional typical*.[234] In Peltonen's opinion, this focus can be seen particularly well in Ginzburg's article *Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes*.[235] For him, all three

233 Levi, G. (1976, 1989); Le Roy Ladurie, E. (1980); Thompson, E. P. (2013); González, L. (1982); Zemon Davis, N. (1984); Magnússon, S. G. and Szijártó, I. M. (2013); Peltonen, M. (1999); Ginzburg, C. (2011, 2023)

234 Peltonen, M. (1999), p. 348

235 Ginzburg, C. (1989)

of the eponymous figures have a common trait: they have an unusually keen eye for peculiar irregularities and the seemingly negligible.

In the 19th century, for example, Giovanni Morelli used an unusual method to evaluate whether paintings claimed to be from old masters were copies. Unlike the forgers, he looked especially closely at the fingernails and earlobes of the depicted figures and, by carefully examining these details, often neglected by forgers, was able to determine quickly whether he was looking at an original. Freud succeeded in describing the psychological suffering of his patients to a depth no one before him had ever reached by considering the significance of brief slips of the tongue and seemingly incoherent dream fragments. Then there was Sherlock Holmes, who—in contrast to his dull companion—famously solved his cases thanks to his sharp eye for inconspicuous trivialities. As Ginzburg explains in his article, it is the ability to pay attention to the smallest details that allows us to deduce larger contexts.

In interpreting the connection between the "small" and the "large," Ginzburg emphasizes a particular observation: microhistorians are keen to find a factor that disrupts a coherent appearance and requires explanation. Or, as he puts it:

> By this I mean starting an investigation from something that does not quite fit, something odd that needs to be explained. This peculiar event is taken as a sign of a larger, but hidden, unknown structure.[236]

On the same subject, Peltonen refers to another author who was the central figure of the first chapter and whose work was in part very similar: Michel de Certeau. The illuminating power of a focus on the *exceptional typical* can be seen particularly well in one of his works. In *The Possession at Loudun*,[237] de Certeau

236 Peltonen, M. (1999), p. 349

237 de Certeau, M. (1996)

investigated the extraordinary case of demonic possession of several nuns in the small French town of Loudun in the 17th century. He recognized that certain forms of possession were becoming more frequent at this time, and he wondered how they related to larger social processes of the era. Peltonen highlights two important findings of de Certeau: first, a spreading social insecurity resulting from a sustained loss of power by the church in favor of other political actors; and second, an increasing resistance to exclusively clerical interpretations of the world on the part of marginalized members of society such as women or the illiterate for whom the symptoms of possession made possible the exercise of a certain resistant power against church officials. Interestingly, de Certeau says that he arrived at these interpretations solely by focusing on a "significant deviation,"[238] a term that is obviously very close to the idea of the *exceptional typical* of microhistorians.

Peltonen notes an interesting point here. The link between the particular and the larger perspective is revealed especially clearly by a processual, temporal view. Only from this viewpoint does it become clear what the microhistorical approach has to offer:

> It is … interesting to read famous microhistories from the temporal point of view. It is typical of much of his [Ginzburg's] work in that it is based on an enormous temporal tension. … [T]he result that Ginzburg wants to communicate … is created by the collision of an exceptional event with the long historical structure of popular culture. This special moment brings into the open structures whose importance is much more difficult, if not impossible, to see in other periods. … This aspect of the microhistorical enterprise is not adequately illustrated by the spatial metaphor describing the focusing of attention on small areas.[239]

238 Peltonen, M. (1999), p. 353

239 Ibid., p. 350

In two of his most famous works, *The Night Battles*[240] and its sequel published 20 years later, *Ecstasies*,[241] Ginzburg investigates an incredible story that emphasizes the importance of this temporal aspect. While studying old Inquisition documents from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, he comes across the story of the Benandanti (the "Good Walkers"), peasants in the Friuli region in northern Italy who once a year "set out" in their dreams to fight against evil spirits and witches to secure good harvests for themselves. Ginzburg notes that over a period of more than 50 years, the Inquisitors succeeded in reshaping the peasants' self-image to such an extent that they now saw themselves as witches and sorcerers, i. e. as the very people they were originally fighting. The reasoning was that the peasant ritual within what was actually a Christianized society was unambiguously based on pagan religious practices, even though the peasants always emphasized that they served only the one—Christ—in their battles. The beliefs in an intermingling of pagan rituals and Christian faith of this nature must have seemed bizarre to the inquisitors, and they repeatedly attempted over decades to strip the ritual of its Christian foundation, eventually succeeding.

