How (not) to reflect on pluralism?
The conditions of strategic institutional work in pluralistic organizations.

Sambugaro, Jonathan

Université Lyon 2

Coactis EA 4161 & Chaire Entrepreneuriat en Economie Sociale

jonathan.sambugaro@univ-lyon2.fr

Abstract:

Attempting to strategically transform situations of institutional complexity through a purposive revision of the pluralism involved is something considered for now as a non-realistic option. In institutional literature, the few studies that focused on the practical doing of people in pluralistic organizations suggest that institutional change is there merely driven by mundane improvisations rather than by a reflexive and deliberate strategic work. I suggest that these first results are not entirely acceptable and I aim to investigate the *conditions* required to engage in strategic institutional work within pluralistic organizations. More specifically, this paper focuses on the obstacles that can prevent such organizations from gaining the necessary reflexive awareness to do so.

In this paper, I will firstly suggest a new pragmatist framework to investigate the logical structure of the process of inquiry toward institutional revision. Since responses to complexity are known to be structured by the ways conflicting perspectives are given voice to in organizations, it is of the utmost importance to be able to investigate the discursive practices involved in transformative attempts from such a logical perspective in order not to reduce such practices hem to dynamics of power or legitimacy. Secondly, I shall theorize the failure case of the institutional strategy of A French Mutual Insurance Company. The first phase of the investigation (2012-2014) consisted in direct observations of the board of directors, committees and general meetings. These observations were articulated throughout with a discursive analysis of internal documents (1980-2014) and strategic documents (2007-2014). Secondly (2014-2015)and starting from a set of initial propositions, interviews were conducted in four regional units and at the national headquarters of AFMIC.

In the case studied, a circular reasoning prevented the transformative attempt because of three obstacles regarding the process of inquiry toward institutional change. Firstly, the substantialist conception of organizational values led to an abstract character of strategic thinking which prevented actors from being able to articulate the contradictions experienced in practice, which is a necessary step to endogenous institutional change. Secondly, the organizational pluralism made of seven political perspectives was not discursively constructed as serving organizational action but solely as being an effect of the representative structure of the policyholders. Because of this, people were unable to deviate from their initial positions for being able to continuously reconstruct the organizational pluralism to take emerging trends into account. Thirdly, the idealistic conception of consensus decision-making in the organization led to the construction of fundamentally decontextualized meanings which prevented the settlement of normative conflict from being bounded upstream by the practical problems faced in the situations and, downstream, by the effective possible means for action. Because of this, discussions did not end up to a decision to modify existing arrangements but ultimately led to dichotomizing the logics involved and reinforced the abstract character of strategic discourses. This circular reasoning prevented actors from being able to gain the reflexive awareness necessary for deliberately revising their institutional arrangements.

Keywords: pluralism, reflexivity, inquiry, pragmatism, institutional work

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1. INTRODUCTION

Strategists may not be entirely satisfied with the existing alternatives for responding to institutional pluralism, which is "the situation faced by an organization that operates within multiple institutional spheres" (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Literature suggests that organizations can cope with incompatible prescriptions of multiple logics through compromise, decoupling or selective coupling of those logics (Pache & Santos, 2013) and that the existence of competing normative orders can be designed through the multiple dimensions of "hybrid organizing" (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Attempting to strategically transform complexity itself through a purposive work aimed at revising institutional arrangements (Lawrence, 1999) is however something considered for now as a non-realistic option. The few studies that embraced complexity by focusing on the very practices of individuals in pluralistic organizations suggest that institutional change is there merely driven by mundane improvisations rather than by a reflexive and deliberate strategic work (for example Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). According to these studies, assuming the possibility of gaining the reflexive awareness necessary for revising the pluralism involved is suspicious and relies on un-nuanced accounts of human rationality in complex settings. But is this to say that it is impossible for strategists willing to engage in such a reflexive work to do so?

The extensive use of discursive ambiguity (Jarzabkowski & al 2010; Sillince & al, 2012) in pluralistic organizations is obviously problematic in regards to the fact that projective activities toward endogenous institutional change need initial contradictions to be engaged (Seo & Creed, 2002). Ambiguity plays an enabling role when it comes down to accommodating divergent perspectives and preventing internal tensions but it may ultimately create an inability to purposefully transform existing arrangements (Denis & al, 2011; Abdallah & Langley, 2014). Such a double-edged discursive ambiguity seems really problematic given "the cognitive and emotional efforts necessary for actors to gain reflexive awareness and engage in work to maintain, disrupt and create institutions" (Lawrence & al,

2013) and therefore deserves further investigation, especially when considering the fact that institutions are of a discursive nature (Phillips & al, 2004; Zilber, 2011). However, despite repeated calls made last years to complete institutional research by focusing on the practical doing in organizations (Kaghan & Lounsburry, 2011; Smets & al, 2012), little attention has been paid to the relation between the discursive practices involved in strategizing processes and the collective capacity to reflexively engage in a deliberate transformation of the organizational pluralism (Greenwood & al, 2011). In the overlap between neo-institutional and strategy-as-practice perspectives (Suddaby & al, 2013), such an investigation could uncover the *conditions* under which it may be possible for strategists working in pluralistic organizations to attempt to transform the complexity itself.

