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Originality through Imitation: The Rationality of Fashion¹



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Mode, scheinbar irrational und launisch, stellt im Gegenteil einen nicht-kontingenten Weg dar, mit den Grenzen der Rationalität in den Beziehungen zwischen Individuen umzugehen. Mode ist ein in sich paradoxes Phänomen, wie schon zu Beginn ihrer Verbreitung im 17. Jahrhundert beobachtet wurde: einer Zeit, die die Notwendigkeit und die strategische Rolle von Unordnung erkannte (ähnlich wie jüngere Ansätze der Organisationstheorie). Mode verlässt sich auf die Permanenz des Wandels (alles ändert sich ständig, das ist das einzige, worauf wir uns verlassen können) und auf die Konformität der Abweichung (jeder möchte originell sein und ist in diesem Wunsch wie jeder andere). Mode funktioniert, indem sie diese Paradoxa kombiniert und in der Form von Banalität neutralisiert. Was kann die Organisationstheorie lernen von der trivialen Rätselhaftigkeit der Mode, die jeden beherrscht, gerade weil niemand sie ernst nimmt?

I. Is Fashion Rational?

What is happening today with fashion? Until just a few years ago the interest in fashion was exclusive to sociology and social history; now it is becoming a theme which is spanning many different areas, often quite far afield from one another, and distant from its original scope. The relevance of fashion is being discovered in science, in economics (even in finance) and particularly in organization theory—which is our special interest here. But what is really uncovered when one approaches the issue of fashion? In many cases simply the existence of trends and fads, and not necessarily fashion as a specific object of analysis: one uncovers fashions, but not always fashion as a question.

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The paper was first published in: *Organization Studies* 32(5) 2011 603–613.

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As sociology has known for years. The awareness of the social significance of fashion has always been acutely present and has produced a rich tradition of research around the contradictory (and therefore particularly significant) aspects of this phenomenon. The classical reference is SIMMEL (1905), but see also VISCHER (1879: 3–46); SOMBART (1902: 1–23); MACIVER and PAGE (1962: 181–188); BLUMER (1969); BAUDRILLARD (1970: 100–109); KÖNIG (1971, 1988); SCHWARZ (1982); LIPOWETSKY (1987); DAVIS (1992); SELLERBERG (1994); SCHNIERER (1995); ESPOSITO (2004).

This makes a big difference in the way you deal with the issue: when one uncovers fashion one usually runs up against a problem, a form of irrationality that surreptitiously enters a field and influences its procedures, as happens when science is guided by fashion instead of theory, or when finance follows trends instead of the fundamentals of the economy (often with disastrous results—as the current financial situation has been illustrating every day). When it comes to fashion one often thinks of ‘gregarious’ attitudes, where people base their behaviour on the behaviour of others rather than on observing the world, and this is generally considered irrational and uncontrolled, usually producing negative effects.

If one considers fashion as a topic in itself, on the contrary (as BARBARA CZARNIAWSKA does for organization theory: see her chapter ‘Fashion in Organizing’ in CZARNIAWSKA 2008; CZARNIAWSKA and PANOZZO 2008), one looks for a different and particular form of rationality—one in which the observation of others (the observation of observers) is not a mistake but rather the best way to understand social phenomena, a way to seize their complexity without getting lost in arbitrariness.² The idea in this case is that fashion can become an interpretative key to understanding some of the most slippery aspects of organizations: the role of gratuitous and apparently unmotivated phenomena, the relevance and the forms of imitation, the intertwining of hierarchical relationships (which seem to go top down and bottom up at the same time) and above all the ways and the role of individualization in relations among actors. If one studies these issues one is actually studying fashion, with its strange logic and its contradictory rationality, and not merely the presence of trends in one area or another.