Moreover, Ginzburg made another discovery during this long-term study. Beginning with the *exceptional typical* in the old documents, he worked his way forward and uncovered an astonishing fact: such rituals were widespread throughout the entire European continent at that time. He found traces of the Benandanti custom in Latvia, Bavaria and the Balkans as well as in Italy.

Ginzburg first encountered a historical anomaly when he read about the strange fertility cult of Friulian peasants in an essentially Christian society. He exploited this rift in history and discovered underground networks reaching far beyond the northern Italian region and whose connections could be traced back at least a hundred years.

240 Ginzburg, C. (1983)

241 Ginzburg, C. (1991)

Author Alexander Schnickmann has contributed to Ginzburg's work, and he describes Ginzburg's approach to interpreting historical events as a hermeneutic that differs from that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who was the focus of the previous chapter:

> … [I]n a strange parallelism to his subject, Ginzburg also always moves along the boundary between two worlds, although it is a boundary that is riddled with rifts. There is such a rift in the circle of origin of the underground myths and ideas that Ginzburg discovers among the Benandanti, namely, the transition from the world of the living and the dead. … [These] rifts [demand] an art of understanding and interpretation that does justice to their somewhat uncanny nature. … Hans-Georg Gadamer found such a moment, which makes the process of understanding possible in the first place, in the dialectic of tradition and interpretation—a movement whose synthesis … culminates in the merging of horizons. Carlo Ginzburg's hermeneutics … however, is a hermeneutics of rifts that are suitable for interrupting the discourse.[242]

These are the rifts in the social fabric to which microhistorians are especially attentive: that which resists the uniform narrative and reveals a "hidden reality that structures everyday experience and must therefore remain invisible in everyday life."[243] The ability to see these rifts must be trained, but once you have the skill, you realize that such rifts occur more frequently than you had thought. They are important because they provide clues to larger webs in the social underground that elude a superficial view:

> If you know what to look for, the world suddenly appears as a world full of rifts. And it is part of the dynamics of rifts that,

242 Schnickmann, A. (2020), pp. 22–23, translation by the author

243 Ibid., p. 25, translation by the author

where they leave their traces visible on the surface, they continue to spread in secret.[244]

Before we continue to see how this kind of Ginzburgian view of rifts can be applied to transformation processes, it will be helpful to learn a little more about Carlo Ginzburg the man; in a way, he himself is a rift in the history of historical research.

Who is Carlo Ginzburg?

Carlo Ginzburg was born in Turin in 1939. His father, the Russian philologist Leone Ginzburg, was born in Odessa in 1909 and moved to Berlin after the Russian Revolution of 1917; the family moved to Turin a few years later. His mother, Natalia Levi Ginzburg, was Italian and became one of Italy's best-known writers in the 1960s after publication of her book about her own family history.[245] His maternal grandfather, Giuseppe Levi, was a well-known researcher; three of his students later received the Nobel Prize.

Growing up in this milieu, which included an illustrious circle of Italian intellectual friends, Carlo Ginzburg was "surrounded by books."[246] Being Jewish, his family was persecuted by Italy's fascist regime, especially his father, who was temporarily arrested, lost his teaching license and was later exiled to the small Abruzzo village of L'Aquila, where Carlo Ginzburg grew up until 1943. During this time, his father left for Rome, where he became the editor of a magazine that distributed anti-fascist articles underground. Shortly after Carlo Ginzburg moved to Rome with his mother and two other siblings, his father was

244 Ibid., p. 23, translation by the author

245 Ginzburg, N. (2017)

246 https://davidkultur.at/artikel/er-war-eine-persoenlichkeit-voll-staerke-und-kraft-carlo-ginzburg-ueber-seinen-vater-leone-ginzburg-und-die-familie-interview-teil-i, last visited in September 2024, translation by the author

arrested again and handed over to the Gestapo. He was tortured and finally succumbed to his injuries in prison in 1944 at the age of 35. The family scattered throughout Italy and found shelter with relatives and friends. After the war, the survivors reunited in Turin. It was here, at the age of 13, that Ginzburg met Giovanni Levi while playing soccer. Decades later, the two men would found the microhistory project.