What are the obstacles in the process of revising institutional pluralism that could prevent actors from gaining reflexive awareness? To advance our understanding of this matter, I will firstly provide new pragmatist foundations to analytically investigate the logical structure of the process of inquiry toward institutional change (Frega, 2012, 2014; Morgan, 2014). Since responses to complexity are known to be structured by the ways conflicting perspectives are given voice to in the organizations (Greenwood, 2011), it is of the utmost importance to investigate the discursive practices involved in the process of transformative inquiry from such a logical perspective in order not to reduce them to dynamics of power (Pache & Santos, 2010; Zald & Lounsburry, 2010) and legitimacy (Patriotta & al, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2014). Secondly, I shall study the case of an inconsistent institutional strategy and I shall theorize three discursive obstacles that prevented actors from engaging in a transformational process by enclosing them in circular reasoning.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: THE INQUIRY TOWARD INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

2.1 THE NEED OF A PRAGMATIST FRAMEWORK

Many criticisms have been addressed last years in the institutional literature to the overly simplistic views of the way actors embedded in institutions can engage (or not) to transform them (Battilana & al, 2009; Lawrence & al, 2011; Smets & al, 2012). As a response to repeated calls to overcome the problematic alternative between the idea of "oversocialized actors" and that of "heroic agents" (Lawrence & al, 2009), most recent contributions sought to advance our understanding of the micro-processes involved in

institutional transformation. Doing so, however, such contributions tended to put aside the notion of reflexivity because of obvious difficulties to conceptually and empirically investigate the notion (Lawrence & al, 2013; Zilber, 2013). As a result, existing frameworks for making sense of strategizing processes in situations of institutional pluralism are not well suited for problematizing what is at stake in a deliberate attempt to revise the normative orders involved. This theoretical defection is not acceptable for strategists, which are on the contrary in the urge of conceptual tools for making sense of problematic situations in contexts of institutional complexity and more importantly for finding ways to deliberately transform such situations.

Firstly, frameworks drawing on a dynamic view of social construction and exploring the distributed dimension of cognition, such as the actor-network theory which provides the conceptual basis of strategizing as a translation process (Denis & al, 2007, 2014), assume that human reasoning is bounded by existing institutionalized mind-sets. Such a perspective is relevant for investigating how networks of actors can be mobilized through "obligatory passage points" but is less helpful when it comes down to investigate actors' critical practices toward an intentional revision of such institutionalized mind-sets (Jagd, 2011). Secondly, frameworks inspired by pragmatic sociology such as convention theory, which provides the theoretical basis for contributions that seek to complement the institutional logics perspective with a situated understanding of legitimacy struggles (Pattriota & al, 2011; Cloutier & Langley, 2013) as well as of the perspective of strategizing as an accommodation process (Denis & al, 2007, 2014), assume on the contrary that individuals may be free to "engage with non-institutionalized mind-sets" (Boxenbaum, 2014). Problematizing the immanent revision of existing institutions is there simply not an issue: obviously, people who are able to disengage with existing mind-sets do not experience the need to endogenously revise such mind-sets. Thirdly, contributions based on the idea of a practice-driven nature of institutional change (Smets & al, 2012) are best suited for engaging in the whole ambiguity and complexity of organizational life (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). However, in their attempt to focus on the immanent logic of practice by refusing an ontological primacy of individuals over actions (Chia & MacKay, 2007), they have led to a conceptual opposition between immanence and deliberate, that is between the practical and the projective dimensions of agency (Emibayer & Mische, 1998). In such a dichotomy, practice-based contributions have come to overemphasize the "mundane" dimension of changes in situations of institutional

pluralism and suggest an impossibility to purposefully reflect on pluralism (for example Smets & al, 2013; Jarzabkowski & al, 2013). As a result, frameworks adopting a practice lens are for now unable to provide relevant conceptual tools for strategists working in pluralistic organizations, which is a particularly problematic situation since one of the benefits of such a practice lens supposedly lies in its ability to enhance the practical relevance of organizational research by providing performative theories (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

A good place to start the investigation of the conditions required to engage in institutional revision would be at the overlap between pragmatism and analytic philosophy. Under the fuzzy label of "neopragmatism", a fair amount of contemporary philosophers have engaged in a reconstruction of our understanding of human rationality. By reconciling the pragmatist idea of a practice-driven nature of social construction and the idea that actors's reflexive abilities and obstacles are to be found in their ordinary language games through which they make sense of their situated experiences, an analytic-pragmatist lens (Brandom, 2008) to institutional change would be particularly relevant for taking seriously both the *immanent* and the *objective* nature of institutional transformation (Chia & Mackay, 2007). In this perspective, the possibility of institutional transformation lies in the capacity of language games to be revised in problematic situations. By departing from actor-centered perspectives and by focusing on the immediate relationship between language and practice (which are two sides of the same coin), analytic pragmatism does not face the now classical problem of embeddedness. To try and make a first humble step forward in this direction, I shall now present the pragmatist notion of inquiry that will serve as a basis for analysing the discursive practices involved in a transformational attempt. Doing so, I aim to suggest an integrative framework for investigating what is at stake in reflexive attempts within situations of pluralism.

