

Keeping tensions up: a reflexive analysis of the (strategy)-making-of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*

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Introduction

This paper deals with strategizing in apparently “management free settings”, i.e. contexts that are stranger to formal management training. The objective is to capture the doing of strategy where managerial theories have not reached out.

Why should it be interesting? There is a growing acknowledgement that organizational processes, including strategy-making, are experienced as dynamic, interactive nexuses of social and material arrangements, yet organizations and strategy keep being understood, presented and taught as stable, objective, measurable and rational phenomena. We believe that this is largely a management scholars’ responsibility: theories on “what works” feed management practice and shape managerial discourses, whereas theories on “how” those desirable changes can be produced rarely cross the boundaries of academic journals (Langley et al., 2013). Hence a hiatus between research and practice is not only created, but also reproduced over time. Digging in a field that mainstream managerial discourses have not really entered may provide us with more “virgin” insights on how things are done and how change can come about.

Building on a process ontology (Chia, 1997; Rescher, 2000; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and a strategy as practice perspective (Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006) this paper will analyse the birth and becoming of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*, a major art curatorial project conducted by a cultural entrepreneur (Di Maggio, 1982; Scott, 2012; Klamer, 2012) on the Dolomites, a range of the Italian Alps.

The study is part of an ongoing research and is explorative in nature, therefore no a priori specific question will drive our analysis, but the “making-of” the project, i.e. the myriad of micro actions through which the curator/entrepreneur shapes his activity (his strategizing), as well as the webs of his beliefs and habits of action, will be under our analytical lens.

Most crucially, the study experiments a particular methodology to foster both an engaged scholarship and a reflexive practice, in the intention to narrow the research-practice hiatus down: the inclusion of the practitioner (the curator/entrepreneur) as a fully self-reflexive co-researcher. We therefore blend auto-ethnography (Vesa and Vaara, 2014; Karra & Philips, 2008) by one of the authors with more conventional observations, interviews, and archival analysis by the other author as complementary data sources. This has a double consequence: on the one hand, it mitigates the effects on the analysis of an external researcher’s bias in information processing (researcher’s subjective bias); on the other hand, it mitigates the effects on the analysis of a too native view (practitioner’s subjective bias) – or rather, it leverages on both.

By doing this the paper strives to make a first methodological contribution while trying to answer to one of the calls of this sub-theme, as it experiments a way to have practitioners engaged in questioning their own practices, reflecting on their role as professionals and making sense of the organizational becoming they are part of. Second, the emerging findings may conduce to a theoretical contribution to management knowledge. The research is in progress, but a first, close (reflexive) analysis of strategizing at *Dolomiti Contemporanee* is pointing at the centrality of tensions: tensions of several kinds are constitutive to the project, whose birth and becoming need the ability to create and keep tensions up continuously, not to solve or to manage them, as we will see. Third, a conclusive note that is relevant for both research and practice also derives from this study: the relevance (and the beauty!) of studying strategy practice in “management-free” contexts, like artistic ones. Management-free contexts are just free from a formalized management training, not from managing acts. Studying how strategizing occurs without a formal management training (which by the way is what had always been occurring in humankind history before the “invention” of management as a discipline in the XX century) can enrich management knowledge, as it provides the encounter not only with other rationalities that imbue how a project is thought and run (e.g. aesthetic, professional, curatorial ones), but also with fresh insights on management practices themselves, even when they are not called so. At the same time, practitioners like curators or cultural entrepreneurs that often see management as “something else” might discover how it is not so far from what they are already doing, although often not calling it so.

Theoretical stance

This paper rests on a process ontology, according to which the world is made of processes and lived experiences that continually unfold, rather than substantial entities. As such, change, action and time are at the core of process philosophies (Rescher, 2000) and are thought to be constitutive of reality. In this frame, “things” as organizations and structures are temporary instantiation of an ongoing becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). As Chia (1997) and Langley (2009) stress, adopting such a becoming ontology entails to prefer activity and movement over substance and entities, to see reality as characterized by change instead of stability and to look at processes that make phenomena happen.

