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« Fiction » and the emergence of alternative organizations: a deleuzian perspective

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Abstract

Fiction has recently raised more intensively the interest of researchers in organization studies. Some works have started to investigate how fiction is used by actors in organizational settings. We propose to contribute to this literature by addressing the link between fiction, understood as imaginaries and action mobilization. In this paper, we examine how an alternative organization can emerge on the basis of fiction. To answer our research question, we use the theoretical framework built by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze on fiction. We present two cases to illustrate the contribution of this framework to the study of alternative entrepreneuring.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fiction has been used by researchers in organization studies in different ways. A first stream of works has used fiction as a source of data. The use of fiction as a source of data is not a methodological innovation for social sciences. For example, historians have used fiction for a long time to analyze a historical period (Grey, 1996), with some historians even considering that fiction contributes to the "making of history" (Marriott, 1940 cited by Grey, 1996). In organization studies, fiction has been used to study how organizations work. We can cite for instance the work of Grey (1996), Parker et al. (1999), Patient et al. (2003), Zhang et al. (2008), Czarniawska and Gustavsson (2008) or of McCabe (2013).

But according to Grey (1996), we should not necessarily look into fictions for what organizations and management really are, but for how organizations and management can be. It leads to the second status of fiction in organization studies, which is the study of how fiction is used by actors in organizational settings. In this perspective, fiction could be understood as as imagined futures (Beckert, 2013). This last stream of research is still in its infancy and needs more investigation. In this paper, we propose to address the topic of the link between imaginaries and action mobilization by answering the following research question: **how do fictions influence the creation of social or alternative organization?** Indeed alternative organizations are at the crossroads of entrepreneurship (Parker, 2013; Rindova, Barry & Ketchen, 2009), of critiques of an institutional order (Dorion, 2017) and of solutions to "grand challenges" (Ferraro, Etzion & Gehman, 2015). While different types of alternative organizations have been studied as well as how to maintain them (Battilana & Dorado, 2010), we lack understanding of their processes of creation (e.g. Parker, 2013).

To answer our research question, we propose to use the theoretical framework built by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze on fiction. We will expose the main concepts of his framework as well as its potential contribution to the study of fiction in organizations in the next section. We will then explain our methodological choices. Finally, we will describe our case studies. We are currently in the process of data analysis.

2. Theoretical framework: a Deleuzian perspective of alternative organizations

Deleuze's philosophy has already been used in organization studies, and more specifically in processual studies. For instance Linstead and Thanem (2007) use Deleuze's philosophy to conceive organization as change rather than stability. By using the concept of rhizome created

by Deleuze, Wood and Ferlie (2003) show how the production and appropriation of health care knowledge breaks out, cuts across and complicates simple lines of information transfer and dissemination. However, while Deleuze's reflection about fiction is rich and promising for organizational research, its use in organizational studies is still in its infancy (e.g. Hjorth, 2013).

Deleuze's starting point on fiction is a critical reflection on the purpose of arts. While traditionally the purpose of arts is often considered to be the representation of reality, Deleuze argues that it should not be its mission. According to Deleuze, describing as accurately as possible our real world is useless and even impossible as it would provide only with a poor copy of it. At the opposite, Deleuze argues that arts, such as literature or cinema, are able to produce a "double of the world". This double has several functions. One function is to receive its violence. Another function is to initiate the fable function which Deleuze names fabulation after Bergson (Deleuze, 1994). Fabulation is the creation of stories, legends, myths, fictions, etc. that are neither the reality nor the future, nor tales or fabulous accounts. Then, possibilities to develop "fictions" – allowed by the fabulation function - are escape routes or "lines of flight" ("*lignes de fuite*", in Deleuze's writings) which gives the possibility to the actor of transforming the world (Brito, 2016).