2.2 REFLEXIVITY AS INQUIRY

Inquiry is initiated whenever "a normative order becomes dysfunctional, producing conflicts or troubling consequences in the domain of action, or for the sake of preventing dysfunctions to emerge" (Frega, 2014), which is also to say whenever a contradiction occurs (Seo & Creed, 2002). Individuals are bounded by their own language games which are rules of behavior but are not spectators of these games. Inquiry is the *active* process in which they engage to immanently transform them. In this perspective, inquiry is by nature an *articulative*

and *transformative* process (Frega, 2012: 52-56). The first and articulative phase of reasoning starts from a given which is a situation as an indeterminate whole, that is a situation where established institutions are deficient at providing continuous meaning for the course of action. This indeterminate situation has to be articulated into a problematized one, that is to say an incomplete situation from which an investigation can be conducted about what can be done to complete the situation. Indeed, "every set of circumstances that we encounter brings forth some potentially unknowable set of prior beliefs, so that we are always acting within some definition of the situation" (Morgan, 2014). The investigation is transformative, which means that reasoning aims at modifying systems of beliefs and habits to cope with and settle the problematic situation. If the transformation is successful for the course of action, "the inquiry into a single problematic situation has an impact on generalities because it transforms habits and beliefs" (Frega, 2012: 56).

Saying that systems of beliefs are historically constructed and reconstructed through processes of functional determination toward the resolution of problems is to say that practical inquiry constitutes the general paradigm of reasoning and that conceptual distinctions relate to possible courses of action. Assuming this functionalist view of conceptual distinctions implies that institutional change is practice-driven. But this practice-driven nature of institutional change does not imply that inquiry is not a reflexive and projective activity. For pragmatism, assuming there is a distinction between practical-evaluative and projective agency (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) is a mistake, which is today widely endorsed in organizational institutionalism. From the fact that reasoning is always engaged with a problem in a situation as a whole, it logically follows that practical inquiry is a *holistic process*. Indeed, problems do not exist *per se* but only as part of a particular inherited normative order that needs to be transformed. Since practical inquiry engages in an indeterminate situation-as-a-whole to complete it through a judgment that reconstructs a new unified whole that includes the agent itself, it follows that the archetypal nature of judgment is projective. Judgment is "the result of previous activities, a form of activity itself and the origin of further activities" (Frega, 2012: 55), which is also to say that the agent is judging himself and thereby determining the conditions of his further judgments. Settling the problematic situation can be achieved "through actions directed toward the situation as well as through a self-oriented change in the agent's beliefs and attitudes toward the problem which originated the process of inquiry" (Frega, 2012: 75). This very fact that the

agent is in the same time the source of transformation and its possible object (for example Creed & al, 2010) implies that inquiry is an *expressive* and a *constitutive* process, which is to say a projective activity (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The projective nature of practical inquiry (drawn from Morgan, 2014)
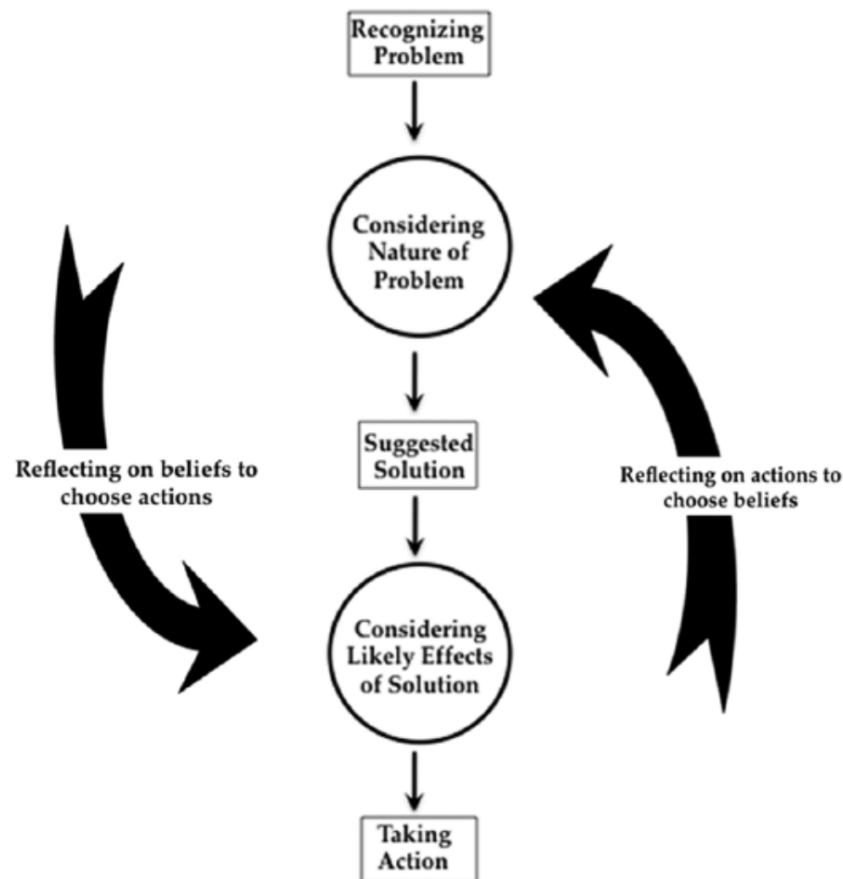
Inquiry ends when a criterion is issued which determines a further course of action. Judgment is defined as the active process of deliberation and adjudication that leads to such a criterion. The double nature of judgment, both expressive and constitutive, means a distinction must be made between value as data for the judgment and value as act of judgment. The difference here is between a non-intellectual attitude versus the intellectual attitude *par excellence*. Experienced values, just like facts, are data for the judging agent. But the very object of the act of judging is also to establish the values themselves. What must be understood here is that a judgment of value is never complete in itself and that the meaning of values is always to be further determined by practical judgments. Saying that values are always indeterminate is obviously to say that existing values have not been confronted to the

