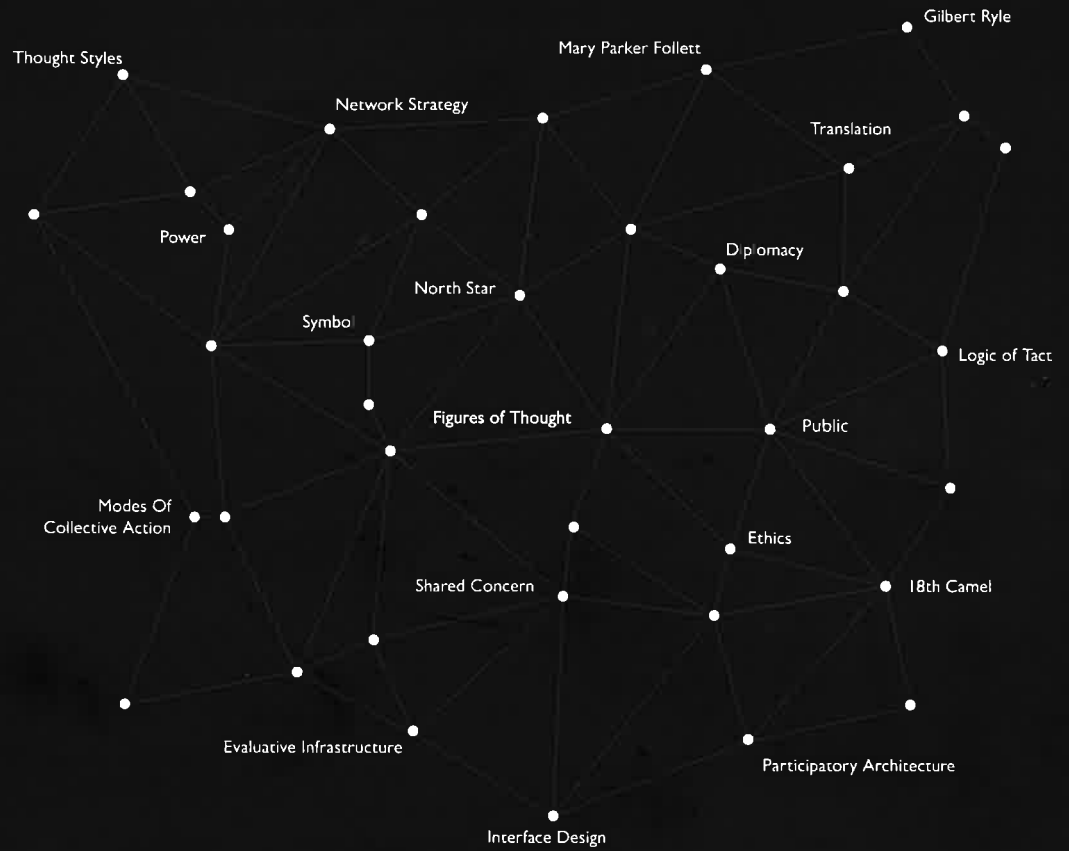


MARTIN KORNBURGER



Strategies for Distributed and Collective Action:

CONNECTING
THE DOTS

OXFORD

'A fascinating look at new models of distributed collective action. It's rich in philosophical reflection and thoughtful observation of recent phenomena, from the refugee crisis to COVID, and links these to a sophisticated theoretical understanding of markets and crowds, movements and teams. I've no doubt that the territory which it covers will be part of the common sense of the near future and that this book provides vital insights into how intelligence can be orchestrated at larger scales.'

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JERRY DAVIS GILBERT & RUTH WHITAKER Professor of Management and Professor of Sociology, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan

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Connecting the Dots

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For Frieda, Oskar and Jessica

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Aren't we interested in what is (barely) possible, rather than what is probable?

Albert O. Hirschman

A wealthy merchant from the east passed away. In his will, the man stated equal division of his wealth to three sons, but his most treasured camels were divided in a rather challenging way. According to the will the eldest son was to be given half of the camels, the middle son was to be given one third of the camels, and the youngest son was to be given one ninth of the camels. The merchant had seventeen camels, and it was not possible to divide them into half, one third, or even into one ninth.

The three sons started fighting with each other for their fair share of the camels. Since the sons were not able to distribute the camels among them, they went to a wise man for advice. The wise man patiently listened about the sons' dilemma. After carefully understanding the situation the wise man brought one of his camels and added it to the seventeen camels of the merchant. This increased the total to eighteen camels.

Now, he started reading the deceased father's will and divided the camels. Half of eighteen is nine, so he gave the eldest son nine camels. One third of the eighteen is six, so he gave the middle son six camels. The youngest son got one ninth of the eighteen camels, so he gave him two camels. After giving nine, six and two camels to the sons, he successfully distributed seventeen camels. The wise man took back his camel.

The Story of the 18th Camel, author unknown

1

Introduction

Collective Action in Crisis?