The starter of this creative process of fabulation is a loss of trust in the world. This loss of trust can be individual but also collective. In this perspective, fabulation is "the oxygen of possibility" when all possibilities have been exhausted. Fabulation is located between reality and possibility. Deleuze has applied its theory to the "Third-World cinema". Deleuze, following Perrault, points out that fiction expresses the dominant ideas or the point of view of the colonizer and forms a pre-established model of truth. If the colonized film maker intends to represent reality and to impose to the actors how and what they must play, he will only reproduce the dominant myths and systems of the colonizer instead of destroying them (Deleuze, 2013a & 2013b). To destroy them, the filmmaker must take real characters and let them fabulate. To do so, he must allow the character to constitute himself as a knowing subject, able of evaluating his position and defining his status and his own role in a community, and collect the singular gestures, images and expressions with which he interprets and defines his life experiences (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Then, "Fabulation" is neither a part of the film nor a simple actor's playing a scene. In the sense of Deleuze, fabulation can be considered as a political moment that is directly linked to a "becoming-minority".

This theoretical perspective makes several contributions to the study of fiction in organizations. First, Deleuze proposes a processual ontology, which allows us to study not the organization in itself, but the processes by which it emerges (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, 1994). Deleuze introduces the concept of fabulation as a processual narrative performance of imagination. Thus, fiction becomes a bridge between dream and reality that could be interpreted as “a becoming”. The framework adds also a processual conceptualization by focusing on the arrangements (“*agencements*” in Deleuze’s writings), in which subjectification into “entrepreneur” happens. Second, the strength of this approach lies in the perception of the creative effort as a phenomenon that goes beyond an individual initiative or an aggregate collective of individualities. Finally, the concepts of Deleuze’s framework seem to be particularly adapted to the study of alternative or social entrepreneuring. For instance, fabulation designates the ability to produce “*line of flights*”, and fabulation starts when the subject loses trust in the world he or she lives in. Deleuze’s framework, indeed, adds to the understanding of the role of fictions in organizational life by conceptualizing them as political. Deleuze, like Foucault, describes a world where everything is political. Politics emerge from fabulation (Valentin, 2006): giving political meaning to the action of fabulation means opening up a new space, a “becoming”. If, as the critical work on alternative organizations suggests, the alternative is to get rid of a model, it is certainly because this model represents a majority system and that the alternative tries to open up a new space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984).

3. Methodology

To answer our research question, we use a qualitative methodology. We conducted two cases studies of alternative organizations, one in France and one in Portugal. These cases have been selected because they account for the creation of an alternative organization, in the sense that they intend to propose an alternative to a dominant model. The differences in national, cultural and sector settings allow to enrich our results. In these cases, we show how fabulation could be at the source of the creation of the deleuzians “lines of flight” already mentioned.

3.1. The creation of a local ‘collaborative and participatory supermarket’ in Dijon, France

During winter 2016, a small local film theatre programmed (from November 2016 to January 2017) several screenings of the documentary *Food-coop*, which presented the experience of a

cooperative run by New-York consumers. Park Slope Food Coop, created in 1973 and still in operation. A short time after the projection, a small group of citizens – some of whom had an activist or associative background – decided to launch an identical project and organized a series of public meetings. This information was communicated through the press and by sending email invitations to those who had shown interest in this type of project at the film screenings in the winter of 2016–2017. The possibility of creating a local ‘collaborative and participatory supermarket’ brought together an initial group that actively participated in the first work and plenary meetings in January and February. Three committees were then set up. Each of them was dedicated to a specific task: communication, organization and definition the project’s ethical dimension. In March, thanks to word of mouth, a third plenary assembly was attended by nearly one hundred people wishing to become involved in an ‘alternative’, ‘citizen’ initiative aimed at enabling them to feed themselves at ‘better prices’ or more directly oppose their model to that of mass-market retailing. But, despite this focus on prices, the alternative character of this emerging organization isn’t defined here as an alternative to capitalism but as a common creative process where “fabulation” has a role to play in the emergence processes.

3.2. The creation of a social enterprise to empower a poor local community in Lisbon, Portugal

Beyond.ME is a social enterprise which was created by three Brazilian friends in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In October 2017, one of the founders, Tai, moved to Lisbon and started to develop Beyond.me activities in Mouraria, a poor and typical neighborhood of Lisbon. Tai had many years of experience in community development within favelas in Rio and other countries before starting Beyond.ME. She worked with different big and small NGOs and developed a critical point of view of their work: *“I have been in Favelas and in NGO's for a long time, and there are a bunch that are horrible for poor people”*.