When he began his studies, Ginzburg had no intention of becoming a historian. He initially enrolled in art history in Pisa, but soon turned to philology. It was only later, after reading Marc Bloch's *The Royal Touch*,[247] that he discovered his interest in history. Antonio Garmsci's famous *Prison Notebooks*[248] were another significant influence accelerating the shift in this direction. Once the decision had been made, he was also cognizant of what his special focus would be: the investigation of witch trials with the aim of giving a voice to the oppressed and marginalized.[249] Only later did he realize the subconscious link to the story of his own life and the persecution he had experienced at an early age.

Indeed, it was only after the publication of his first book, *The Night Battles*, when he was 27 and *The Cheese and the Worms*[250] ten years later (both of which enjoyed popular success) that the art historian Paolo Fossati pointed out to him during a conversation that it was quite obvious why he, a Jew, was concerned with witches, heretics and their violent oppression. Ginzburg reported in an interview with Tina Walzer in 2022[251] that he had been thunderstruck by this comment. How could he have failed to notice the connection between his chosen field of research

247 Bloch, M. (1990)

248 Gramsci, A. (2011)

249 https://trafo.hypotheses.org/38125, last visited in October 2024

250 Ginzburg, C. (1976)

251 https://davidkultur.at/artikel/geschichte-ist-keine-festung-sondern-ein-flughafen-carlo-ginzburg-ueber-die-mikrohistorie-und-seinen-beruflichen-werdegang-interview-teil-ii, last visited in October 2024

and his own background? In any case, he noted while thinking about the remark, his work had strengthened his "emotional identification with the victims." In 1961, he earned his doctorate at the university in Pisa where he later also taught. He also lectured in Bologna and for almost 20 years, from 1988 to 2006, at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Ginzburg adopted a particular perspective even in his first books. He was fascinated by details, which led to his directing his attention to the fates of single, seemingly insignificant individuals or groups that stood out due to certain peculiarities. In the course of his engagement with the subject and during discussion with authors who pursued a similar approach, he noticed time and again that his objects of study could serve as the starting point for determining fascinating connections to larger historical contexts, insights that would establish his position as one of the founders of microhistory. Ginzburg stands out for his lucid and elegant writing style; his works are exciting and unusual, but at the same time eminently readable. The quality of his writing helped his work and that of other microhistorians to reach a wider readership encompassing far more than a specialist audience.

Wanting to continue his work on the Catholic Church Inquisition, Ginzburg requested permission from Pope John Paul II to use the Vatican archives in 1979. In 1991, the Vatican granted a select group of researchers, including Ginzburg, access to the archives. Ginzburg was awarded the prestigious Balzan Prize for his complete works in 2010. He lives today in Bologna, Italy.

Three examples demonstrating the exceptional typical

The *exceptional typical* describes situations that are essentially well-known to everyone, yet so unique in their conciseness or intensity that they disconcert our understanding of the familiar. As described above, Ginzburg's attention was drawn to

these situations in particular because they represent a kind of rift that occasionally offers access to subterranean social networks. In the following, I will present three vignettes displaying rifts of this kind as examples demonstrating how a microscopic focus can be used as a tool to uncover clues to macroscopic relationships. The anecdotes have been chosen from different fields—academia, health care and organizational consulting—and draw on my own experiences as well as the experiences of others. In all three cases, I will describe minute details that highlight the dramatic course and intensity of the events.

The presentation of these descriptions in a format similar to a microhistorical approach will be followed by their use to illuminate overarching dynamics pointing to underlying connections between the three vignettes relevant for our transformation practice today. The objective is twofold: pointing the way to a special understanding of the challenges facing transformation managers in today's world while simultaneously describing the actions that are possible in the face of these challenges.

Vignette 1: Leadership needs ambiguity

In his unpublished doctoral dissertation, university lecturer Kevin Flinn described the dynamics driving events at a British university, his employer at the time, when he established a new format for internal leadership development. The focus was on regular conferences of senior managers of the university who met quarterly to review their everyday experiences without a predetermined agenda. Flinn called these assemblies leadership experience groups (LEGs). At that time, there were five groups, each accompanied by a convenor (Flinn speaks of a "convenor" rather than a "facilitator" because he expressly did not want to install an official group leader; emphasis was on the character of an interaction among peers).

After one of these LEGs, one of the convenors, who himself held a highly prominent role in teaching at the university, decided to consider his own experiences and those within his LEG.

He wrote a paper and sent it to several high-ranking managers, including the vice chancellor, at the same time.