Premise, promise

How do we organize ourselves to accomplish shared goals? In response to this deceptively simple question philosophers, economists, and social scientists have described four distinct modes of collective action. In hierarchies, the visible hand of the manager coordinates activities through command and control. In markets, prices take on the function of communication and integration. In institutions, conventions, norms, and logics pattern social action. And finally, in grassroot movements, shared identity claims provide scripts and props for collective action. Together, this vocabulary provides much of the intellectual tapestry of business schools, economic departments, and related social sciences.

Yet if we look around us, we observe new forms of collective action emerging. We see platform organizations, such as Airbnb and its cooperative siblings such as Fairbnb, where users share excess resources via market-like structures; we see carpooling sites such as BlaBlaCar and talent pools such as Topcoder where communities form around tasks and challenges; we witness novel forms of organizing and creating knowledge such as Linux, Wikipedia, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), where tens of thousands of individuals work together to collect and analyze data and turn it into narratives; there are social enterprises such as BRAC¹ that help people to get out of poverty through microfinance and other distributed support systems; we read open news platforms such as *The Conversation* or follow the revelations of investigative journalism platforms such as *Bellingcat*; we enjoy application ecosystems bringing together millions of developers and users turning mobile phones and other devices into universal tools; our children choose between thousands of

¹ See <https://www.brac.net/>

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user-built computer games on the open online platform Roblox; and there are a myriad of other examples that have been captured under various headings such as the sharing economy, the circular economy, peer-to-peer networks, open source, distributed innovation systems, and so on.

The shared, defining characteristics of these phenomena include openness, polycentricity, and plurality: They are open in that they invite external contributors to engage; they have many decision centers whilst no single one of them exercises control over the others; they are made up of heterogeneous actors who do not necessarily share the same interests, values, or norms. And yet, despite their openness, polycentricity, and plurality, these forms of social organization are goal-oriented and act strategically. These examples represent forms of collective action that follow neither markets nor hierarchies, neither institutions nor movements. They are theoretical puzzles and organizational mysteries, as they represent experiments with an “untapped capability to govern” collective action differently (Mulgan, 2019: 54). This book pursues these experiments, with the aim to provide a vocabulary for the hitherto “untapped capability” to organize and strategize distributed *and* collective action. Its promise is to develop alternative figures of thought that help to investigate, and perhaps invent, new forms of distributed and collective action.

Collective action in crisis

In autumn of 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees from war-torn Syria, Iraq, and other countries were en route toward Europe.² From September until the end of that year, more than 300,000 refugees arrived in Vienna. There the crisis represented an immense humanitarian and logistical challenge for established organizations and institutions. The speed and size of the migration flow combined with the “legal vacuum” (as one senior police officer described the situation) of how to deal with hundreds of thousands of unregistered and hence, administratively speaking, illegal refugees paralyzed the state administration. In fact, in September 2015 major newspapers diagnosed that Austria (and Germany) had “lost control” over the crisis.

The lack of response from established state institutions provided the space for an unconventional collective of actors to emerge. Organizations from the private and public sectors, NGOs, and civil society stood up and

² This example is based on collaborative work with Renate Meyer, Stephan Leixnering, and Markus Hoellerer; see for a detailed account Kornberger et al., 2017, and Kornberger et al., 2019.

took responsibility. This engagement led to many remarkable collaborations, one of them being the civil society start-up Train of Hope. Initially Train of Hope was no more than a handful of friends handing out water bottles to refugees at Vienna's main train station. Within a few days it attracted hundreds of volunteers and hundreds of thousands of supporters on Facebook and Twitter. Train of Hope took on more and more responsibilities until it eventually formally took over the operational command at Vienna's main train station. This was extraordinary. A civil society start-up, run by a bunch of twenty-somethings with no prior training, let alone any formal or legal structure backing them up, took over state responsibilities and the operational command at Austria's main refugee hotspot. As the Chief Operating Officer of the City of Vienna Wolfgang Müller reflected:

In September [2015] alone, 109,000 working hours were provided, 180,000 meals handed out, and 4,800 people received medical care. We have these exact numbers because the civil society initiative [Train of Hope] run their own accounting. Mind you: Civil society, the crowd so to speak, organizes itself with lightning speed, provides a top performance over months, and uses modern management instruments such as controlling. Here we have a citizen start-up that took over what are traditionally tasks of the state, such as refugee management and care. [...] This was participation of a new kind: it was not the state that acted with citizens participating; rather, civil society acted with the support of the state.³

It was particularly impressive to see the speed with which Train of Hope provided help; the breadth of its efforts (for instance, Train of Hope could mobilize translators for almost every dialect spoken by refugees); its depth (for instance, Train of Hope ran a full-time care program for the entire duration of the crisis, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, based on civil society resources).