The social problem Beyond.me tackles is the cultural impoverishment of neglected neighborhoods, often due to gentrification. According to her, the key to strengthening local communities is empowerment, in particular empowerment of the residents who are already active in informal community development: *“You have to empower the locals, they know what to do. They are smart enough”*. The founders decided to rely on what they call “local cultural guardians” to empower local communities. They define a guardian as *“The one who resists the changes of time, the ephemeral occupations of his/her territory, the high prices of*

globalization. *A Local Culture Guardian is that talented person for an art and for her/his community. It's the lady who lives down the street and everyone knows she makes the best Pastéis de Nata in the area.*” They are the ones who keep and guarantee the permanence of cultural and ancestral practices in their territories. Beyond.ME, being a social enterprise, uses commercial means to achieve its social mission. It sells local cultural experiences supervised by local cultural guardians to tourists, therefore competing directly with already dominant companies, such as Airbnb Experiences.

4. Data collection and analysis

We used primary and secondary sources of data to build our analysis. Data have been collected by using different methods: ethnographic method, interviews, observation, participant observation and collection of documents. The ongoing data analysis process uses coding as a method of analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

The first case (the cooperative supermarket) shows multiple signs of “fabulation” in the sense defined by Deleuze. We have chosen in our data’s two moments to illustrate it. The first one is when individuals decide to join the supermarket project called “Court Circuit 21” and their expectations. In these short moments, we retrieve the moments Deleuze imagined but not applied to the cinema.

“And it must be said that I am angry about what happened at the political level and I found the project (of cooperative supermarket) attractive. I do not know anything about the subject. Maybe I'm here to start an activity here and now. I don't want to stay angry and I would like to see if there are things to do together” (X., June 2017).

“ The society in which we evolve wants us to have a certain mode of displacement, of social relations. And the alternative, I see it as something that I like. (...) For many activists, we like to be apart from the system. But if everyone starts to ride a bike ... These alternatives are livable. Good for the climate, safety, etc. » (C., interview, April 2017

The second moment is linked to the definition of organization's values. Data show that the creation of spaces to deliberate is necessary to define organization's rules and methods. When debating on the values of the organization, actors used "fabulation" to push "legends" or "fiction, or "fabulation" in the deleuzian sense when the world we live seems to collapse. The decision process on organization's values is also when individual subjectification occurs.

" What I find really promising is the prospect of a collaborative store focused on connecting with local producers as much as possible. A store where you can go more or less when you want (on the opening hours obviously). A mean to generalize a local buying and responsible approach that is important to me. But I do not always have the courage to adopt such a behaviour (if I have nothing to eat, I finish at the local supermarket ...) " (Comment on questionnaire survey, July, 2018)

The second case (the Portuguese social enterprise) shows also signs of "fabulation" in the sense defined by Deleuze. First, the "methodology" that was used to create Beyond.me and that is taught to local communities to achieve empowerment is based on 4 steps and the first one is : "dreaming". This step consists in "fabulating" one's own vision of the world ones want to create and the means to produce this world. "Dreaming" is a way of escaping the current world we live in to imagine the world we want to live in. Second, data show that the creation of this new world is based on a process that turns the cultural guardian into an entrepreneur of his own world. We can observe in this process the arrangements ("*agencements*" in Deleuze's writings), in which subjectification into "entrepreneur" happens. Finally, data show that the creation of Beyond.me has a political goal, as Deleuze conceives every human action.

6. Implications and limits

Alternative organizations are often defined with reference to the capitalist system. This paper tries to define them as a creative effort that is not part of a struggle against a majority system (e.g. capitalism but not necessary) but rather as the desire to become part of a future. One limitation of this approach lies in the ability to understand, however, how the transition between creation of a fiction (as fabulation), storytelling and the creation of a new organization takes place. We propose to go beyond this limit by showing that intermediate, temporary arrangements can be created by the actors to facilitate this transition and we propose a

contribution to the definition of an alternative organization and of what we could call “alternative entrepreneuring”.

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