

Hiding the Basic Temporal Paradox of Strategic Management: A Study of Danish Top Managers' Deparadoxification Practices

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Abstract: *In the strategic management literature, a basic temporal paradox is created: on the one hand, the strategic manager is believed to operate in a world of change and flux. On the other hand, the core strategic objective is to make decisions that create a better future platform for the business. Essentially, the strategic manager is expected to predict the future; yet this is an expectation that only works under the assumption that the world moves in a somewhat orderly and linear fashion. The great conundrum is that while this temporal paradox underlies all strategic practices, then why don't more strategic processes break down? In this paper, I will develop a tentative answer to this question. Theoretically, the answer is motivated by Niklas Luhmann's argument that paradoxes can, at best, be made invisible or in Luhmann's term 'deparadoxified'. Empirically, the answer is developed in the context of a broader narrative about 'meaning' in organisations and my basic claim is that this meaning trend provides a framework for a deparadoxification strategy that draws on semantics and logics developed in a religious context. Concretely, I will show how this type of religious deparadoxification is applied by three Danish CEOs.*

Keywords: *strategic management, organisational paradox, systems analysis, meaning in organisations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the strategic management literature, a basic temporal paradox is created. The paradox is this: on the one hand, the strategic manager is believed to operate in a world of change and flux. The external environment changes at all times in mysterious, non-linear and fundamentally unpredictable ways (Porter, 1996). On the other hand, the core strategic objective is to make decisions that create a better future platform for the business (Mintzberg, 1987; Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Essentially, the strategic manager is expected to predict the future; yet this is an expectation that only works under the assumption that the world moves in a somewhat orderly and linear fashion. In consequence, the strategic manager is put in a logically impossible position: in the present she is asked to anticipate a future which essentially cannot be anticipated.

The great conundrum is that while this temporal paradox underlies all strategic practices, then why don't more strategic processes break down? Most strategic processes do seem to function but why is this when they are obviously based on a paradox? In this paper, I will develop a tentative answer to this question. Theoretically, the answer is motivated by Niklas Luhmann's argument that paradoxes cannot be solved or eliminated; at best they can be made invisible or in Luhmann's term 'deparadoxified'. Empirically, the answer is developed in the context of a broader narrative about 'meaning' in organisations. The recent decade has seen a growing interest in the organisation as a container of a larger purpose or meaningfulness (Bains, 2007; Ind, 2010; Kurtzman, 2010) and my basic claim is that this meaning trend provides a framework for a deparadoxification strategy that draws on semantics and logics developed in a religious context. I will make the case that this type of religious deparadoxification is applied by strategic managers to hide the basic temporal paradox of strategic management.

Initially, I discuss the concept of deparadoxification as well as a number of concrete deparadoxification strategies. Next, I outline the paper's analytical frame. This is followed by the analyses of a cluster of management self-biographies and a subsequent discussion of the deparadoxification strategy at work. Finally, I discuss the paper's limitations and potential consequences.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1. The Concepts of Paradox and Deparadoxification

As central analytical concepts in this paper, the dual notions of paradox and deparadoxification need to be specified. Relying on Bateson's communicative perspective on paradox, the paper defines a paradox as a situation where two mutually exclusive expectations co-exist (Bateson, 1956). The definition of deparadoxification, however, is a little less straight forward. In the literature on organisational paradox, a significant stream of studies conceptualises deparadoxification as the *resolution* of paradoxes (for instance Amason, 1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1993; Atuahene-Gima, 2005; Eylon, 1998; Farson, 1996; Kan and Perry, 2004; Roberts, 2002; Scott Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). These studies tend to ascribe paradox a somewhat marginal role in organisational life. Paradox, it seems, is conceptualised as the odd exception to the otherwise logical and rational organisational activities. For instance, Jaffee (2001, pp. 34-40) argues that paradoxes appear in situations where intended positive effects clash with unintended negative ones. In this understanding, paradoxes are discrete events that materialise under unfavourable circumstances, and when they do appear, they disturb the organisation's flow of intentional processes. The answer is to restore normality by reconciling the two horns of the opposition. As Handy (1994, p. 34) puts it: organisations must 'reconcile what used to be opposite. Firms must be planned yet flexible, differentiated yet integrated, mass marketers and niche marketers'.