Because process thinking directs us toward action as it is happening, opting for a practice perspective appears as appropriate. Without the existence of any unifying “practice theory” (Rasche & Chia, 2009), we position ourselves close to the scholars who conceive practices as the daily activities and doings of actors in context. In management studies this focus emerged in response to a perceived need to humanize strategy research (Whittington et al., 2002), re-focusing research on what people do, i.e. on the myriad of micro actions through which human actors shape activity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Applying this stance as an analytical lens allows capturing the dynamics of strategizing as they manifest themselves in context while reflecting on how they both shape and are shaped by higher level practices.

Methods

This study is part of a larger ongoing research on cultural entrepreneurship conducted by the Department of Management of the University of Venice. It was made possible by an unconventional research-practice collaboration promoted by the Department of Management, on the basis of which a set of cultural entrepreneurs (curators, organizers of festivals, filmmakers) were granted a bursary to be engaged as fully self-reflexive co-researchers for one year, in order to develop genuine practice-based reflections on their own work or on topics related to cultural entrepreneurship. This study is based on one of these research-practice collaboration, namely with the founder and curator of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*. The paper inductively explores how an individual free from any formal managerial knowledge strategizes, starting up and running a major cultural project.

Data collection is in progress from the following main sources:

- Auto-ethnography accounts and fieldnotes (by the practitioner-researcher) produced monthly since March 2014 until now.

- Documents (reports, budgets, press articles, online articles, visual documents, etc.), jointly collected and analysed by both co-researchers.
- Interviews conducted by the academic researcher with other collaborators and other actors involved in the project (in progress).
- Non-participant observations (by academic researcher), during summer events 2014 (more fieldwork is prospected during spring to observe some of the preparation of summer events 2015).

A preliminary analysis has been conducted as follows: after a deep immersion in this wide and composite mass of textual and visual data to familiarize with the case and its lingo, the academic researcher engaged in a coding process to identify relevant themes, according to an open, inductive design. In this first analytical round the academic researcher was soon struck by the issue of tensions, as these were more or less explicitly emerging from what was told and seen. Preliminary analysis of data was taken back to the practitioner-researcher for his comments, and his reflections on the data were incorporated in this first version of the study. After a description of the case, our preliminary findings from this research in progress will be illustrated.

Case description: *Dolomiti Contemporanee*

“*Dolomiti Contemporanee – in-environment visual arts lab*” (DC hereinafter) is a major curatorial project that was founded in 2011 by Gianluca D’Inca Levis (participant and co-researcher in this study), a contemporary art curator, with a background in architecture. By the time of the launch of DC, the Dolomites, a range of the North-Eastern Italian Alps, had just become a UNESCO World Heritage site (2009). These mountains had been hosting hubs where people had lived and worked for centuries, constituting an immense motor of local identity and of social and economic development. Crises of several kinds have turned these motors down in the past decades. The mountains economics have changed in favour of tourism exploitation and these sites linger abandoned.

The idea of DC is therefore to identify relevant abandoned sites on the Dolomites, such as large factories, other complexes of industrial archaeology, or residential settlements that are no longer active, and to reactivate their potential by rethinking their relationship with the surrounding nature and with the humankind (what DC calls “contemporary landscapes”) in a non-trivial and non-stereotyped way, through the curatorship of temporary visual arts events.

The first initiative organized by DC was the one of Sass Muss in 2011, a 20,000 sq. m. site that had been hosting a hub of chemical production and that was closed down in the 1950s. The industrial site belonged to a public agency and had previously been completely restored through

European funds, yet left empty and unused. DC transformed the former industrial complex of Sass Muss for three months (august-october 2011) into a contemporary art exhibition centre, creating a sort of “creative citadel” that included an international residency for artists (dormitories, a café, a bookshop, ateliers for artists and for educational activities); the former warehouses became exhibition rooms; the surrounding mountain environment became the training ground for the artists and the invited curators who worked on the identity of the site and its surroundings, by inhabiting them.