problematic situation involved in the inquiry. The meaning of these values, that is their consequences, is to be determined. Pragmatism, in this sense, is a doctrine of meaning which "rests on the argument that the meaning of an event cannot be given in advance of experience" (Denzin, 2012). Since values involved in a judgment are by nature indeterminate, the entire plurality of values is always at stake in every situation of inquiry. The act of judging, in reconstructing the meaning of values, is by nature a *pluralistic deliberation*. Reflexivity is then defined, in a pragmatist account, as a process of deliberation taking place in an articulative and transformative inquiry and which consists in transvaluating a plurality of indeterminate prior values within a particular and problematic situation in order to adjudicate between possible courses of action.

This pragmatist account of reflexivity is helpful to analyse actors' deliberate attempts to institutional transformation because it suggests a logical structure that allows us to reject three erroneous (transcendental) conceptions of a valuation (Frega, 2006: 165-168). Firstly, there is no reflexivity in deductively deriving an action from a proposition that assesses a determined value for an established end, which is the paradigm of practical syllogism. Because a value is there already determined, there is obviously no need for a valuation: the relation between means and ends is already given and do not need to be reconstructed. Secondly, reflexivity is not a comparison between a situation and a model either, which is Plato's paradigm. This applicative conception also annihilates the very sense of reasoning in the same way as the previous conception. The third conception is that of cognitivist theories of deliberation that carry a purely intellectual perspective of adjucation, therefore completely missing the situated nature of valuation. These three conceptions are problematic when it comes to build performative theories of institutional transformation because they reject the immanent nature of inquiry. Inquiry always takes place in particular and complex situations where the effective possibilities of action are limited, thereby determining the number and the nature of possible choices. The means determine the ends as much as they are determined by those ends in the adjudication between the possible courses of action. Understanding this immanent and objective nature of inquiry (Frega, 2014) implies rejecting the means/ends conceptual dualism which is today widely endorsed within institutional theory but helpless for analysing reflexive attempts to institutional transformation.

For a start, understanding the multi-dimensional nature of the process of inquiry allows us to make sense of three well-known but previously un-integrated elements regarding

institutional transformation (see table 1). The articulative dimension of inquiry, that is to say the effort required to problematize an indeterminate situation into a problematic one, relates to the need to formulate contradictions of multiple normative orders that are experienced in contexts of practices for being able to endogenously engage in institutional transformation (Seo & Creed, 2002). As change is practice-driven, the transformative dimension of inquiry relates to the need to experiment possible ways to cope with and settle the problematic situation, that is to being able to improvise new arrangements within situations (Smets & al, 2012). The projective revision of existing mind-sets terminates when a criterion is issued which determines further the meaning of values, that is to say when the inquiry into a particular context produces a self-oriented change in the agent (Creed & al, 2010; Kodeith & Greenwood, 2013).

Table 1: The dimensions of inquiry

Dimensions of inquiry	Conditions of transformative attempts
Articulative	**Formulating** practical contradictions within situations (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002)
Transformative	**Experimenting** possible revisions for settling the situation (Smets & al, 2012; Jarzabkowski & Smets, 2013)
Projective	**Determining** further the practical meaning of values (Creed & al, 2010; Kodeith & Greenwood, 2013)

3. METHOD

3.1 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Investigating the obstacles that could prevent actors from gaining reflexive awareness in pluralistic contexts requires to sample a case with regard to some attributes that are known to be relevant to the study of organizational responses to complexity. These attributes, which are the position of an organization within its field, its structure, its ownership and governance as well as its identity, « frame how organizations experience institutional complexity and how they perceive and construct the repertoire of responses available to them » (Greenwood & al, 2011). In this paper, I shall study the institutional project of A French Mutual Insurance

Company (AFMIC, the name has been changed) which is a nonprofit organization whose organizational attributes are very interesting and provide the opportunity to investigate rare circumstances (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). AFMIC is an auto & property insurance, health insurance and financial services company that is also a leader in the french market (5M members, 10k employees, €5,7bil revenue in 2013). A very unique property of AFMIC is the form of its governance, which is deeply connected to the form of its structure. As the leader of the mutualist movement in France, many time in its history AFMIC chose to construct and exploit an organizational pluralism to make sure that societal logics prevail over professional logics: the organization is highly decentralized (eleven regional units were, up until now (1987 - 2014), in charge of their activities) and its governance is divided into seven political groups in which actors carry (Zilber, 2002) and give voice (Pache & Santos, 2010) to the multiple perspectives of policyholders.