If we follow Derrida's discussion of Western metaphysics, this image of paradox appears to be a child of logocentrism. Derrida (1976, 1981) argues that Western culture displays a desire to view the essence of a concept in a way that reduces something else to a secondary status. Something is conceived as superior, original or authentic, and its opposition is discarded as secondary or even parasitic. The above image of organisational paradox exposes a logocentric character. It paints a picture of rational activities as the organisation's essence whereas paradox is reduced to a secondary occurrence emerging in a void of rationality. The 'real' organisation is intentional and comprehensible; paradox is the accidental outlier. However, so goes Derrida's argument, what seems essential cannot exist without a recourse to its marginalised opposite. By closer scrutiny, we cannot grasp the concept of rationality without establishing a difference to the notion of paradox. In effect, it becomes untenable to see rationality as the privileged origin. If paradox is necessary for the constitution of rationality, then paradox is just as essential (or un-essential) to the organisation as rationality.

Derrida's deconstruction is an elegant way of displacing the metaphysical hierarchy between rationality/paradox. Paradox and rationality condition each other and thus paradox cannot be studied simply as secondary accidents restricted to situations where rationality and logic is absent. This opens up an entirely new way of conceptualising deparadoxification, namely as a question of *disguising* - not eliminating - paradoxes. A central theoretical figure in this development is the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann who argues that paradoxes cannot be made to disappear as they are constitutive to decisions: to eradicate paradoxes would imply the simultaneous eradication of distinctions, which would, in turn, rule out the possibility of making decisions. Instead Luhmann (1988, 2000, 2011) suggests that deparadoxification is about hiding paradoxes, i.e. about preventing the undergrowth of hidden paradoxes from appearing directly as paradoxes. Following this proposition, when I study how the temporal paradox in strategic management is managed, I study the on-going work that strategic managers do to hide it.

2.2. Strategies of Deparadoxification

From this theoretical point of view, three deparadoxification strategies can be identified in the literature on organisational paradox:

- *Deparadoxification by social acceptance.* In this case, deparadoxification is a result of an agreement among social actors that a paradoxical situation is not paradoxical at all (Ortmann, 2004; Rasche, 2008). If such propositions are broadly accepted in the organisation, so-called *As If*-situations are established: communicative processes may now proceed *as if* the paradox does not exist, in effect obscuring or deferring critical questions about this operation (see Ortman, 2004 for a more detailed discussion).

- *Deparadoxification by bootstrapping.* The concept of bootstrapping refers to practices that create their own foundations (Barnes, 1983). To deparadoxify by bootstrapping, thus, is to discursively articulate the world's facticity in a specific way while simultaneously articulating this perspective as the only comprehensible and feasible one. Andersen (2003, 2012) shows how this type of deparadoxification plays out on the factual, temporal and social dimensions of meaning and highlights how a number of techniques is used to this end. For example, organisations might bootstrap by referring to compelling reasons ('We have to rethink our investment strategies because the market wants ethical products'), by appealing to an undisputable truth ('We all know that this CSR strategy is a necessary step in building a more ethical organisation'), or by referring to the gravity of the moment ('We have to make this change now, otherwise the moment is passed'). In all three cases, a possible version of the reality is performed as *the* reality, allowing decision makers to use this as a reference point for future decisions.
- *Deparadoxification by blindness.* In this case, organisations deparadoxify by means of deliberate inattentiveness (Knudsen, 2011). According to Knudsen (2011, p. 967), 'communication may produce possibilities that jeopardise the continuation of the communication'. In his study of observational technologies in health services, Knudsen shows how organisations prevent destructive potentialities from being actualised by displaying different forms of inattentiveness that blind them to different kinds of problematic information. Although Knudsen does not explicitly relate the concept of deliberate inattentiveness to deparadoxification, I suggest that the concept of blindness may also be seen as a strategy of deparadoxification. In this case, forms of inattentiveness are blinders that help the organisation to ignore paradoxes that would, if observed, challenge the organisation's decision-making processes.