The interest of fashion is linked to the fact that if one looks carefully at it, it appears to be a circular phenomenon, which tends to reverse the usual presuppositions and to highlight more complex relationships. More technically, fashion is an inherently paradoxical phenomenon, which highlights the paradoxes of the different areas where one seeks it out. It is, for example, already visible in our starting hypothesis: the rationality of fashion. As we shall see, actually, one can neither say that fashion is rational nor that it is not rational, because it is rational in its way of producing and using irrationality—and this is what we would like to explain so as to see if and/or how we can use it to attain clues for organization theory.

II. The Rationality of Unreasonableness

Today it is fashionable to discover the rationality of fashion—but in this sentence we already meet a first peculiarity of fashion that in this, as in other cases, takes the form of a paradox: the rationality of fashion is basically the rationality of the irrational. We talk here of irrationality in quite a precise way, i.e. not only in the somehow indefinite sense of the rejection of logic and rediscovery of alternative forms of creativity. The point is not only the abandonment of rationality and its rules, but the discovery of the different and very strict rules that govern a non-random way of managing the limits of rationality in the relations between individuals, which depend on each other but would like to be autonomous.

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This argument can be already found in Veblen (1899: 115), with reference to the motivations for consumption: in specific cases it is very difficult to distinguish between usefulness and waste, because waste becomes a purpose in itself—and has therefore its usefulness.

The issue is certainly not alien to the field of fashion, that has always been considered the kingdom of the irrational—not to say of the unreasonable. A reasonable fashion is hardly attractive. Fashion looks unmotivated: its forms never have a reason that corresponds to practical, aesthetic or similar purposes. If it prefers a comfortable style it is not for comfort as such, but rather for a clear choice that must be signaled, otherwise it will not be recognized as fashion (and the result is usually not comfortable nor reasonable at all: for example, people using expensive and impractical jeeps or pick-ups in city traffic).³ But even BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE knew that the contrast of fashion and reason is wrong: ‘we should not dispute which of two customs is better, and should follow not the

good, but the modern custom', because we must behave 'not as reason, but as custom wants us to; and not as we are used to doing or should do, but as people do'.⁴ The spread of fashion adds only the awareness that fashion and reason are not only opposed but fundamentally incompatible: since the beginning of the 19th century in a dialogue between fashion and reason fashion has refused to listen to reason, because it maintains that if they came close they would both be lost.⁵

SIMMEL discovered that this unreasonableness is not an accessory detail of fashion, a simple flaw, but belongs to the very essence of the phenomenon and of its way of working. What seems frivolity is actually a deep necessity of fashion that he calls 'abstraction' (SIMMEL 1905): the need to break free from external criteria and to indicate that one refers not to the things but to the observation of the things. Economic or technological criteria, and even the search for beauty, do not explain the movements of fashion, whose only motive (as MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ noted) is self-referential and hence tautological: 'When push comes to shove, it is fashion.'⁶ The sense of fashion is not reason, and this must be underlined—otherwise it would not be fashion but simple clothing. This emptiness has always been one of the most irritating aspects of fashion and one of the reasons for concern about its diffusion, which seems to supplant the interest for the good or the beautiful, and in general the search for perfection, with an inexplicable attraction for what is simply new or different (LA BRUYÈRE 1688: XIII).

Fashion is a kind of free zone where irrationality is more exploited than refused: KANT, for example, said that following fashion meant to be mad, but he also said that in a world where everyone is mad, it is better to be mad with others than to be sane alone—therefore it is better to be mad according to fashion (KANT 1798: §68). Fashion, indeed, has the strange ability to impose itself on everyone, whether they want it or not, whether they follow it or refuse it—because even those who reject fashion cannot avoid taking it into account, and must do so carefully and with considerable waste of energy (as people already said in the 17th century: for example LA BRUYÈRE 1688, XIII: 11: 'Il y a autant de faiblesse à fuir la mode qu'à l'affecter.'). To be intentionally unfashionable means to imitate the same social example—for the negative (SIMMEL 1905).⁷ Indeed, the power of fashion is so strong that the burden of proof has shifted: it is he who does not comply who draws the attention (LUHMANN 1986: 654).⁸

III. The Necessity of Disorder

The rationality of fashion, therefore, relies on the explicit and systematic rejection of reasonableness. How can we say then that fashion is rational and discover its rationality?