The reasons that explain the particular structure of AFMIC's governance are as follows. In the beginning, each mutual insurance company was restricted to a particular class of workers such as public officials, craftsmen, teachers and so on. AFMIC was the first such company to choose to be open to all people in commercial and industrial organizations (that is both entrepreneurs and their employees). At first, policyholders used to participate directly in AFMIC's annual general meetings. When the organization grew, the question of constructing internal representation (Pache & Santos, 2010) was raised. In 1987, a decision was made to organize a pluralistic governance through seven political groups. One of them represents entrepreneurs, five of them are made of the five main french trade unions through prorated union elections and the last one represents the nonprofit sector. Here, the term "political" refers to what is called the "political line" of the organization, the other line being described in the organization as the "technostructure". Members of the seven intra-organizational communities are very tied (Delmas & Toffel, 2008) to their regional-level and national-level union infrastructures, especially people from the five unions, what makes them capable of advocating (Zald & Lounsbury, 2010) each particular perspective. Along with its pluralism principle, the governance is based on a consensus principle of decision-making. Such governance is usual in France within the health sector where powerful intermediate bodies run public organizations but is unique within insurance companies.

Given what is currently known about the organizational filters that shape responses to institutional complexity (Greenwood & al, 2011), AFMIC is relevant toward investigating the

discursive conditions and efforts necessary to gaining reflexive awareness in pluralistic contexts for three reasons. Firstly, studying a centered actor in a very mature field is relevant because organizations in such positions tend to experience the stronger level of complexity (Battilana & al, 2009). Secondly, this complexity is not that of two competing logics but that of seven political perspectives. This situation is particularly interesting regarding how much of a need there is for empirical research within situations involving a multiplicity of logics in order to extend our knowledge of the enactment of normative disagreement and its outcomes (Greenwood & al, 2011). Thirdly, AFMIC's corporate governance was designed to be very well balanced, which means that the organization is likely to fail at manipulating internal logics (Pache & Santos, 2010). This situation is likely to lead to handling pluralism through a compromising strategy (Pache & Santos, 2013) relying on an extensive use of discursive ambiguity in order to avoid organizational paralysis.

3.2 THE CASE

During the construction of its 2010 - 2015 corporate plan (2008 - 2009), AFMIC realized that the increasing isomorphism of the insurance field was leading to the disappearance of its "mutualist difference". In the sixties when AFMIC was created, such a difference was obvious. The first CEO wanted to tackle the capitalistic perspective of insurance on the grounds that firms were just designed to make easy money, therefore being technically inefficient. He decided to introduce the segmentation principle into automotive risk management so that the cost of AFMIC contracts, because of an improved technical efficiency, was thirty to fifty percent lower than every existing contract. Becoming the technical leader allowed AFMIC to show that its mutualistic perspective, in opposition to the capitalistic perspective of insurance, was to insure people in the optimal way from policyholders' point of view which meant, at this time, in the most inexpensive way. Fifty years later, this meaning of mutualism had nearly disappeared because of institutional pressures. The first strategic issue of the plan stated that AFMIC had to reflect on what constitutes its social value proposition so that its subsequent refined mutualist doctrine could be a differentiating factor. Such a deliberate reflection was clearly described as an institutional strategy aimed at reconstructing what constitutes a mutualist perspective of insurance in order to renew a qualitative difference between AFMIC and other insurance companies.

An institutional project (IP) was consequently constructed and deployed. Reflecting on the articulation between the mutualistic and professional perspectives in order to promote a particular institutional arrangement was the reason that initiated IP. However, it ended up that IP did not respond to its strategic issues as its final aim was exclusively to reshape the way prevention and CSR activities are organized. In the process, people slowly deviated from the initial purpose that was to reflect on what constitutes the mutualist contract and adopt the idea that the mutualist difference lies "beyond the contract". This disarticulation between the "technical" and the "political" perspectives of AFMIC was experienced as a failure from both organizational lines. As a result of the inconsistency of IP regarding to the strategic issues that originated the project (see table 2), these same issues pertaining to the need to reflect on the articulation of organizational logics became central to the strategic questioning ahead of the next corporate plan. This revealed the true unwanted character of the situation which is that the seven groups honestly failed in the renewal of what constitutes AFMIC's mutualist doctrine.

Table 2: The strategic inconsistency of IP

Strategic issues identified (2008-2009)	Project implemented (2012-2013)
Constructing a differentiating doctrine of mutualism	The project focused on CSR & prevention activities which are not differentiating
Refining what constitutes the "mutualist contract"	The idea arose that the mutualist difference lies "beyond the contract"
Coupling "professional" and "mutualistic" logics	The project ended up dichotomizing organizational goals between the creation of "economic value" and that of "social value"

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

This study is part of a broader doctoral research conducted within AFMIC for 36 months from October of 2012 to September of 2015 and which took place in a regional unit firstly and at the national headquarters secondly. This research was financed through a CIFRE agreement, which is a French incentive scheme that aims to strengthen research and development by giving the opportunity for doctoral student to conduct their entire research in organizations. For organizational and strategic research, this situation where the researcher is

"both a fully versed inside participant in strategy-making and a full-fledged member of the academic community" is particularly interesting (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Yanow, 2012; Tallberg & al, 2014; Vesa & Vaara, 2014) and even further relevant when considering the practice lens of the study (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). An ethnonarrative approach (Hansen, 2006), consistent with both the necessity to capture the entire complexity of the organization and the analytical-pragmatist theoretical framework of the research, was adopted (see table 3).