In this paper, I wish to illustrate how a fourth type of deparadoxification strategy can be traced in contemporary management literature; a type that has not been previously discussed in the literature on organisational paradox. The central idea is that strategic managers hide the temporal paradox of strategic management by drawing on a strategy developed in the functional system of religion. This strategy consists of two steps: a) the installation of the religious distinction immanence/transcendence as an overarching observation device, and b) the construction of strategic managers as the embodiment of this distinction. I will argue that this operation makes it possible for strategic managers to construct themselves as persons with a privileged and sovereign insight into how the world operates, thus making the paradox fade out of sight.

2.3. Functional Differentiation and the System of Religion

In his renowned book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris (2004) argues that religion suspends reason. Drawing on the thesis of secularisation (Somerville, 1998), Harris sees religion as the antipode to reason and contends that religion should be withdrawn from public life. In a number of European countries, governments and institutions have picked up on this distinction by seeking to limit the public exposition of religious symbols and rituals (Rorive, 2009). This paper, however, argues that religion is not in opposition to reason. Building on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, the contention is that religion is a functional system with a distinct rational function, namely that of handling paradoxes and contingency. In this paper, I show that strategic managers use the communicative form of religion in their efforts to deparadoxify.

Luhmann analyses modern society under the general frame of functional differentiation (Luhmann, 1982): at different times and under different circumstances, society has been separated into a number of autonomous functional systems, each monopolising the handling of a specific societal function: the health system handles health; the legal system observes that laws and regulations are respected; the economic system makes economic transactions possible, etc. Functional systems are characterised by observing the world through a particular type of distinction; a code (Luhmann, 1992, 2000). A code is a binary distinction with an unequivocal preference, such as the legal system's code 'legal/not-legal', the economic system's code 'to have/not to have' or the pedagogical system's code 'to learn/not to learn'. The code's major achievement is that it splits the world in a way that makes what emerges on its inside always stand out as preferable as opposed to what appears on its outside. If, for instance, the world is observed through the economic code 'to have/not to have' it is always better 'to have' than 'not to have'. In Gotthard Günther's (1980) words, the code displays a designation value – a preferred value that participants in the communication are motivated to reach for – and a reflection value against which the designation value is defined.

In Luhmann's theorising, religion is an autonomous functional system with the distinct function of handling paradoxes produced in other functional systems (Luhmann, 1985, 2000; see also Beyer, 1997; Laermans and Verschraegen, 2001; Sløk, 2005). It does so by means of a particular communicative structure that observes the world through the binary code immanence/transcendence. Religion's starting point is the installation of an ultimate, world-defining force - God - that transcends human observation. The transcendent character of the divine is pivotal: if God was observable, he (or she or it?) was reduced to a part of the empirical reality, which would undermine God's function as a supreme force. Now, in contrast to any other functional system, religion does not simply land a phenomena on either side of a binary distinction. Instead, religiously coded communication examines if the observed something might break the boundary between the realm of the observable and the realm of the divine. Religion tests whether observable phenomena contain traces of the divine or if they are merely mundane phenomena, and in the event that something is believed to reflect a divine presence, it is given a positive religious value. In such cases, the fundamental undecidability of the world is absorbed: if something is believed to be a reflection of the divine, doubts about its legitimacy are annulled. It now has a direct link to the ultimate reality and therefore cannot be contested.