First, because we discover today that fashion is something serious, something important—again not a new idea, but one that got lost with the spread and the success of fashion (except for sociological research (see note 3) and for a few other cases, particularly in literature and literary criticism, as, for instance, LEOPARDI 1824; BALZAC 1830–3; BAUDELAIRE 1863; BENJAMIN 1982). The general attitude towards fashion is a sort of sufficiency, as if it were something frivolous and essentially trivial, not to be taken too seriously—perhaps to be left to women, who are more concerned with it and more involved in it. When we talk of fashion, then, we think now primarily of clothing and of the presentation of self. When fashion first entered society and culture, however, the attitude was very different.

Fashion actually has not always existed, and even the words to indicate it have not always existed: only in France, in the 17th century, was the feminine *la mode* distinguished from the masculine *le mode*, coming from modal theory. And in the 17th century the phenomenon of fashion was not regarded as something trivial, a mere trifle: it appeared, on the contrary, as a very serious and worrying issue, engaging the best minds of the time, from LA BRUYÈRE to PASCAL to LA ROCHEFOUCAULD. Fashion was not limited to clothing (and it was not limited to women: indeed, mostly men auda-

⁴ '...non ci ha luogo il disputare quale delle due usanze sia migliore, ma convienci ubidire non alla buona, ma alla moderna usanza'; 'non come la ragione, ma come l'usanza vuole che tu faccia; e non come si soleva o si doveva fare, ma come si fa': (CASTIGLIONE 1528: XVI, 37 and 38).

⁵ 'Dialogue entre la Mode et la Raison', *La Mode*, 20 May 1807: 222–223, quoted in KLEINERT (2001: 446).

⁶ 'Enfine, c'est la mode': MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ (1626–1696), letter of 3 January 1689.

⁷ A booklet of 1622, mentioned by GODARD DE DONVILLE (1978: 354–260), mocks 'Négligence' as the last trend of fashion and the apotheosis of its power: the natural attitude opposing artifice is the triumph of artificiality.

⁸ See also VISCHER (1879: 78): 'lieber mit allen frech, als auffällig durch abweichen von dem, was alle tragen!' (it is better to be shameless together with the others than to be striking because we deviate from what everybody is wearing).

ciously followed the rules of fashion and their mutations). One spoke of philosophical, aesthetic, medical, alimentary and especially theological fashions (and today we are beginning to rediscover the same scope of the phenomenon). That's why fashion was shocking: because it influenced not only the presentation of oneself and one's appearance (which quite obviously referred to others) but also the fundamental issues of life and the soul, where the orientation to others and to contingency replaces the orientation to eternity and to truth—as fashion compels one to do. Most upsetting were theological issues: the idea that one could pass according to fashion from a devotional to a libertine attitude. Many passages in *LA BRUYÈRE* deal precisely with this (1688: XII, 16ff.), with the transitoriness of orientations in moral and religious attitudes, which changes what, according to nature, should remain stable and be placed on a level that has nothing to do with the whims of people and the variability of attitudes.

But there is another interesting parallel between the situation of the 17th century and the areas today where we discover the importance of fashion. The 17th century faced a problem which is in part similar to what concerns the theory of organization and management consulting today: the discovery of disorder in an orderly field, in conditions where one cannot give up either the one or the other—that is, one cannot reduce disorder to a simple mistake, to be eliminated or reduced to a minimum, but must instead recognize that it is essential. Disorder is necessary to have some kind of order. In other words, order is based on the possibility of controlled disorder.