The first phase of the investigation (October of 2012 - June of 2014) took place in a regional unit and consisted in direct observations of the board of directors, committees and general meetings. These observations were articulated throughout with a discursive analysis of internal documents (1980-2014) and strategic documents (2007-2014) with unrestricted access (approx. 3600 type-written A4 pages). Extensive meetings were regularly scheduled with the AFMIC supervisor in order to complete my understanding of organizational life with the more historical perspective of the sixty-years-old Deputy CEO. Uncountable informal conversations with people working at the regional headquarters and in agencies helped me "understand the common sense, everyday, unwritten and unspoken, tacitly known 'rules of engagement' known to situational 'natives'" (Yanow & al, 2012). This first phase of inquiry led to build a pre-model of the discursive obstacles that prevented the organization from engaging in a reflexive manipulation of its pluralism. This pre-model constituted the theoretical base for the second phase of the investigation.

Secondly and starting from a set of initial propositions, 27 interviews (54 hours) were conducted in four other regional units and at the national headquarters of AFMIC during July of 2014 and February of 2015. The regional units were chosen for their particular status (performance, historical context, people in the governance). Since these units were all slightly different, the interviews were designed to understand how each organizational context could shape the studied phenomenon in a specific way, which helped to refine the core problem. Regarding the national level, the "technical" executive board (28 members in 2014), the "political" board of directors (33 members in 2014) and the "hybrid" supervisory board which the President, Vice-presidents, the CEO and Deputy CEOs attend (14 members in 2014) were considered. Everyone attending the hybrid committee was interviewed, as well as five other people chosen for their particular positions in the organization.

Table 3: Data sources, types and uses

Source	Type	Use
Observation & Participation Approx. 800 A4 pages	**Field notes** **Informal conversations**	• Familiarize with the organization • Understand native language game • Identify strategic shortcomings
Documents Approx. 3600 A4 pages	**Company-related documents** (1980-2015) **Strategic documents** (1998-2015) **IP-related documents** (2012-2013)	• Retrospectively identify the problematic case • Support the preliminary discursive analysis
Interviews Approx. 54 hours	• **Regional headquarters** 4 x 2 people (4 Regional Presidents & CEOs), also respectively members of the national board of directors and the national executive board. • **National headquarters** 14 people attending the supervisory board + 5 other people.	• Enhance my understanding of organizational history • Get information about strategic processes and practices • Support the analysis of the obstacles • Refine the phenomenon

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS (light version)

Considering that this study came out of a real time ethnographic work, the framework that helped me to make sense of the phenomenon was constructed in an iterative way between data and theory. Through frequent observations of the board of directors, I firstly identified three well-known and common shortcomings in the practices of AFMIC's strategy making. The first one was the insufficient ability of representatives to formulate transformative projects and came from the fantasized character of the reality in which representatives engaged in thinking. Such a non-realistic character of the formulation of change is usual in contexts of participative strategizing, where consensus is often achieved at the expense of realism (Denis & al, 1995). The second shortcoming was the inability to confront multiple perspectives and came from a pathological avoidance of normative conflict. This inability to

deviate from existing formal positions (Denis & al, 2001) is related to the risk of jeopardizing the whole political line because of the possible exclusion of one or more of its constitutive groups. The third shortcoming lay in the inability of adjudicating within a plurality of criteria, which is also a usual phenomenon known as escalating indecision (Denis & al, 2011).

The pragmatist framework helped me to make sense of these three insufficiencies and their relation regarding AFMIC's failure in its reflexive attempt. More specifically, I started to reflect separately on each insufficiency and then built an integrative pre-model of three logical problems for explaining these shortcomings. These logical obstacles were related to three fundamentals structuring organizational discourses: AFMIC's mutualistic values, its pluralism principle and its consensus principle. The first problem lay in the substantialist perspective of organizational values, the second lay in the disarticulation between AFMIC's internal pluralism and its action, the third lay in the idealistic conception of the consensus decision-making (see table 4). The pre-model constituted a base for further discussions with top managers and representatives as well as for structuring the discursive analysis of internal documents and interviews.

Table 4: Three strategic shortcomings and their related obstacles

Dimensions of inquiry	Conditions of transformative attempts	Identified strategic shortcomings	Identified obstacles to the process of inquiry
Articulative	**Formulating** practical contradictions within situations	Unrealistic character of transformational projects (Denis & al, 1995)	Substantialist conception of organizational values
Transformative	**Experimenting** possible revisions for settling the situation	Inability to deviate from existing formal positions (Denis & al, 2001)	Pluralism disconnected from organizational action
Projective	**Determining** further the practical meaning of values	Escalating indecision (Denis & al, 2011)	Idealistic conception of consensus decision-making

4. FINDINGS (very light version)

4.1. FIRST OBSTACLE: A SUBSTANTIALIST CONCEPTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

The document summarizing the political debates in the process states that "a very strong organizational identity is claimed", relating to "a historical legacy of which representatives and employees see themselves as guarantors". This identity is made up of "shared mutualist values" that constitute the core of the organization, « the constant challenge [being that] these values have to be perceived in [organizational] actions ». The problem identified here lies in an idealistic conception of claimed values: values and actions are articulated through the prism of "embodiment" (of the values in actions) and of "conformity" (of actions regarding values). This conception led to the idea that the political and the technical dimensions of the organization are two distinct spheres. In this perspective, for the political reflection to be "truly political", it must not engage in a in-depth review of operational units since doing so would ground it in the context of organizational activities instead of the mutualistic values which political line guarantees. As some Regional Presidents stated, "if political people become too professional, they will not engage in a political reflection but in a technical reflection".