Studying collective action during the refugee crisis my colleagues Stephan Leixnering, Renate Meyer and I were deeply moved by the crisis and civil society's response to it. Intellectually we were puzzled by Train of Hope: How could it happen that Train of Hope, a network of actors that did not have any crisis management experience or access to resources to speak of, could effectively outperform the state and its institutions? And

³ Interview in *Zeitschrift Führung + Organisation* 4/2016; translated by the author.

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how did this collective manage to coordinate action and make decisions in an extraordinarily turbulent and complex environment?

The answer lies in the organization, strategies, and practices that coordinated collective action within and across the distributed network. Train of Hope experimented successfully with novel ways of coordinating collective action and distributed decision-making: Train of Hope resembled partly a decentralized social movement, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people around a shared moral concern (a far stronger motivation than economic incentives). This crowd provided the necessary resources, from food to shelter, medical equipment, legal advice, translation services, and a myriad of other valuable goods. Simultaneously, Train of Hope deployed elements of technology-powered platform organization which are well known from Wikipedia, Airbnb, and other sharing economy actors. In fact, one activist mentioned Airbnb as the blueprint for Train of Hope's organization and a media commentator went as far as describing Train of Hope as "Uberification" of help.⁴ As a platform it channeled civil society's resources into effective, purposeful action. In short, Train of Hope's effective crisis management was a result of its clever way of coordinating action among a vast, distributed collective. It combined the openness, resourcefulness, and creativity of the crowd with the focus and goal-directedness of hierarchy. Train of Hope was distributed *and* collective action. In fact, Train of Hope had started to experiment with a new set of ideas about how to collaborate, exploring and exploiting an "untapped capability" to govern collective action that Mulgan spoke about above.

Credit, COVID, climate: Learning through crisis

The permanent state of crisis in which we find ourselves asks for experimentation.⁵ COVID-19 will continue to define reality, infecting our bodies as a virus and our minds as fear of the virus. While this pandemic is new, crisis as such seems to be the new normal. To validate, just juxtapose the first two decades of the new millennium with the last decades of the dying twentieth century. In 1989 the Berlin Wall came down to the fading sounds of 80s pop. Politically, the "third way" proposed to end the class struggles and ills of capitalism; the "end of history" seemed in sight. Like a thick red

⁴ See <http://mobil.derstandard.at/2000056740256/Den-privaten-Fluechtlingshelfern-geht-der-Atem-aus>.

⁵ The triptych of crises in this subheading was suggested by Mark Carney in his 2020 Reith Lectures.

carpet, time was rolled out in front of us, and we strolled toward the future in our Birkenstocks. Or so it seemed. Disruption broke into this idyll, occasionally. But it was quickly embraced, even celebrated, as the lovechild of Silicon Valley start-up culture and Schumpeterian creative destruction; bad for a few, good for most, more like the birth pain of future prosperity than a shock to the system. Time was on an upward trajectory, with jumps and jolts, but upward and onward it went. And then, with the turn of the millennium, crisis entered the *theatrum mundi*: 9/11, the global financial crisis, the ensuing economic crises, the euro crisis, the 2015 refugee crises, the ongoing climate crisis, various political crises (from Trump to Brexit, Syria, Ukraine . . .), and now, COVID-19. It's crisis all the way down.

I am not as optimistic as many others in pronouncing that crisis creates (my) opportunity, but I do think that crisis forces us to radically rethink how we organize ourselves. Crisis throws us back to our very own ways of thinking. Crisis derives from the Greek word for decision or judgment. Think, for instance, of a turning point in the progress of an illness, where the condition improves or worsens. Crisis marks that which is necessary to bring about a change in the state of affairs. Crisis is an interruption of temporality that forces a decision, an interruption that divides the flow of events (sometimes history) into a “before” and “after.” The French philosopher (and former teacher of current French President Macron) Paul Ricœur (1988) called the crisis a “pathology” of history, a dysfunction in regard to the link between past experience and future expectation. This reveals crisis-specific temporality: During crisis, the future is not just uncertain (as it is always, predictably). Rather, the future might never arrive: There might be no future at all. Simultaneously, the crisis cuts us off from the past: There is no way back but through the doorway of nostalgia. This strange temporality is crisis' defining feature: Crisis is an enduring presence; it cuts us off from the future and the past alike; crisis is a moment that lost its mooring in the past and drifts across an ocean with no tomorrow in sight.

As the crisis' enigmatic temporality does away with any illusion of linear progression from past to present and future, it deprives us of our most basic orientation. Crisis, Ricœur argued, means “not knowing any longer what my position within the universe is; not knowing any longer which stable hierarchy of values should guide my preferences” (cited in Kornberger et al., 2019: 241).