Religion's main problem, however, is that it lacks the ability to formulate which observable phenomena have a divine character. In itself the distinction immanence/transcendence does not specify what has a religious value and even God is left powerless: he may well have the capacity to identify what has a religious value but, as a transcendent force, he is not able to communicate this on Earth. Religion's 'trick' is to develop figures who incarnate the distinction immanence/transcendence (Luhmann, 1985, 2000). In the Christian Faith, the example *per se* is Jesus Christ, both man and divine: as the Son of God, Christ incarnates the divine ultimate reality, yielding him an untouchable and privileged insight into how earthly phenomena should be understood. Meanwhile, as the son of the carpenter Joseph from Nazareth, Jesus also has the ability to wander the Earth and communicate the message. From a purely sociological point of view, then, Jesus Christ (and other similar religious figures) is a communicative construction designed to maintain religion's capacity to handle paradoxes. In the remainder of this paper, I will show how this particular deparadoxification strategy is applied by three Danish top managers to conceal the temporal paradox of strategic management.

2.4. Data

In recent years, a new organisational meta-narrative has evolved. It tells the story about how organisations must develop a 'larger purpose' or 'meaningfulness' as their *raison d'être*. This narrative can be traced in research papers and management consultancy literature alike (for instance Gurnek Bains et al.'s (2007) *Meaning Inc.*, Nicholas Ind's (2010) *Meaning at Work* and Joel Kurtzman's (2010) *Common Purpose*) and, as I will show, it appears to provide a context for a deparadoxification strategy that builds on religious semantics and logics.

The current paper is based on the analyses of three top managers' autobiographies that all draw heavily on this 'meaning narrative'. Specifically, I analyse Lars Kolind's (2006) *The Kolind Cure*, Mads Øvlisen's (2011) *Heartcore*, and Alfred Josefsen's (2009) *My Passion for Leadership*. Lars Kolind is the former CEO of the Danish hearing aid producer Oticon (now William Demant). He is well known for having developed a network-based and egalitarian organisational structure (the so-called 'spaghetti organisation'), and for his successful turnaround of Oticon in the 1990s. Mads Øvlisen is the former CEO of the pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk. During his years as a CEO (1981-2000), Novo Nordisk became the world's leading actor in the field of diabetes treatment and enzyme development. Alfred Josefsen is the former CEO of Irma, a Danish super market chain specialising in top quality victuals. Josefsen was in charge of a process that revitalised Irma and turned it into a profitable business after years of decline.

To contextualise the selection of these texts, let us briefly recapitulate the argument. The temporal paradox of strategic management is this: on the one hand, strategic managers operate in a world of unpredictability and flux. On the other hand, strategists are asked to make strategic decisions that place the organisation in a favourable future position. Essentially, strategists are called to predict an unpredictable future. In each of the three empirical cases, the CEO is firmly locked in this paradox. In all cases, the CEO is hired to take charge of an organisation in decline and three management texts document the respective CEO's retrospective thoughts on how to develop appropriate strategies. Kolind proposes an entirely new organisational structure (the 'spaghetti-organisation'); Øvlisen contends that a values-based management approach is the better choice while Josefsen argues that the

strategy should be based on trust. Yet these different strategies are all based on the above paradox: while they are developed to position the organisation favourably in the future, the CEOs simultaneously acknowledge that the future cannot be anticipated. Essentially, nobody knows what will the future will hold and therefore no absolute reason to trust the strategy in question can be given.