This idealistic conception of organizational values was problematic for engaging in the process of inquiry. Because it takes the signification of values as already determined, this conception prevented people from reflecting on the reciprocal determination of means and ends. Since the reflection does not arise from the practical situations in order to take the effective stresses of organizational action into account, it unfolds as an abstraction. Because of this, the formulation of transformative projects did not start from the effective practical contradictions experienced in situations (Seo & Creed, 2002) but unfolds from a fundamentally non-realistic (abstract) character of strategic thinking (Denis, 2001). Regarding the process of inquiry, the formulation of organizational identity prevented actors from being able to problematize an indeterminate situation as an incomplete one.

Proposition 1: A substantialist conception of organizational values prevents the inquiry from being articulative.

4.2. SECOND OBSTACLE: A DISCONNECTION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL PLURALISM AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTION

AFMIC's governance is divided into seven political groups consisting of established french unions. This situation is discursively supported as being the best way to represent the diversity of policyholders and make sure that mutualistic values prevail over the professional logic: "a very positive trait of the organization is to have individuals from very different backgrounds, who are known to be engaged toward developing social welfare and who have a real human and social depth". For this reason, it is assumed that "the social concern always comes first when making a decision". The fact that the practical meaning of claimed values naturally differ from a political group to another is considered to be an expression of pluralism: "the very good thing is that we share the same mutualist fundamental values. After which we can disagree about what to do in practice, but that is not a problem", "we can disagree on the means but there is no doubt that all representatives are pursuing the same social goals".

A problem lies in the fact that the pluralistic governance is not discursively constructed as serving organizational action but solely as an effect of the representative logic of AFMIC. Because the nature of shared meanings is abstract, no common practical problem could be seen as a trigger for engaging in a transformative process. Obviously, since each representative is legitimate in the governance on the grounds of his previous membership in one of the constitutive unions, no one can deviate from its initial perspective at the risk of the position being compromised. The political line therefore constitutes a rigid framework which is disconnected from emerging trends in the field that would yet require an organizational evolution. In this situation where no possible normative conflict can be resolved through the transformation of the whole plurality involved, practical contradictions could not function as a trigger to endogenous change.

Proposition 2: A disconnection between pluralism and organizational action prevents the pluralistic inquiry from being transformative.

4.3. THIRD OBSTACLE: AN IDEALISTIC CONCEPTION OF CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

The logical structure of AFMIC's judgment is that of an idealistic conception of consensus decision-making. In order for representatives to be committed to approving a project, its practical consequences must have been derived from shared premises. Decisions

are always taken on a consensual basis, which means that no decision is taken which does not involve the agreement of eighty percent of the administrators. This situation is reported by interviewees as being a flaw since it prevents from making choices about competing perspectives. For a consensus to be achieved, discursive ambiguity must mechanically be instilled until every conflict is settled. This situation is described as "a situation where members neutralize each other". As a consequence, what is called the "soft consensus" causes a rise in abstraction to make any contradiction disappear. In the process of strategic planning, the progressive disappearance of the issues that initiated the need for a change in the first place leads to the fundamentally inconsistent nature of the projects. Whereas contradictions are expected to catalyse organizational change, the "soft consensus" rather creates "a circular discussion in which no changes can be formulated".

The idealistic conception of consensus decision-making is problematic because its underlying structure of judgment is that of a practical syllogism. In situations of competing perspectives, the only possibility for shared premises to be formulated is that the principles of action remain abstract.

Proposition 3: An idealistic conception of decision-making prevents any practical judgement from terminating the inquiry.

4.4. THE PHENOMENON: A DEFECTIVE CIRCULAR REASONING

In order for the inquiry to be constitutive of renewed institutional arrangements, there must be an ability to articulate an indeterminate situation into an incomplete one, which is to express an internal problem in the existing normative orders that will serve as a basis for the transformative phase. In the case studied, a circular reasoning prevented such a expressive attempt because of three obstacles regarding the process of inquiry. Firstly, the substantialist conception of organizational values led to an abstract character of strategic thinking which prevented actors from being able to articulate the contradictions experienced in practice, which is a necessary step to endogenous institutional change. Secondly, the organizational pluralism made of seven political perspectives was not discursively constructed as serving organizational action but solely as being an effect of the representative structure of the policyholders. Because of this, people were unable to deviate from their initial positions for being able to continuously reconstruct the organizational pluralism in relation to the emerging trends in the organizational field. Thirdly, the idealistic conception of consensus decision-

making in the organization led to the construction of fundamentally decontextualized meanings which prevented the settlement of normative conflict from being bounded upstream by the practical problems faced in the situations and, downstream, by the effective possible means for action. Because of this, strategic discussions did not end up to a decision to modify existing arrangements. It ultimately led to dichotomizing the logics involved and reinforced the abstract character of discourses. Because of its fundamental inability to "contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 963), the self-reinforcing abstract character of organizational discourses prevented contradictions experienced in practice to being endogenous trigger to institutional change. The circular reasoning prevented actors from being able to gain the reflexive awareness necessary for deliberately revising their institutional arrangements, that is for engaging in a constitutive behaviour (see figure 2).