For Ricœur crisis is always a crisis of decision-making: a moment in which a decision must happen; yet, neither norms of the past nor future

goals are suitable points of departure for our thinking. Therefore, the emotional response to crisis is not fear (such as fear of fire or other disasters) but existential angst, which has no identifiable object that could offer a foothold for a response rehearsed in prior learning. In these circumstances, Ricœur argues, engagement with the world as it is, in the moment, is the sole source of guidance for decision-making. Thus, the intellectual response to crisis is experimentation, adaptation, and learning. When in the midst of crisis the authority of old scripts withers, we have no choice but to author our own. We ought to experiment—also with new ways of acting as collective beyond the well-worn modes of collective action.

Search for organizational innovation

Train of Hope is by no means a black swan. Once we start looking, we see many other surprising examples that challenge and change well-worn modes of collective action. Some of the first impactful responses to COVID-19—such as setting up of ad hoc Nightingale Hospitals in the UK,⁶ producing makeshift ventilators in car factories,⁷ or collaborations between textile manufactories and bakeries to produce masks⁸—resulted from emergent collective action between public sector agencies, firms, and civil society. Civil society initiatives to care for those most at risk mushroomed in local neighborhoods across the globe. Also, test and tracing schemes seemed to work best when organized in a decentralized fashion rather than through centralized units, as the UK government learned painfully.⁹ There are many Trains of Hope that emerge in crisis.

What do we see when we look at the Trains of Hope through an organizational lens? We witness new forms of distributed collective action, forms of coordination that combine the scale of markets, the agility of movements, the resourcefulness of crowds, the ingenuity of open-source and peer-to-peer networks, and—this is crucial—at the same time, they are purpose-driven and goal-directed. Intellectually, that's a conundrum. When Adam Smith takes the reader, right at the beginning of his *Wealth*

⁶ https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/07/how-to-build-a-hospital-in-nine-days-emergency-architecture-in-a-pandemic-coronavirus-outbreak?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Outlook

⁷ <https://www.zeit.de/mobilitaet/2020-04/beatmungsgeraete-seat-produktion-spanien-covid-19/komplettansicht>

⁸ <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000116115742/atemschutz-made-in-austriabetriebe-satteln-um-auch-baecker-liefere-zu>

⁹ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-53799854?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health&

of *Nations*, into the pin factory, he reflects our belief in hierarchy to effectively organize collective action. If we want to get things done, we call for hierarchy: From the military to the corporation, from the church to government, for centuries hierarchy has been the default answer. Train of Hope and many other experiments in organizing distributed collective action challenge this narrative. They invite the question: If neither the iron fist of the visible hand (managerial hierarchy) nor the laissez-faire of the invisible hand (prices in market) coordinate action, who, what, else organizes such distributed *and* collective action?

Nietzsche (1882/1974) once spoke of the “sublime presumption of the word ‘and’” in utterances such as “man *and* world” or, in our case, distributed *and* collective action. On the most basic level, this book is about working through this sublime presumption, in order to understand its conditions and consequences. This quest seeks to offer a positive alternative to the intellectual crisis of collective action as political and organizational idea. Indeed, much of the social and political thought of the twentieth century framed the collective action problem as a binary choice: Either we rely on the visible hand of the manager or the invisible hand of the market. Again, we find ourselves firmly grounded within Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. The key principle to prosperity, so says Smith, is productivity gains realized through the division of labor. Either within the pin factory or as part of markets, the division of labor is key to progress. Yet what is divided needs to be brought back together, and that task, for Smith, is accomplished through the manager in the pin factory or through prices in markets. This dichotomy still frames much of our organizational imagination, making alternative forms of collective action elusive concepts. Whether it is government, private firms, or not-for-profits, our default option for the coordination of human action remains managerial fiat or markets.

If we turn from organizational experiments such as Train of Hope to the bookshelves, we notice a wide gap between emergent organizational capacity and our organizational imagination. We’re stunned by the effectiveness of Train of Hope, the creativity of Linux, the scale of Wikipedia. We marvel (rightly) at their performance and accomplishments but we do not pay as much attention to how they actually accomplish these performances. We appreciate them for their creative, effective, and innovative services but we rarely see them as *organizational innovations*. There is a simple reason for our ignorance: Organizations and their structures are backstage; yet what they produce can be experienced, used, enjoyed. The claim of this book is that this organizational innovation—the way distributed collective

action is organized—is equally, if not more, interesting than new products or services that we experience.

Method of discovery

Mary Parker Follett's simple thought experiment illuminates the path ahead. If you take a railway journey many objects pass by as you look out the window. Upon arrival, however, you have the picture of a journey in your head, not mere accumulations of objects. You have only looked at grass, cows, and trees, yet you saw the countryside. Follett argues that this ability to connect singularities, to turn objects into experiences, to see a *Gestalt*—this ability is “our greatest asset in business management” (1927a/2013: 202). It allows us to link customers to producers, innovation to marketing, finance to new ventures, needs to technologies, and so on.