The topic of the document revolved around a dramatic formulation chosen by the convenor in question. In his premise, he determined a connection with certain marketing activities of the university depicting the school as being especially oriented towards the business world. In the course of this marketing process, this convenor perceived the development of new control practices, e. g. a pronounced orientation towards KPIs and a new type of controlling regime. He believed these phenomena to be a consequence of the marketing initiative; no one had intended it to happen, but as ambitions from all sides began to intertwine, an atmosphere that he called "organizational bullying," the sense of excessive bureaucratic tyranny, emerged. He described the impression that university employees were prevented from performing their actual work by a multitude of additional administrative activities while in his opinion they were simultaneously under constant pressure to justify themselves because, despite their best efforts, they rarely met the ideals of the new management concept. As he saw it, this concept prioritized standardization over plurality and efficiency over creativity and gave teachers and researchers the impression that an institution that was supposed to promote curiosity and critical thinking was commodifying its work. Ironically, this new regime was euphemistically presented as a "Fit4Future" program that was "business-like." Moreover, a recent comparison of British universities had ranked the university in question at a high level for "bullying behavior." Even though the convenor's document emphasized that no one consciously intended "organizational bullying" and that it was instead an overarching interactional pattern that emerged from the confluence of everyone's intentions, the allusion to the topic of "bullying" was obviously deliberately provocative.

The convenor notified Flinn that he had distributed the document to various officers at the university and left it up to him

to decide whether he wanted to share the document with the members of his LEG. Shortly afterwards, however, another convenor announced that he had shared the document with his group.

The emotionalizing paper cast doubt on Flinn's LEGs project insofar as it apparently encouraged convenors to speak openly about unpleasant truths. In this specific case, the university management was accused of a certain duplicity. Ostensibly, it had introduced a reasonable management culture aimed at increasing efficiency and geared towards financial indicators. Behind the façade, however, this measure was evidently intended to have a disciplinary effect as it seemed to imply that managers who were also teachers lived their professorial lives with a certain laissez-faire attitude and with too little cost awareness. LEGs apparently encouraged open discussion of all these aspects, and officers in management positions found themselves forced to justify their actions.

Flinn's account of his thoughts as he considered what action to take with respect to the paper itself and to the information that it had been distributed to everyone is well worth reading. Meanwhile, events followed one another in quick succession. Emails flooded in, and Flinn found himself in a conversation with his superior, the university's HR director, just one day later. He entered the office and sought to strike a light-hearted, slightly amused tone that would downplay what had happened:

> As I entered my manager's office, I adopted a very jovial attitude to the whole affair, inviting her to join me in viewing Ralph's wider distribution of the paper much as parents might view the utterance of their own child's first swear word.[252]

252 https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2299/13884/ 08192041%20Flinn%20Kevin%20-%20%20-%20final%20DMan%20submission.pdf?sequence=1, p. 64 seqq., last visited in October 2024

However, the atmosphere of the conversation was anything but amused; indeed, it was rather formal and tense. Flinn and his superior initially disagreed about whether the position of the convenors legitimized the emphasis on their personal opinions in the discussions. Flinn believed that convenors, being group participants, were perfectly entitled to do just that. His superior took a different view. A short time later, the two met again for their weekly jour fixe, at which time she asked Flinn to organize a survey among all participants of the LEGs to collect quantitative and qualitative feedback. She herself was a participant in an LEG and noted that she had gained little of value from her membership even before the controversy. She also revealed that she had heard similar statements from participants in other LEGs. Flinn countered that such a tangible assessment of the benefits of LEGs was not necessarily possible. He does not elaborate any further at this point, but seemed to believe that LEGs could trigger development processes in participants by giving them the opportunity to explore political dilemmas that all had experienced and to learn to address unpleasant issues that were otherwise discussed only in informal conversations. The objective should not be limited to fostering the emotional maturation of the participants; another aim should be to stimulate critical thinking beyond the scope of the LEGs. Flinn obviously doubted that these aspects, which could be conducive to development precisely because they were also demanding, could be captured through the use of standardized questionnaires.

Flinn summoned all his courage and asked whether a survey result to the effect that "tangible" progress could not be documented would cause his superior to reconsider her support for the LEGs and whether she would regard this survey result as desirable. He was almost surprised when she quite openly answered both questions in the affirmative. In fact, however, the subsequent survey revealed that only two participants no longer wanted to take part. Interestingly, the HR director was not one of them.