Figure 2: A defective circular reasoning
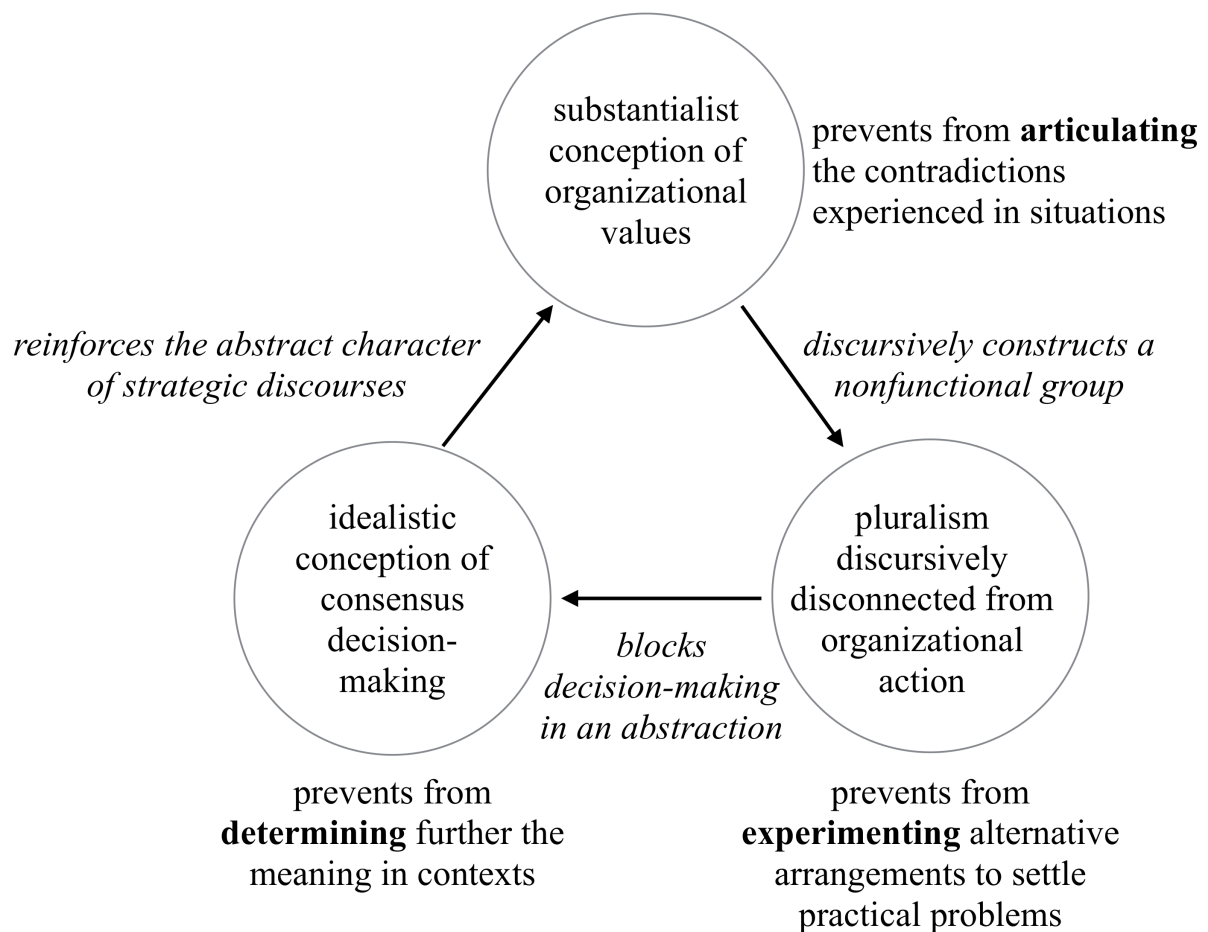
5. DISCUSSION (ultra light version)

This investigation mainly suggests three advances. Firstly, what seems here to be a phenomenon of organizational paralysis is primarily a consequence of a defective circular reasoning that must not be understood as a purposeful strategy of discursive ambiguity to handle pluralism. The abstract character of strategic discourses did not help to avoid the paralysis, which is commonly the reason why people purposefully rely on ambiguity. On the contrary, it constructed the very impossibility to engage in the transformation of the pluralism involved in the organization. As a consequence and contradictory to previous studies, this research found that the lack of specificity of the political perspective of the organization did not provide an extended response capacity to complexity. Secondly, this research suggests that the idea that pluralistic organizations are not able to engage in projective agency but only in practical-evaluative agency has to be reversed. Empirical investigation shows that the very condition for engaging in a reflexive and deliberate transformation is that of properly engaging in a practical reasoning. In the case studied, the failure precisely came from the inability of actors to contextualize the production of existing arrangements for being open to new practical contexts. Thirdly, this paper shows that advancing our understanding of the conditions necessary for actors to engage in a reflexive work towards institutional transformation in pluralistic settings requires a revocation of the means-ends dualism in order to problematize the relation between the way normative orders are enacted and the resulting organizational capacities to formulate transformational projects and adjudicate between them. By presenting new analytical-pragmatist foundations that allowed uncovering three obstacles to the process of inquiry, this paper invites to investigate further the discursive practices involved in pluralistic settings from this logical perspective.

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