A few years later, Gilbert Ryle (1971) would wrap this practical idea in the more principled cloak of philosophy. Imagine you walk to work across the campus of an ancient university, say St Andrews in Scotland. You will see coffeeshops and bookstores, libraries and laboratories, office buildings, lecture halls, and ceremonial areas; you will see students, some young, some old; teachers and researchers; administrators and passers-by. Wandering about the grounds, you might ask, with Ryle: I look at all these objects, but I cannot see the university; where is *the* university? His answer: The university isn't one thing or many that you can point at. Rather, what we mean by “university” is the connection between all those elements. It is the interplay between a broad set of activities, the life that is generated between people, practices, and buildings. The university is a concept that organizes our experiences, suggests Ryle, and Follett would add that this ability to connect, to organize our experiences, is our “greatest asset” in managing and organizing our affairs.

If we continue our imaginary stroll through contemporary organizational landscapes, we encounter a plethora of examples of distributed and collective action, from the sharing economy to peer networks, from open-source platforms to distributed innovation systems, all of which present distinct forms of relating people, technologies, resources, capabilities, values, and decisions to each other. Now imagine our strange pair Follett and Ryle standing in front of these weird and wonderful forms of collective action. Like the visitor to St Andrews, Follett and Ryle would need a language

to thread elements together into an intelligible experience. They both know about hierarchy and markets, and they understand institutions and grass-root movements, but they lack a vocabulary to make sense of distributed and collective action.

How to develop such a vocabulary? The social sciences have assembled an impressive methodological toolkit that guides empirical analyses and legitimizes their recommendations. What might guide the discovery of ideas? The German polymath Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a contemporary of the better-known Goethe, filled several hundred pages in his *Sudelbücher* (*Waste Books*), a collection of messy sketchbooks in which he jotted down ideas as they came to his mind. In one aphorism (K 308) Lichtenberg observes that many ideas float around in his head in isolation, yet if they could be put together they might lead to great discoveries. Isn't it similar to the case of gunpowder? Lichtenberg thinks out loud. Its individual elements have been known for centuries, yet it took a long time to combine them and discover their explosive mixture. Lichtenberg argues that when we think we usually treat ideas in isolation, and each individual idea follows its own cognitive path dependency. Ideas "stick" to disciplines and categories, and deviant thoughts usually snap to grid, stopping them from mixing and mingling with other ideas. To overcome this problem, Lichtenberg suggested that we have to deliberately detach ideas from their taken-for-granted context and expose them to each other: "One has to *experiment* with ideas," Lichtenberg concludes. Just as gunpowder was discovered through combinations of elements in experiments, new ideas may be discovered through thought experiments.

This book is a thought experiment in discovering new modes of distributed and collective action. Elements of this thought experiment are the established forms of collective action: the invisible hand of the market, the visible hand of the manager, institutions and grassroot explanations such as social movements. These ideas have been doing a fine job in explaining mechanisms of coordination in the spheres they describe (and sometimes constitute): markets, hierarchies, fields, and civil society. They map neatly onto each other and ossify the academic division of labor in disciplines of economics, management, sociology, and political science. For sure, boundaries allow for mutual exchange, bricolage, perhaps even learning, but the discovery of gunpowder requires a more sustained encounter than the occasional exchange of a prisoner on a bridge in the middle of the night; it needs deep engagement, it needs thought experimentation

that brings together fleeting intuitions and new ideas, just as Lichtenberg suggested.

Figures of thought

At its core, this book introduces a set of new concepts to make sense of distributed and collective action. I describe these concepts as figures of thought: figurative expressions that convey meaning, relations, and *Gestalt*. Literally, they are tools to figure things out by putting them into context. The first figure of thought explores the question of the collective itself: What is the “we” in collective action? What moves in-between, what constitutes the “we,” is a shared concern manifest as a symbol, that provides a collective with orientation in its thinking and handrails for its actions. Second, the question of design: How is communication, collaboration, and control organized in distributed and collective action? I propose three infrastructural concepts as ways to think of how the open is structured—interfaces (that which allows communication between heterogeneous sub-systems); architectures of participation (that which allows actors with different motivations and skills to collaborate in division of labor); and evaluative infrastructures (that which allows to evaluate and control outcomes). Third, how to inject goal orientation, and with it strategy, into distributed collectives? The concept of network strategy is a figure of thought that induces a sense of directionality into distributed collective action. Finally, the figure of the leader in distributed collective action morphs into that of the diplomat—that ancient broker and boundary-spanner whose task is to mediate between actors that are locked into an interdependence that does not afford the comfort of ignorance nor the safety of domination.

These concepts or figures of thought share a certain family resemblance: All of them are figures of the in-between, concepts of connection, ideas that build relationships. They are mediators that hold our experiences together (think Follett and Ryle), they are part and parcel of a cognitive infrastructure that turns events into experiences, threads data into narratives. Just as the university or the countryside are not distinct objects to be found “out there,” the figures of thought proposed in this book are organizing principles of reality, ways to connect the dots. As figures of the in-between, they are ideas that give names to relationships, that qualify connections, and ultimately, that describe experiences. Such conceptual work

matters because it provides what Wittgenstein described as “picture of the world”:

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

(Wittgenstein, 1950/1969: paragraph 94)

Empirical research delivers concrete statements that tell us about “true or false” (paraphrasing with Wittgenstein a complex matter); but their correctness will depend on the “inherited background,” the intellectual tapestry that make this distinction possible in the first place. It is the task of philosophy to reflect on and renew this “inherited background.”