Curiously, in all three cases this paradox is pushed aside or made invisible. An identical narrative structure runs through the three self-descriptions, describing how this is accomplished: first, the CEO puts forward a strategy that claims to stimulate innovation and creativity in the organisation, yet initially he struggles to convince members of his organisation that the strategy solves what it claims to solve, making the organisation the arena of a visible paradox. However, in all three cases this gradually changes. The critical voices are silenced and replaced by a strong conviction that the CEO's strategy was, after all, the proper choice. This signals a movement from a situation where the temporal paradox of strategic management is visible to a situation where it is concealed: in a not too distant past, a significant sense of doubt and scepticism was directed towards the CEO's strategy, yet now (i.e. the author's present) his strategy is believed to be the undisputable answer to the organisation's problems. Below, I will show how this deparadoxification is accomplished through a religious strategy and, ultimately, the three cases have been selected to illustrate this process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two steps are involved in the religious deparadoxification strategy: first, the CEO installs the religious observation scheme immanence/transcendence as an organisational super-code. Second, the CEO constructs himself as an incarnation of the distinction immanence/transcendence. Below, I will show how the three CEOs carry this out.

In all three books runs the basic claim that an organisation is only legitimate if it is driven by a higher purpose – a 'meaning' - that reaches beyond narrow economic interests. In this context, profit is reduced to a secondary means to fulfil the larger purpose. In the case of Novo, its purpose is to 'take responsibility for society' by developing ever better diabetes treatment medicine. For Irma, the purpose is not simply to sell victuals but to 'to fight the impoverishment of the Danish food and meal culture', and as a hearing aid producer, Oticon's meaning is about 'Helping people live with their hearing loss as they prefer to live' (Kolind, 2006, p. 245). Oticon's purpose lies in its ambition to help people gain access to new opportunities in their lives, despite their hearing losses.

It appears that the 'meaning' reaches beyond the organisation itself. The three CEOs all seem to observe the 'meaning' as a sort of transcendental signifier (Derrida, 1976) that defines and organises observable phenomena and identities. As Josefsen puts it, the 'meaning is the super-narrative about who we are and what sort of a tribe, a 'sect' and peculiarity we are' (Josefsen, 2009, p. 103). From this perspective, then, the 'meaning' constitutes a sort of ultimate organisational reality; it is a form of final semantic force that defines what the organisations truly are and how they should carry out their businesses. And still, the meaning cannot be observed. It exists, the three CEOs contend, but no one seems to be able to observe it directly. It is there to structure organisational practices but it evades or transcends empirical scrutiny.

Although the 'meaning' cannot be observed, the three CEOs share the expectation that it should be reflected in the companies' concrete practices and products. For instance, Øvlisen emphasises that any activity should relate to Novo's larger purpose and if not it is reduced to what he (2011, p. 56) calls a 'Mickey Mouse-product'; a product only launched to satisfy the shareholders. For example, he tells the story about a project that aims at improving the dialogue between doctors and patients. Øvlisen shrugs his shoulders of the fact that the initiative did not help Novo Nordisk to sell more drugs. The project was 'worth the effort and became a rich source of innovation for people with diabetes and for Novo Nordisk' (Øvlisen, 2011, p. 49). The initiative reflects Novo's ultimate reality of 'serving society' and, to Øvlisen, this is all that matters. Kolind shares the view and words it even more explicitly. Under the headline 'The meaning must be evident in all the organisation's practices', Kolind (2006, p. 54) contends that:

The main point is that all organisations, public or private, must go through a process in which they find their meaning. They have to understand clearly why they will be missed and by whom if they suddenly ceased to exist. And how they were perhaps *not* missed by anyone. However, this is the easy part. The difficult part is to go through all corners of the organisation in the light of the

meaning. (...) In many organisations many sections, reports, meetings, activities, expenditures, procedures, and habits only contribute in a very limited way to the customers. The consequence ought to be clear: Such activities should be brought to a halt immediately.

The transcendent ‘meaning’ should be traceable in all observable phenomena, and in the event that a phenomenon does not reflect the ‘meaning’ it has no value.

I propose that this basic logic – that organisations should be driven by an overarching ‘meaning’ which must be made observable in concrete everyday practices – indicates that the communication is coded religiously. All three CEOs observe the world through the lens of the religious distinction immanence/transcendence by asking the basic question: do concrete, observable practices contain the organisation’s ultimate and invisible reality? In this light, the key concern for organisational members is basically a religious one: to make sure that observable phenomena contain traces of the organisation’s ultimate reality.

