The Form of Management Situations:
A Brief Proposal

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What is management? Whatever you associate with it—drop it for a moment. Instead start with two still uncommon yet sociologically plausible and interrelated assumptions. First, think of management in very general terms as a specific accomplishment in coping with situations. The use of the word in English language and some sociological insights (Goffman 1959; Lofland 1976) support this idea. Notice that accomplishment doesn't address individual competence but should rather be understood as a property which arises in interaction only. Second, communication is the prime mover of social process and thus interaction (Luhmann 1995). This is particularily a temporal argument. No management can afford to disregard that all participants, contexts and other involved identities are acting or happenning simultaneously. Sure enough simultaneity rules out the explanatory power of causality and intention. The only term able to tackle this factor of co-ocurrence is communication.

Thus we initially conceive of management as a *form of communication*. Think of *communication* as a contingency trade-off reducing and thereby reproducing uncertainty, that is, determinable indeterminateness (Baecker 2005; Baecker 2006). Understood in this way it can't be mere talk and needn't be based on language either. It indicates a self-determined operation reproducing more operations of the same kind (Luhmann 1995; Luhmann 1997). That is, only communication can determine the subjects, situations, spaces and times of communication. Therefore self-reference obtains. Now think of *form* as the form of distinction (Spencer Brown 1994). Use this notation

to mark a distinction. This mark marks (α) a distinctive operation bringing forth (β) two different sides and (γ) the space in which it is drawn.
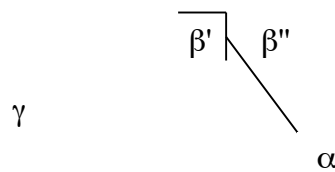

Figure 1: Form

The left side (β') is the state indicated. On the right side (β") of the mark is the not yet determined but determinable context in which the operation is embedded. The cohesion of all these values is called a *form*. Now put the notions of form and communication together by taking communication as the genuine social operation bringing forth the states (events, episodes) and spaces it relies upon (Luhmann 1997; Charles Tilly (2005) addresses the same phenomenon with the term "transaction"). In this case every single value of a form is ambiguous *unless a subsequent operation occurs that determines what has happended immediately before and what is to be expected next*. This is exactly the conditionality needed for an interlocking of selections that engenders process. In mapping the above mentioned idea of communication as a dispersed trade-off in uncertainty with Harrison C. White's uncertainty types (White 1992, 17-19 and 106-109) one gets a clearer view of the inextinguishable impediments of communication: there is uncertainty about the environment (contingency), the relations (ambage) and the contexts (ambiguity) that delimit the ecological space of the operation and thence the operation itself and its connectivity respectively. (To be sure, relations and environments are also contexts, environments and contexts readily take the form of relations, and context and relations might be environmental.) In the end any presumed social mechanism can be considered as an attempt to overcome these basic problems of communication.

It follows that it is the *observation* of forms, in the sense introduced here, that enables us as sociologists and natives alike to understand what's going on—that is, it enables us to rec-

ognize that communication is going on while engendering communication. So the mark of distinction notated above turns out to be a token for an observer who's marking and thereby decoupling an identity just to find himself enmeshed in surrounding context yet to be determined by other observers. In case of marking the ongoing self-observation itself (which is unavoidable for it first of all allows for control and identity formation) we will say that the form re-enters itself. That is a possibility harking back to the very concept of form and a necessary condition for communication to occur. Now we have a complete formalism to come to grips with management.

Remember that forms and their notation are not simply analytical instruments but are devised to make the construction of actual operations visible. Imagine a simple and typical management situation like task assignment in a dyad for example. An operation is performed and observed at the same time—*on both sides*. Dependent on the ecology of the specific assignment (dismissal, other tasks, love affair, clients etc. as environments, relations, and contexts) the message becomes a different one. *But the only way to find out which message prevails is by communication*. That's why self-reference is an adequate starting point.

Observation of a form is not restricted to the participants of communication but communication itself too is an observer. Here the always present *third side* comes in. Granting communication the status of an observer sounds rather odd but comes quite natural as far as one recognizes that communication claims its own right by producing outcomes and engendering sequences of events noone of the participants expected. Of course one might think of situations where the converse obtains. But we should always be aware of the fact that we are adapting our own descriptions of social situations to cultural prescriptions of discretion, agency, and rationality that push us towards a personal attribution of outcomes (Brunsson 1985; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1994; Weick 1979).

Hence when we say management is a form of communication all the antecedent considerations must be taken into account. Management is intimately linked to self-reference, context, determinable indeterminacy, observers and self-observers, embedding and decoupling. We see now that this general formalism for observing, assorting, and arranging the social must lead to an operational notion of management ascertained in a micromoment mode (Leifer 2002). The distinction of good and bad management is irrelevant at this stage of analysis. The resulting notion of management is of course very close to a description of the dynamics of social organization itself—i.e. the process of identifying control projects and controlling identities (White 1992). However, one should be careful not to confound

them. Management is a special case of control project in situations with a specific form of indeterminateness—maybe most salient in triage and struggle for status gain.

Now we can pose the crucial question with respect to our interest in management. What is the distinction performed as a communicative operation when management is the case? Following the idea of mindful management as presented by Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe the distinction we are looking for is the distinction between anticipation and containment (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). With the above shortly introduced notation this conjecture can be noted as follows:

$$\text{Management} = \overline{\overline{\text{anticipation}} \;\big|\; \text{containment}}$$

Very roughly speaking (we abbreviate here) this reads like: the form of management is the operation of anticipation in the context of containment. Both sides are concurrent and sequential at the same time for we don't look for single actors acting this way but for dispersed and interlocking self-similar social processes and events (Abbott 2001; Tilly 2005; White 1992). Note that this distinction also produces an unmarked state on the right which means that it is embedded in further at this time undetermined but subsequently determinable contexts. The argument is that this distinction brings forth specific managerial times and spaces allowing for and exploited by suitable gaming. Anticipation includes anticipation of events, states, situations, disruptions, routines, expectations, possibilities, actions and talk but also the anticipation of containment itself. It includes anticipation of short-term as well as long-term operations. Containment refers to the same things but is a containment of anticipation, too. There is containment in order to anticipate and anticipation in order to contain. Anticipation can be the containment operation itself and vice versa. The closing of the mark in this equation is the above mentioned *re-entry* (of the form into the form). It allows for the kind of reflexive mutual reference demonstrated both in this paragraph and in everyday situations which all are characterized by a dynamics of second order observations, that is, the observation of observers and not simply of things (von Foerster 2003).

Since at this stage I only try to point at a possible research arena I abstain from fleshing this out any further. Anyhow I contend that starting with this formalism can help management studies both to structure data and to get interpretive insights (Abbott 2000; Tilly 2004). The general research question generated by this form is how anticipation and con-

tainment get distinguished, separately valued, and related empirically. In other words one has to look in the vein of a cybernetic explanation for the restraints put on this distinction in different empirical contexts (Bateson 1972). Feel free to apply this distinction to persons calling themselves or being called managers but also to formal organizations, to the rush and jars on a university campus, to congested city traffic, to planning, family, or art production.

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