Much of the organization theory of the last decades (MARCH, SIMON, WEICK, BRUNSSON) can be read in this key: bounded rationality, organized anarchy ('garbage can'), loose coupling, motivation through 'irrationality', hypocrisy in decisions. All of these evoke situations where the alleged ordered world of the organization reveals fractures. The interesting side is that these fractures or clefts, such as the irrationality of fashion, are not mistakes to be corrected and deleted where possible, but become conditions for the very functioning of the organization—as whether it should foster 'islands' of disorder and intransparency within it in order to achieve a more realistic and viable form of rationality. According to WEICK, effective organizations are 'garrulous, clumsy, superstitious, hypocritical, monstrous, octopoid, wandering, and grouchy' (1977a: 193ff.), while 'self-design involves some difficult managerial actions, including the management of doubt, the fostering of inefficiency, and the cultivation of superstition' (1977b: 45). Not by chance all of these formulas have a paradoxical structure in which (as in all paradoxes) the first aspect negates the second, even though the former cannot exist without the latter: efficiency and inefficiency, anarchy and order, transparency and hypocrisy, rationality and limitations of rationality.

The 17th century made the same discovery on the level of society as a whole: the hierarchical order of medieval society, where everyone had a place, was upset by the bursting of disorder, in the form of social mobility, flexibility of morals, openness of the future. It was necessary to take note of the fact that the social placing of people was not set in advance in an almost natural way according to family and birth, and therefore it didn't necessarily confirm a fixed social order, reflecting an indisputable cosmic plan. The former hierarchical society corresponded to a hierarchical cosmos: but when the social placement/dislocation of people depends on their performance and on other contingent factors, what order can be given to the world, and how much variability should be/is to be granted? Is an order that changes in accordance with time and circumstances still an order? Can we talk of order when we discover that the future is produced by our actions and our constructions, and not fixed in advance by fate or by some other eternal scheme?

Contingency breaks into every aspect of human and personal life, and the search for orientations is becoming increasingly more difficult (and correspondingly more pressing). It gets difficult to distinguish the real from the apparent, or worse still, good from evil. In the same period (and not by chance) the destabilizing discovery of the complexity of the moral was made, that seemed no longer

to hold for everyone and/or on every occasion. What moral is still possible in a world where good intentions may have negative effects, and bad intentions may bring about positive results (MANDEVILLE)?

The reference moves from eternity to time, from cosmos to society. An order, if it still can be found, must be derived from the disorder of the changing orientations of people and from the relations between them—and must be complex and multifarious. Fashion (paradoxical and transient, invented by society exactly in this period) can be seen as a reaction to this new condition—a way to refer to the variability of time and of persons that allows us to have a much more flexible orientation—that we must now consider in greater detail, and alongside corresponding forms in the field of organizations and of their theory.

IV. The Stability of Transition

How does fashion work, and what is its power based on? How can it achieve this unlikely performance of combining order and disorder, reliability and transience? As we shall see, it does it first of all through a refined weaving of paradoxes and through the ability to hide them: in fashion we move daily inside a tangle of paradoxes, and the most surprising thing is that we do not even realize it.

But what are these paradoxes? One can find at least two basic mechanisms that are intertwined and support each other. First, what we could call the *stability of the transitional*: the shocking discovery that everything changes, and that this is the only thing we can rely on, the only certainty we have. This is also a typical feature of the modern age, distinguishing it from traditional societies, which founded their stability by looking backwards at tradition and custom, at what is worthy and reliable because it has always been so, and relies on an original wisdom—on a higher project that properly sets up the things and the world and has been gradually altered by human mistakes and recklessness. Traditional societies put a high value on the old and refused novelty, which was seen first of all as corruption, deviancy and nuisance—something breaking into a consolidated order, bringing trouble and irritation, to be removed as soon as possible (SPÖRL 1930).

Modern society, on the contrary, within just a few decades has become obsessed by the new, which not only begins to be welcomed but becomes the necessary condition to appreciate something: not only do people like what is new, but they *only* like what is new (in art, in costume, even in science: GRENAILLE 1647: 130 and 7; GRACIÁN 1647: n. 269). The references change constantly, and one begins to expect this change, to actively seek novelty and surprise.