In this communicative context, people who incarnate the ‘meaning’ have a definitional advantage. If organisational phenomena are valuable only if they relate to an ultimate, transcendent reality, then people who embody this reality are given a privileged right to define which phenomena are valuable and which are not. If you ‘are’ the organisation’s larger meaning, surely you know which decisions will be favourable to the organisation. In the remainder of the analysis, I will show how the CEOs manage to give themselves this definitional advantage.

Throughout the biographies, all three CEOs consistently show that their actions mirror the ‘meaning’: Kolind consistently acts helpfully towards his employees and customers (reflecting the meaning of ‘helping people’), Øvlisen’s conduct systematically displays his desire to act responsibly (reflecting the meaning of ‘taking responsibility for society’) and Josefsen’s actions are consistently governed by an effort to create a richer food culture in Denmark. In almost everything they do their actions reflect their respective organisation’s larger purpose and so have a definite positive religious value. However, in itself this does place the ‘meaning’ within the CEOs - after all, they may just accidentally happen to act in accordance with the larger meaning. Therefore, if the CEOs are to convince that they embody the larger meaning, they must establish that their actions are authentic expressions of their inner personality. The CEO must make clear that the light of the ultimate organisational force shines *from* him – not *on* him.

The CEOs seem to apply different strategies to this end. Kolind appears to perform what may be coined a ‘spontaneous’ strategy. Drawing on the basic logic that spontaneous actions reflects our true personalities, Kolind articulates his helpful initiatives as non-reflexive and mentally unfiltered. When Kolind helps others, he does so spontaneously and without ulterior motives and so it appears that helping others is simply a reflection of his personality or human nature. Øvlisen, on his part, seems to call on a ‘virtuous’ strategy. In this illustrative quote, Øvlisen (2011, p. 124) makes clear that responsibility and a sense of duty are personal virtues of his:

I usually say that as a leader you have to be more virtuous than Caesar’s wife and make sure that people see that you live the values and do not just stand there jabbing on about them because then they have no value and you have no credibility. This is exactly why it is so crucial that the leader lives the values, and through the years I have thought about which virtues and values have driven me, informed me and helped me to carry out the actions that have developed into social patterns (...). To me, duty, responsibility, trust and respect have been absolute core virtues while the reward has been a sense of joy. I have not always been conscious about this while doing it. It is an acknowledgement that has developed through the years.

Øvlisen’s observation is this: as CEO you must act in accordance with the company’s values and principles, otherwise people lose confidence in you. Øvlisen himself has done so consistently, but only recently has he discovered that the background for his conduct is his heartfelt sense of duty and responsibility, ingrained in him during his childhood years. This means that not only does Øvlisen act in accordance with the company value of responsibility; his actions also reflect his inner virtues, in effect placing Novo Nordisk’s ultimate reality inside him.

Josefsen construes himself as a container of Irma’s higher purpose by means of what may be coined a ‘passionate’ incarnation strategy. As indicated by his choice of book title, *My Passion for Leadership*, Josefsen brands himself as an abundantly passionate person to whom Irma’s purpose is not just some casual idea; it equates his own personal life project, translating into an intense symbiotic relationship

with Irma that even bereaves him of his ability to 'separate where Irma starts and where Alfred ends' (Josefsen, 2009, p. 93). This passionate operation places Irma's meaning within Josefsen. There is no differentiation between Irma's ultimate reality and Josefsen's personal passion; they are, in a religious term, one flesh: Irma is an integral part of Josefsen and *vice versa*.

These communicative operations imply that the CEOs incarnate the distinction immanence/transcendence: unquestionably, the CEOs, men of flesh and blood, belong to the empirical world. But, as they carry the organisations' ultimate and un-observable reality, they also belong to the realm of the divine. If we accept this, it means that the CEO stands out as a religious mediator with a privileged authority to see how the future will evolve. As the personification of an ultimate reality, the CEO possesses an insight into how the world and the organisation will evolve and as a person of flesh and blood he has the ability to wander the organisation and transmit his divine knowledge.