Notes on Vignette 1

In his book *The Virtues of Mendacity,*[253] Berkeley professor Martin Jay considers how people might possibly navigate politically intricate situations such as the one just described. His insight: by behaving ambiguously. He explains how people sometimes seem to undermine their own aspirations by saying one thing and then doing something else. He also describes how this ability is nevertheless essential for maintaining a relationship with the other person in complex situations. The HR director who was annoyed by the LEGs and their unmeasurable results to the point of wanting to call a halt to the entire program, only to continue gladly her own participation, is an example.

> To the extent that humans evolved into beings who are both communal and individual—unlike uniformly social, nonindividuated animals like ants or bees—they needed contrary skills that might allow the flourishing of both the imperative to tell the truth and the ability to subvert it.[254]

An especially human characteristic is the ability to learn beyond genetically predetermined processes. This learning often takes place over the course of complex political processes. We learn what a meaningful ambiguity in social interaction is and become behaviorally elastic. This ability to behave politically—"an invention of our species that has no real parallel elsewhere in the animal world"[255]—means that in times of growing interdependencies we must, on the one hand, be able to trust more and more that people will do what they say: "Interdependence necessitates faith in the continued realization of our expectations about how the social world replicates itself, carrying out its implicit or explicit promises to do what its members say they will do. …"[256]

253 Jay, M. (2010), p. 25

254 Ibid., p 25

255 Ibid., p. 26

256 Ibid., p. 27

On the other hand, we must learn to live with the fact that there are no guarantees: ". … [I]n politics, rules can be relaxed and procedures circumvented, if there are compelling reasons to do so."[257]

Jay describes the ability to judge when and under what circumstances we disclose how much as *savoir-faire*,[258] knowing what to do. Skills such as tact, courtesy and the interpretation of norms of decency allow us to assess a situation and weigh the possible actions to defuse it, what we can and cannot expect from our counterpart. Jay uses the same Greek term as Gadamer in the previous chapter, who wondered how best to describe judgment as the conscious side of action: by using *phrónēsis*.

> It compels us to judge between competing moral commands, including the command always to be honest, which many not invariably be the best policy in all circumstances. And insofar as such judgements may not be subsumable under a single, uniform moral rule, we learn through practical experience a kind of wisdom—the Greeks called it *phrónēsis*—which helps us negotiate the difficult passage between competing duties and obligations.[259]

This two-sidedness, which can never be resolved and which requires *phrónētic* judgement, often characterizes our actions. Consider Flinn's description of his conduct when he entered his superior's office, fully aware of the explosive nature of the situation, but hoping to ease the tension by downplaying the seriousness of the confrontation with a joking comment. At first glance, his effort was seemingly in vain. But perhaps, in a *phrónētic* sense as well, his clever microgesture relieved the pressure of the situation weighing on her exactly to the degree called for under these circumstances, which allowed her to reconsider the

257 Ibid., p. 28

258 Ibid., p. 31

259 Ibid., p. 31

usefulness of the LEGs. Is humor always appropriate in such situations? Certainly not. We have here an example of *phrónētic* judgment, which is always situation-intelligent and cannot be generalized. But it can spark the development among the involved parties of a *sensus communis*, a sense of commonality as described by Gadamer and Arendt in the previous chapter, that opens their minds to a more complex grasp of a situation. Suddenly it becomes clear, for example, what an attention-grabbing paper is capable of achieving: understood as *exceptional typical* and with the help of abductive attention to something as unusual as such a *specific* paper, it suddenly becomes understandable what "bullying behavior" at this university *actually* means.

How can a skill of this nature be learned? Possibly in Flinn's LEGs. It can indeed be liberating to address the uncertainties of how we work together. In turn, this can lead to personal maturation, for instance, by exploring the hinterland of efficiency-enhancing measures and recognizing that they go hand in hand with disciplinary tendencies and the avoidance of plurality. Paradoxically, patiently illuminating any such dynamics can also prove liberating for those we see as representatives of an efficiency discourse when they realize that they always also contribute to the circumstances under which they are suffering. That, at least, would seem to express how the HR director felt. Moreover, we also have here an example of a non-linear connection between the "small" and the "large" showing what happens in transformation projects in local contexts and how these local events can have an impact on a broader scale. The ripples from the sharing of a paper with some representatives of senior management spread ever wider, provoking seemingly irrational reactions from some of these senior managers, yet simultaneously expanding the discursive space of the involved parties unexpectedly by turning the dark side of measures to increase efficiency into a topic for discussion.