What is at stake (I)

Perhaps ironically, this philosophical pursuit is intrinsically practical. Ideas do matter, but not only because of the Keynesianism that “the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.” More directly, yet equally encroaching, Peter Drucker (1994) suggested that businesses (including public administration and NGOs, we add) are based on a set of ideas and assumptions that

shape any organization’s behavior, dictate its decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what the organization considers meaningful results. These assumptions are about markets. They are about identifying customers and competitors, their values and behavior. They are about technology and its dynamics, about a company’s strengths and weaknesses. These assumptions are about what a company gets paid for. They are what I call a company’s *theory of the business*.¹⁰

Now, “theory” shares etymological roots with theatre: They both put the spotlight on something, focus our attention, structure our intention. They are models of the world, and after regular exposure to them they tend to become models for the world. If folk theories do not resonate with polycentric, open, and networked reality any longer, we witness crisis, failure, and malaise. Many authors lament that theories of business and practices

¹⁰ See <https://hbr.org/1994/09/the-theory-of-the-business>.

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of organizing are drifting apart; map and territory do not match. As Geoff Mulgan put it:

We're in the midst of revolution after revolution in technologies that are founded on the ultimate commons—information and knowledge. But these are being squeezed into organizational models designed for the sale of baked beans and cars. Instead we need to match the imagination of the technologies with a comparable social and organizational imagination.

(2018: 213)

We have invested so much imagination into creating new technologies and products, yet we have invested so little into rethinking the organizational forms that produce these innovations. Structurally, universities look very much like they did a hundred years ago, as do firms and government organizations. Even third sector organizations are described without any creativity, purely negatively, as not-for-profit. Indeed, we have proven little organizational imagination. Yet we ought to engage in an intellectual retooling, as Hirschman (1958) reminded us when he wrote that scarce resources are not first and foremost of financial or technological nature, but that the scarcest of resources is the ability to make decisions and organize collective action. In order to do so, we need what Drucker called a “theory of business”—a way to think about collective action.

Putting names to phenomena isn't simply sorting a spice rack in alphabetical order. Rather, as Nietzsche reminded us, language is powerful. Giving names to experience is a process of taking ownership; to name things is to gain power over them:

It has caused me greatest trouble, and for ever causes me the greatest trouble, to perceive that unspeakably more depends upon *what things are called*, than on what they are. The reputation, the name and appearance, the importance, the usual measure and weight of things—each being in origin most frequently an error and arbitrariness thrown over the things like a garment, and quite alien to their essence and even to their exterior—have gradually, by the belief therein and its continuous growth from generation to generation, grown as it were on-and-into things and become their very body; the appearance at the very beginning becomes almost always the essence in the end, and *operates* as the essence! What a fool he would be who would think it enough to refer here to this origin and this nebulous veil of illusion, in order to *annihilate* that which virtually

passes for the world—namely, so called “reality”! It is only as creators that we can annihilate!—But let us not forget this: it suffices to create new names and valuations and probabilities, in order in the long run to create new “things”.

(Nietzsche, 1882/2020: 60)

What Nietzsche shows in his prose and what a manager knows through their practice is that words matter. They are what connects experiences; they are, once again with Follett, our greatest asset in business and beyond.

The endeavor to map that which relates and connects experiences (and which is not part of the observable world) is called philosophy. Wittgenstein once wrote (1950/1969) that one could imagine a person who knows their city perfectly well, finding always the shortest way between two locations. And yet, this person might be utterly incapable of drawing a plan of their city, and if they tried, they would produce something entirely false. This person is the nemesis of the philosopher who spends time and care on making maps that draw out the relations between different buildings, places, objects, people, times, and so on. This relational quality makes the philosopher a bit like the infrastructure planner for the city. The philosopher provides an epistemological infrastructure that connects things, often in the background. To provide an example, take the notion of production and consumption as two distinct activities: Co-creation challenges this epistemic distinction and suggests that production and consumption are somehow interlaced activities; in the circular economy both become even more intertwined. We can understand these concepts as expressing different relations, and in as far as they do, they are philosophical concerns. Done badly we end up with archetypes, as they are the leftovers of abstraction from empirical data; done well we can call them concepts, as they are there to disclose aspects of empirical reality. They are not abstractions but cognitive infrastructure for empirical inquiry.

So, what is the task of philosophy? Conceptual inquiry, which is understanding the relation between discrete, observable elements. It is cartography—mapping what it means to say “university” or “strategy” or “collective action”—what are the elements that are implied, what are the relationships between them, and can I draw them on a map (communicate them) so that others can use them, make sense of them, and work with them? It’s about “thick descriptions,” as Ryle initially introduced them; an intellectual re-enchantment through figures of thought, not disenchantment through analysis.