On this basis, then, we may be able to understand how the temporal paradox of strategic management is hidden in the three cases. When first appointed, the CEOs simply appear to their employees as men of flesh of blood whose ideas may well be unproductive or even downright wrong. Yet, as they manage to install the religious distinction and articulate themselves as the incarnation of this distinction, they assume a discursive position from which they can hardly be challenged. In effect, their strategies are no longer not just any perspective on management; they are nothing short of divine and incontestable truths about management.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that a new type of deparadoxification strategy can be observed in the context of strategic management, namely a religious strategy, which has been observed through the self-observations of three Danish top managers. In all three cases, the CEO tells the story about how his particular management strategy is subject to initial criticism and discussion, yet in the course of time gains wide support throughout the organisation. I have argued that these processes of deparadoxification are the results of the application of a religious strategy that involves two discursive steps: first, the installation of the distinction immanence/transcendence as an organisational super-code that observes whether or not concrete organisational phenomena reflect the organisation's larger, transcendent purpose; and, second, operations that place the larger purpose within the CEO, which, if executed successfully, yields him a divine authority to define the organisational reality. I have argued that this religious strategy may explain the deparadoxification processes that take place in the three organisations. Furthermore, I have made the case that this specific type of deparadoxification is made possible in the context of a new organisational meta-narrative, the 'meaning' trend, which emphasises that organisations must develop a larger purpose and make sure that all behaviour is reflected in this purpose.

As this analysis is made on the basis of Luhmann's systems theory, it is important to keep the limits of a systems theoretical epistemology in mind. From this perspective, the only thing observable is observations. This has two implications. First, as the current paper is based on the analyses of observations made from one particular point of observation, namely the CEO's, the paper's claim remains modest. The paper only contends this: a religious deparadoxification strategy can be observed in the observations made by the CEOs, nothing more. Second, what happens in psychic systems remains beyond the reach of the analysis. In a systems theoretical optics, social systems and psychic systems are two distinctly different types of systems that never intersect: social systems consists of nothing but observations and communications; psychic systems consist of thoughts that always remain internal to psychic systems. This means that a number of questions cannot be answered within the frame of systems theory: do the CEOs in fact incarnate the organisation's larger purpose? Do the employees in fact accept the management philosophies? How do the employees experience the religious deparadoxification strategy?, etc. These and similar questions are beyond the reach of a systems theoretical approach which, of course, does not mean they are irrelevant but that it takes an alternative epistemology to answer them.

The general problem of religious deparadoxification is that it excludes critical perspectives. Along with the religious deparadoxification goes the acceptance of divine intervention as the main communicative form of persuasion. This, I think, may point to dogmatism. If someone constructs himself as the incarnation of a larger divine purpose, this person's opinions and perspectives are given a sacral quality, which effectively makes critical questions emerge as sacrilege. This calls for critical

self-reflection. The three CEOs, whose self-observations I have analysed and discussed, all consistently assert that they want their employees to challenge their ideas. After all, 'the manager is not always right', as Josefsen (2009, p. 50) maintains. However, in the context of a religious deparadoxification, Josefsen *cannot* be wrong. He has painted himself into a corner from where his perspectives are effectively incontestable. This double-binds the employee in yet another paradoxical situation. 'Be critical' and 'you cannot be critical' seems to be the communicative situation that employees are now expected to manage. It appears that the disguising of one type of paradox stimulates the production of new ones in a never-ending process in which the religious deparadoxification strategy is just one strategy among others. Yet, in contrast to other deparadoxification strategies, the religious one seems to involve a totalitarian aspect which may find its way into organisational communication disguised under seemingly innocent headlines such as 'meaning', 'purpose' and 'passion'.

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