Vignette 2: Leadership as a group phenomenon

In *A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organizations*[260] published in 2005, the therapist Nicolas Sarra describes a situation during his engagement as an internal consultant for the British National Health Service (NHS). Following the merger of several psychiatric services, a kind of umbrella organization (trust) had been created and a new HR director had been appointed for this organization.

Sarra was a member of the HR director's team, and he perceived her to be dissatisfied and lacking orientation in initial meetings. A feeling of general confusion spread through the team. He considered possible actions to rectify the situation and proposed a task to the group that would lead to the members' interaction with other groups, spurring the growth of a "we identity" for his team. The HR director gladly accepted his suggestion and withdrew from the discussions on how to proceed. Sarra's idea was to form teams of two who would visit the separate facilities of the trust and conduct formal and informal discussions about the current situation, gathering impressions of the organizational experience in the different divisions of the trust. The proposal was accepted, and he himself visited Orchard Hospital, a forensic psychiatric facility. Sarra knew the manager of this facility personally and was aware of problems in its operation. He hoped that his work on site could make a genuine contribution to a better understanding of the operational dynamics. After he had proposed a schedule for the two-day visit to the Orchard Hospital's manager and his team, everyone agreed to set up appointments for the interviews and a date for a final plenary session when the results would be shared.

On the first day, Sarra arrived at Orchard Hospital with five other colleagues. The facility accommodated approximately 100 patients, cared for by a staff of several times that number. The team split into groups of two. The first meeting saw Sarra and his colleague talking to an IT manager, who was surprised that,

260 Sarra, N. in Stacey, R. and Griffin, D. (2005)

despite all the technical requirements, there were apparently always glaring communication problems. He also seemed to feel insecure because, although he did not work in the official hospital area, he locked the door before the conversation began. Both the topic of communication issues and the locking and unlocking of doors recurred in subsequent interviews. This left an impression on Sarra: "… [I]t seemed that not only physical traffic was monitored and potentially prevented but conversational traffic as well."[261]

The ward nurse in one unit revealed in her interview that absenteeism was unusually high, which she attributed to the poor working conditions, the meagre pay and the fact that specialist psychiatric staff often saw themselves more in the role of prison guards. Previously, the union had successfully prevented the use of temporary staff, leading to an even greater workload for the ward staff who had not called in sick while simultaneously causing a significant rise in earnings for those who worked because overtime was paid at an above-average rate. Some managers even suspected that there was collusion among the staff members as to who would call in sick and when so that everyone could accumulate overtime at the same rate and improve their salary.

Over time, the stressful situation for the specialist staff of dealing with mentally unstable and violent offenders had produced striking behavior on the part of everyone involved. The specialist staff tried to set themselves apart; for instance, each of them wore a large, noisy bunch of keys on their belts, audibly marking them as members of the specialist staff even from a distance. In addition, the specialists often took advantage of the opportunity offered by retreating to closed rooms as a way to escape the sense of being observed by the patients. These actions, just as the frequency with which ward staff called in sick, did not go unnoticed by patients.

261 Ibid., p. 187

Patients had in turn found their own ways of isolating themselves. They turned the smoking room into a retreat that was always filled with so much smoke that ward staff could barely breathe, let alone see anything. Then Sarra and his colleague were told the following story, which had happened a few weeks before:

> There had been an uproar (at least from members of staff) when one of the patient's visitors to the clinic had been discovered in an act of fellatio with him in the "library." Sexual contact between patients and their visitors is forbidden. This event generated some kind of internal enquiry and increased observation of the patients while they were with their visitors. A short time after the above events one of the patients made an allegation that three members of staff were locking themselves in the toilet for the purpose of having sex together. An internal enquiry was launched and the members of staff in question were temporarily suspended. … Eventually the members of staff were exonerated from the charge of having sex on duty but were reprimanded for locking themselves in the toilet. They had claimed that it was the only place where they could hold a private meeting.[262]

This sequence of events, which can hardly be surpassed for its striking impressions, demonstrated clearly to Sarra how mutual interdependencies were constantly called into question and then restabilized with tremendous effort by the involved parties. The effort was mirrored in an overly rigid, formalized regime of rules; in the public exposure of anyone who defied the rules; and in the experience of shaming from constant control. These aspects all undermined any free flow of communication. The intolerability of these circumstances ultimately found expression in the breaking of taboos by both supervisory staff and patients.