What is at stake (II)

This is a book about how we coordinate ourselves, how we make decisions collectively, which structures and designs we give ourselves—with the aim to be open and resourceful as well as purposeful and goal-directed. Hence, this book is also a book about political economy—albeit small-p politics, a critique by stealth that pursues its goal in contrast to those noisy uppercase-debates about *The-System-and-Its-Future*. Arguably challenges such as “Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire” (Henderson, 2020) or claims like “Greed is Dead” (Collier and Kay, 2020) are thought-provoking, but they present themselves as rather abstract, removed from the daily life-worlds of most people. And for most people it seems only logical to suppose that these questions are to be “fixed” by politicians or experts or elites or some other omnipotent actor up there. People themselves feel affected yet powerless, a mix that fuels anger and political populism.

In contrast, this book suggests that questions of how we coordinate and collaborate with each other may also be answered on a more mundane level—as Michel Foucault proposed: on the level of practice. This book approaches big questions through the back door, from a practice of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984), which means rethinking the political economy not from its head (political ideologies, global institutions, interests etc), but from its body, that is, its organizational base. The book is in search of an alternative, not to the system but within the system. It suggests that the future economic order will not come from radical system change, nor are we at the end of the end of history where all we see is the bars of the iron cage tightening around us. Alternatives come from elsewhere, from in-between, out of the cracks, in the midst of crisis, from practices and experimentation. In this sense this book would like to encourage a sense of agency in a time in which global forces and macro-structural constraints seem to write history. That is perhaps this book’s subversive character: It suggests alternative practices of distributive collective action that might lead to system change. Just as deeds might make morals, and action might inspire thought, as Van Gogh wrote to his brother:

Whether originally deeds lead to principles in a person or principles lead to deeds is something that seems to me as unanswerable and as little worth answering as the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg.¹¹

¹¹ Letter to Theo van Gogh, October 22, 1882.

Since we have a rather large collection of treatises that trace the road from principles to practice, from ideas to actions, this book explores the opposite move: What if practices led to principles, organization disclosed new strategic options?

Plan of the book

Novel questions ask for a novel analytical style: The challenge of understanding Train of Hope is that it undermines our intellectual division of labor, neatly organized in disciplines. Train of Hope is undisciplined, ill-defined, something that worked in practice but not according to theory. Gilbert Ryle suggested that it is the task of philosophy to deal with such undisciplined phenomena, with the aim to reduce what is experienced as a puzzle to a problem that can be addressed subsequently with the rigor of specialized scientific disciplines. In order to do so, Mary Parker Follett proposed that we have to “undepartmentalize our thinking” (1927b: 183). Philosophy enables such undepartmentalized or undisciplined thinking because of its unique position: Ryle argued that the philosopher has one foot in the library and the other foot in the laboratory. Philosophy is at home at the interface between library and laboratory; its focus is on the coordination between the two which does not happen in either of them but, as Ryle put it, in the “philosopher’s head” (Ryle, 1971: 204).

Inspired by Ryle, this book does not amass new data or test old hypotheses. Rather, it pursues the discovery of principles and practices of distributed collective action through bringing together philosophical reflection (library) with phenomena and experiences (laboratory). It is based on the premise that the door to the future opens inwards. If you want to go through, you have to step back—back into those flexible *casteluzzi*, little movable (and moving) castles that Hirschman had in mind when talking about working with ideas and concepts rather than with grand theories (Hirschman, 2013: vii).

Each chapter of the book is such a *casteluzzi*—useful to observe and explore one’s surrounds, and if necessary to defend a position, but also quite easily abandoned. The first part of the book engages with forms of collective action that we are most familiar with: hierarchy and the visible hand (manager) who controls it; the invisible hand of the market; institutions that coordinate via cultural norms and conventions; and social movements that put identity at the core of collective action. This first part

is an inventory—that is, an attempt to find out, which includes both taking stock and inventing, as Paolo Quattrone reminds us; it is not a critique for the sake of critique, but the attempt to figure out what underpins the well-worn modes of collective action.

The second part of the book is critical in a different way: critical in what needs to come together for distributed and collective action to occur. It's like defining the critical mass in chemistry for a reaction to take place. In this vein, the second part explores the conditions that make forms of distributed and collective action possible: What makes a collective? How is "openness" organized? How is intentionality (or strategy) designed into distributed and networked agency? Which figures of thought capture leadership in distributed collectives? Part II does not deliver a blueprint or a model, not even a theory, but it might outline the basic vocabulary for organizational designs and strategies for alternative forms of distributed and collective action to occur—not the one best way, but a compass to find our own winding paths, through trial and error. This book supports this journey of discovery like the North Star in the night sky. One needs it for orientation, and yet nothing could be further from reality.