At the beginning this was obviously seen mainly as corruption and folly, as loss of stability and not as a search for a different kind of stability. Once the trauma is overcome, however, one begins to grasp the positive consequence of this change of attitude: it is true that one refers to transient references that change with time, but it is also true that an orientation can hold and be accepted even if we know that it changes. And one begins to see that this is not necessarily a weakness. No scientific statement would be presented today as an absolute and eternal truth, but only as a contribution to the development of knowledge, hence destined to be overtaken by new research—(and no less valid as a result of it). Even more evident is the case of positive right, that holds not because it refers to nature or to necessary norms, but only by virtue of a decision that decided it as such, could have decided otherwise and can change in the future—but as long as it holds it must be respected.

Fashion is the most explicit expression of this approach. We follow it even if we know that it goes by—indeed precisely for this reason. We know that last year we didn't like it and next year we will no longer like it, but this in no way weakens its present strength (on the contrary, we like it precisely because of this). Fashion implements a very efficient combination of flexibility and reliability: we can count on it, but we can also count on the fact that it will change. As 'scheduled transitoriness'

(LUHMANN 1989: 256) it succeeds in deriving from transiency a specific persuasion. We rely on its precepts because we know it is not forever, and that we retain the ability to adapt to times and circumstances—the only form of stability allowed in a society that no longer relies on history but is addressed to the future. Fashion, with its constant production of novelties, looks actually for a form of stability, revealing thereby one of its most puzzling features: a kind of ‘institutionalization of the ephemeral’ (LIPOWETSKY 1987; MACIVER and PAGE 1962: 108) in which the continuous change becomes the only constant. In BAUDELAIRE’s (1863) terms, the secret of fashion is ‘extracting the eternal from the ephemeral’.

This curious constellation, however, is certainly not new for organization theory that has been observing a condition of permanent reform for several years. When NILS BRUNSSON (1993) talks of ‘reforms as routine’ he describes a condition where the stability of an organization is pursued through change and not through constancy: reform is something normal and not the exception, and rather than a revolution in the structures of the organization it should be considered a further structure necessary for its functioning. As fashion is renewed only in order to prepare further innovations, i.e. to overcome itself, so the realization of reforms is often a prerequisite for other reforms. Once reformed, an organization tends to go on reforming itself, and seems to find a provisional stability in this movement. And as fashion tends to come back to itself and to propose the same forms again after years or decades, as if they were new (today we talk of vintage), organizations also show a curious ‘forgetfulness’ about reform attempts that allows them to start the same reform projects again and again, without taking into account the previous attempts and apparently without profiting from experience.

In both cases, stability seems to be sought in the constant pursuit and preparation of surprise, that is no longer taken as a nuisance but as the very condition for the functioning of the structure: novelty and reform are not inconveniences, burdens to bear when there are problems. The knowledge that today’s fashion will change tomorrow does not weaken it at all, and contributes rather to its sense and to its strength; the willingness to reform is not a weakness of the organization, a sign that something doesn’t work. On the contrary, organizations working well and successfully are always subject to reform projects, that (like fashion) indicate a positive opening to the future and the ability to face it. One does not change because one wants to get better—one is better because of the willingness to change.

V. The Conformity with Deviance

A similar paradoxical configuration can be found in the social dimension, which became more and more complex as the traditional hierarchical organization that assigned a place in the society to everyone grew less plausible. Everyone knew the social place of everyone else and what could be expected from them—without having to deal with the mysteries of their psyche and of their individual personalities. Today, on the contrary, society is made up of singular and idiosyncratic individuals, each seeking his originality (the myth of self-realization) and trying to be recognized by the others as a unique and authentic subject—and, as such, unpredictable.