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262 Ibid., p. 190

The Orchard Hospital institution was characterized by the most powerful forces of social inertia, all of which were oriented towards maintaining the status quo. The official interpretation maintained that there was no other way to mitigate risks and guarantee security. Yet this formalized and overstructured approach smothered any form of creative action, necessary though this is even in an institution, for the smooth conduct of processes and for the ability to react appropriately to the unexpected. Furthermore, it generated aggressive tensions, prevented communication with one another and fostered "us v. them" dynamics.

On the evening of the first day, Sarra met with his colleagues, hospital staff and some of the patients to consider how best to proceed. Sarra's group had not yet had time to share their findings. However, it seemed to him that some members of the hospital staff in particular were under a lot of tension. At the end of the discussion, one clinic employee remarked that the process launched by Sarra's team could be productive solely under certain conditions:

> As we were finishing, one of the consultants said that this would be a useful process only if there was an "action plan" leading to "improvements" which could be "evaluated" as "outcomes."[263]

Sarra began to understand the origins of the tension felt by the hospital staff. The issue was not merely dealing with mentally unstable, violent offenders or the interdependencies *within* the trust. The NHS had some time before adopted a kind of business mindset from the private sector and applied it to the work in its institutions. Among other measures, there was now a "national service framework" that set clear targets and defined how improvements could and should be measured. If targets were not met, high-level managers in particular were at risk of losing their jobs. Sarra noted that setting targets and the desire for

263 Ibid., p. 193

constant improvement of established practices sounded sensible. The British government at the time was also committed to these goals and linked its re-election to their achievement. The "Modernization Agency" had been created for this purpose.

> This agency aims to "ignite the hearts and minds of those in the health service with a passion for the continual improvement of services." … [The] Modernization Agency sees itself as the instigator of a "social movement," "the greatest movement for organizational change which the world has ever known."[264]

One consequence was the direct linking of critical targets for improvement to the achievement of goals of single facilities and subsequently to the job security of managers. At the same time, there was the pretense—as if were simply common sense—that this was the one and only form for the proper organization of clinical facilities. After all, who would not want to see a drive for improvement everywhere and the dismissal of incompetent management staff? When implemented in clinical facilities, however, this style of performance orientation evidently led to pronounced anxiety among managers, to high (collusively agreed) absenteeism and to rigid and irrational behavior. Indeed, Sarra concludes that "… [S]enior managers find themselves obliged to lie, cheat, 'massage' the figures, do anything to meet targets, and then find themselves scapegoated for doing so."[265]

Notes on Vignette 2

This vignette clearly illustrates that the behavior of managers is neither autonomous nor rational. As is true of all relationships, the relationship managers have to their employees and to their own superiors is characterized by interdependencies. Patients in

264 Ibid., pp. 193–194

265 Ibid.

a psychiatric institution, for example, can cause serious trouble for the institution's staff by making accusations. Equally, institutional staff can further tighten the supervisory regime. Institution management is dependent on politicians who make grandiose promises to improve current conditions, even though many of them have never seen the inside of an institution like Orchard Hospital and have no idea what their promises mean in practice. Conversely, politicians' careers depend on goals whose achievement rests on the shoulders of institutional staff over whom they have little influence.

Even if officially appointed managers have a prominent position, leadership is clearly not the achievement of single individuals; it is much more a group phenomenon. Managers influence what happens in organizations, but the reciprocal influence is even greater. In his essay *The Society of Individuals*,[266] Norbert Elias describes how we create regularities in the social fabric through our interactive actions: routines and habituated behavior leading to the stabilization of expectations among involved parties and helping to regulate social interaction. Paradoxically, the stabilizing effect arises solely from the unplanned merging of the intentions of all. Routines are experienced because everyone constantly contributes to their maintenance through his or her own behavior. Nevertheless, because the diversity of the individuals translates into a corresponding diversity of contributions, even the most stable routines are sometimes reinterpreted. Elias therefore sees the evolution of the social fabric in the actions of the individuals comprising this fabric. At the same time, a sense of individuality arises solely because this social fabric—conveyed by the gestures of a multitude of individuals—constantly has an impact on us. Our changing counterparts simultaneously act like lenses magnifying the social norms and expectations that they project onto us during interactions *and* like mirrors in which we can experience and "see" ourselves. Unless we interact with others, we cannot learn to assess our

266 Elias, N. (1991)