PART I

INVENTORY

Modes of Collective Action

Imagine being an ant: You'd live in a comparatively impressive dwelling as a member of a relatively complex society characterized by strict hierarchy and elaborate division of labor.¹ Take for example the leafcutter ant; it keeps a special fungus in its ant heap, which the ants provide for with leaves they find and cut in the woods. Feeding on these leaves, the fungus produces a kind of milk, which the ants use to raise their own offspring. Indeed, they run a form of agriculture, with a relatively complex value chain that requires if not planning then at least patience. This primitive form of husbanding is based on a not-so-primitive division of labor: Find, cut, and transport leaves; look after the fungus garden; react when the wrong leaves are being fed; milk the fungus; feed the youngsters; manage waste; build and maintain that anthill; defend the colony from intruders; breed more ants ... all of these actions are distributed between up to eight million ants per colony and require specialized skills. This raises the question: How to coordinate these actions so that they join up, make sense as a whole? Ants communicate to act as a collective through chemical signals with which they mark their paths. Ants that follow a specific path "read" these traces and know whether a source of food or trouble lays ahead. As D'Ettorre explains, "the behaviour of the ant colony is an emergent property resulting from the dynamics of feedback loops between interacting ant workers, each following simple decision rules" (2017: 133).

Of course, this is rather limited communication, hard-wired into their tiny bodies with little flexibility, let alone capacity to learn. Yet it is an effective form of signaling to others what one is up to in order to coordinate action. Sure, our repertoire of collective action is broader, richer, more complex, but it fulfills the same basic function. Collective action

¹ My forage into the world of ants is based on the work of Hölldobler and Wilson (1990; 2010).

is concerned with the feedback mechanisms that effectively coordinate the actions of a multitude of humans (and machines) to arrive at goal-directed, strategic action. Put differently, because agency is distributed among a plethora of people doing different things, we need to think about coordination between them, integration of their efforts, motivations for collaboration, conflict resolution, and control of outputs. While ants have not much choice when it comes to coordinating collective action, we do—in fact, so much so that Duke University’s political scientist Frederick Mayer (2014: 13) rightly argued that the “problem of collective action is perhaps the central problem of social life.” This statement isn’t much of an exaggeration, as collective action is a pragmatic way to ask the perennial question about the nature of human nature: What makes us collaborate, what motivates us, what keeps us from freeriding, what binds us together as social beings?

Now, as to the answers to the central problem of social life, we can differentiate between four well-worn modes of collective action. As *mise en scène* we commence with invisible hand explanations. They suppose a common good to be the result of indirect action; collective goals are achieved not because of but despite our trying to do so. Second, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, visible hand explanations impose a rational designer or planner at the top of a hierarchy to oversee and coordinate action. Managerial command and control are what ensures differentiation and re-integration of efforts. Third, reacting to Olson and Hardin’s critique of collective action, Ostrom foregrounds institutional mechanisms that enable collective action. A plethora of further explanations emphasize the role of culture, norms, and conventions that silently, but not always subtly, shape behaviors and make us socially fit in. In these institutional explanations, integration is based on collective rationality. Finally, grass-root explanations are often associated with civil society movements. They focus on less formal, yet nonetheless effective, ways of joining up people’s actions, based on common grievances that give rise to a shared sense of identity.

Each mode of collective action fragments like a river delta into arms, streams, and the inevitable critical eddies. Each mode is vast—in fact, too deep to exhaust in one book. Thus, we approach them as Nietzsche once advised one should approach big problems and cold baths: Get in and out quickly. Heeding his advice, we will focus on first principles that distinguish each mode of collective action. Rather than adding layers of literature to arrive at an accurate representation of the state of the art, we will chisel away

at each mode until we arrive at the core of its argument. As in sculpture, the figure becomes visible through taking away, not adding.

This analytical strategy reverses the logic of scientific production which focuses on writing papers for journals that (more often than not) resemble "catalogues of spare parts for a machine they never build," as George Miller quipped (quoted in Beninger, 1986: 105). Milton Friedman argued that science usually works at the boundaries between what we know and what we do not know; scientists are frontier-dwellers and as they progress into unknown territory their intellectual supply lines to their home base weaken.² Their quest for the new leaves the common ground behind them, untouched. Just think of a typical business school strategy professor. They might spend years studying the impact of resource configuration on competitive advantage in a specific industry at a specific time but they most likely will never publish a paper on the nature of strategy. Many of these specific debates published in disciplinary journals have long passed the top of the notorious S-curve. This book is a jolly ride all the way back down that S-curve, in order to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time (to paraphrase T. S. Eliot).

² Friedman's forgotten insights deserves to be quoted at length: "Economics is a scientific discipline that has a core that is common to almost all professional economists. Naturally, economists devote little professional research and writing—except in textbooks—to this common core. They concentrate on the issues that are on the frontier where economics is being made rather than taught or applied" (1970: 80).