This is of course rather complicated, because in order to be recognized by others we need common patterns of reference; but it is difficult to find shared models when we want to achieve our uniqueness. Even here fashion can help, because it allows for a complex and unlikely form of imitation that seems capable of combining the orientation towards others with individual specificity. Fashion is actually imitation—everybody says it, from the moralists of the 17th century up to TARDE, SIMMEL, BALZAC, even BAUDRILLARD. But what or who imitates when one follows fashion? It is no

more, as in the Middle Ages and in antiquity, a matter of imitation (mimesis) of high models, of saints and heroes, of the good and the beautiful—models that hold for everyone and at any time, because they showed fundamental precepts and basic principles. The references of fashion, on the contrary, are often not high but rather deviant (prisoners, gypsies, street people and the like) and not beautiful at all—since for more than a century fashion hasn't aimed at being beautiful, but rather at getting noticed, at drawing attention, and this is its first criterion (at the cost of disturbing and of being unpleasant).

What or who do we imitate when we imitate these models, following fashion? First of all the refusal of conformity, namely deviation and originality: we imitate those who imitate nobody, and those who are unique and original. The paradox is evident, and in this case takes the form of *conformity with deviance* (the second paradoxical mechanism behind fashion). We imitate the refusal of imitation, and in doing so we are conforming and deviant at the same time: conforming because we do like the others and enjoy the corresponding social support, but deviant because we refer to the refusal to be like the others. This is one of the most surprising successes of fashion, that succeeds in imposing the contradictory law of originality to everybody: everyone wants to be unique and original, without imitating anybody—but in this desire I am like everyone else.

This curious construction again poses a typical problem of organizations, and perhaps fashion can once again give some suggestions: the need to combine reliability and creativity, rules and innovation. Effective leaders, we read, 'must be loose and tight, creative and routine, and formal and informal' (DENISON et al. 1995: 526). This is why we need modern formal organizations that react to the discovery of subjectivity and find the way to make it manageable. Everyone as a subject is unique and unpredictable, but not as members of an organization, where their behaviour is controlled and predictable—I do not know what the employee wants or prefers, but I know what I can expect from him or her. In modern society organizations bring into practice the sociological distinction of person and role, where the person stands for individual singularity and the role for social reliability: exactly because of this, organizations have become indispensable and have spread more and more. But because of this there are also problems: the difficult constellation of unpredictability and planning, of creativity and control, emerges in classical issues such as the distinction of formal and informal organization, or of hierarchical power and authority. The problem is always to recognize and use the person under the role, without letting in the uncontrollable variety of individuals—the same issue that fashion manages to answer with its paradoxical forms.

VI. The Neutralization of Paradoxes

Fashion, therefore, is based on a network of paradoxes that express the complexity of our society—the same paradoxes that emerge in other typical modern social forms, such as formal organizations. The fascination of fashion, however, is largely related to the fact that we usually don't care about its contradictions and inconsistencies: fashion looks harmless and relatively unproblematic, because it succeeds in making these paradoxes work by combining them with one another.

This happens not by chance, and not only because of the curious lack of reflection about fashion. Fashion works just because its paradoxes, instead of summing up and making it even more problematic and incomprehensible, in a certain sense cancel or at least neutralize each other, producing the strange condition that such a widespread and powerful phenomenon is regarded with the sufficiency we mentioned before, as something frivolous and minor, a trivial form of unreasonableness and superficiality, not worth too much attention. How does this neutralization work (which, as we shall see, is the last and fundamental paradox of fashion)?

Let's start from the apories in the social dimension: our contradictory desire to be recognized and appreciated by the others just because we are unique and singular. But then we should appear incomprehensible and not be appreciated: an original who is recognized as such is no longer original. But nobody wants to be original alone, and we would like to find a way to be appreciated (i.e. recognized as equal) and individualized (i.e. recognized as different) at the same time—and here fashion comes to our aid. Our originality finds its clues in the trends of fashion that give us an orientation in order to express our singularity. When we discover a trend we feel original, and would like to be recognized and admired by others—but what they recognize (if anything) is only an originality expressed in the (not at all original) forms of a fashion shared by everyone. In the dilemma of deviance and conformity, we would like to see the first recognized, but find support only for the second. Usually, however, we do not come to realize it, because fashion, as we know, changes constantly, and before we are forced to recognize that our originality is shared by the others, fashion has moved on, and suggests being original in another way. The stability of change (the first paradox of fashion) solves the normality of the original (the second paradox).

But the opposite is also the case. Even in the temporal dimension, as we saw, fashion produces its paradox, reflected here in the fact that we learn to expect surprises, i.e. we expect from fashion that it should always amaze us. A normalized surprise, however, contradicts itself, but then the reference to the social dimension comes in to a world of original individuals, hence surprising and unpredictable. Here again the paradox in one dimension neutralizes the potential difficulties of the paradox in the other dimension. It is true that it makes no sense to ground our expectations on the production of surprises (we expect not to be able to expect anything), but it is also true that we can attribute these surprises to the originality and creativity of individuals. Dealing with people who define themselves as innovative and unpredictable, in expecting surprises we confirm in the meantime the patterns of social relations and of the relationship with the others. By attributing surprise to people we do not realize how the expectation of surprises is paradoxical—and we see this confirmed in the way each one relates to himself or herself and to the others.

The power of fashion, therefore, lies first of all in its admirable ability to combine paradoxes and to make them work, making fluid the dynamics of a society that bases on intransparency its way of managing complexity: the intransparency of the future and the intransparency of the others, acknowledged without losing one's ability to build expectations and to maintain a form of control, i.e. without losing one's ability to generate structures. In a society that faces the need to recognize and manage paradoxes, fashion shows us a way to articulate and combine the paradoxes with one another instead of trying to delete them—it succeeds in governing paradoxes by multiplying them in a controlled manner and not by trying to reduce them.

VII. A Trivial Mystery

What can we learn from the study of fashion? Perhaps the most useful tip requires another step forward to recognize the greatest success of fashion, that is even more subtle and elusive, a step which refers to the mystery we started from: its triviality. Fashion is so successful in articulating and combining its paradoxes that people usually don't think much about it, and it is generally regarded as something frivolous and essentially irrelevant. The demonstration of the power of fashion is precisely the fact that we do not take it seriously. Nobody knows how fashion really works and nobody can govern it (SELLERBERG 2002: §6): all attempts to discover and direct the formation and the development of trends clash with the impossibility to manage the phenomenon. Fashion rises and spreads by itself; what designers and companies can do is only to launch stimuli and see how they are accepted,

or to go hunting developing trends in order to follow and strengthen them. There is no rule that governs and directs fashion, and it remains largely impenetrable—but once created, fashion imposes itself on everyone.

Fashion, therefore, remains a mystery, but a mystery that presents itself in the form of a banality, and is hence even more mysterious. But fashion works precisely for this reason. In its weaving of paradoxes, it is probably so effective just because nobody takes it too seriously. The last paradox of fashion, that of a trivial mystery, is the one at the basis of its power and its diffusion, all the more undisputed as they are unnoticed. Fashion spreads everywhere and is seldom taken seriously. Organization theory, perhaps, can also learn something from this—and here again research and theory seem to have anticipated the forms and mechanisms of fashion. More than in any other field, here the problems of latency and effectiveness of hidden mechanisms are well known. We have already mentioned, for example, the issue of informal organization and the duplicity (irony) of rules that hold if one knows that they should not be taken too seriously. In organizations a certain hypocrisy is required, in the sense of the production of ‘inconsistencies between talk, decisions and actions’ (BRUNSSON 1996: 133). It generates a discrepancy between intention and results—in other words, failure. Organizations ‘have to fail in order to succeed’ (p. 134). What can we learn in this regard from the trivial mystery of fashion—from its ability to prevail just because of our tendency to underestimate it?

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