The operation budget was 400,000 € and expenditures were covered through public funding (80,000 €) and through material support by 100 local partners (providing maintenance services, tools and materials, food, transportation, communication services, etc.), as well as a large base of volunteers, found through a door to door communication campaign by DC staff prior to the launch of the project. In those three months of activity 70 artists from ten different Countries lived and worked at Sass Muss, over 100,000 visitors came, ten exhibitions and ten public events of other kind were held, and over 200 articles on the initiative appeared in the press and online. The local community came back to the factory, finally re-opened, to visit it. Following the three months event, many of the partners who had contributed to the project decided to transfer their own commercial activities within the site, renting the spaces. The site came back to life and was returned to the local territory, re-activating it.

In the next three years (2012-2014) the experience was replicated by DC in other sites (“Blocco di Taibon” in 2012, “Spazio Casso” in the Vajont area in 2013, the “Ex Villaggio Eni” in Borca di Cadore in 2014) with similar enduring outcomes.

Preliminary findings

While the data collection and analysis are in progress, some preliminary results seem already to emerge from a first, reflexive analysis of the accounts and documents gathered so far.

Conventional regeneration projects of these former industrial or residential sites (such as public agencies financing large restorations of these sites) proved to be dramatically insufficient in terms of bringing those sites back to life. What was missing? Or, put differently, what made the birth and the becoming of a project as *Dolomiti Contemporanee* possible and successful?

In the first place, there needs to be a triggering element that Gianluca calls a “constructive bother”:

The fact that large sites that have a very high potential lie inert, with nobody able or willing to engage in some rethinking of a new possible usage, is a stupid thing, an irresponsible, bothering thing. And an impoverishment of reality.

Second, a “method” must ensue from this bother; and it is by the word “method” that Gianluca makes sense of DC: “*Dolomiti Contemporanee is a working method*”, he keeps stating in many documents and speeches. And it is in his description of DC working method that the following findings emerged.

Our main finding is that the capacity to make a project see birth, grow and keep becoming implies the ability to create and keep tensions, not to solve, avoid, or manage them, as most mainstream managerial knowledge instead implies.

Everything seems to start from a **thought-action tension** in this case. The entrepreneur does not first analyse, formulate (think) and then implement (act). In Gianluca’s words there are continuous hints at how every undertaken action is shaped by thought (he speaks of “thought practices”) and shapes thought in turn. The idea of DC generates from thought:

I believe that the idea is everything and that, if correctly thought through and acted with the necessary strength, it can only manifest itself effectively, thus corresponding with a positive reality. The good idea is already a fact in potency. The idea is the reality. If an idea does not work in fact, then it wasn’t an idea.

and is explicitly aimed at generating a reflection, both in the practitioner and in the wider community:

The DC project is, basically, a process of mindful reflection [...]. The reactivation of old factories, the production of pieces of art, the sites of my action: all this is not a product, but a process, organic, unitary, of growth and development, of the territory itself, and a reflection, a responsible, operational, necessary one, on its meanings.

By thinking itself continuously, action is changing all the time and thought co-evolves accordingly. This way of conceiving an entrepreneurial idea is open to unanticipated outcomes and all emergent and incremental behaviour. Thought and action are reciprocally reflexive for success. Thought through actions and enacted thoughts are the *modus operandi* in this case.

This view of reciprocal shaping of thought and action immediately implies also a **temporal tension**: in the doing of DC time is not perceived as discrete and linear, but continuous and overlapping. The idea itself of DC is one that evocatively blends the past (the sites of some kind of former glory) with the future (a new unimagined destination for them) through the present (acts of contemporary arts). But beyond that, in the way Gianluca describes his method, we retrieve an idea of organization as a continuous ongoing accomplishment that rests on this idea of temporal tension: “*It is necessary to imagine and re-imagine continuously the meaning and the function of things*” This notion of continuous re-imagination excludes stability. In other words, the entrepreneurial act as here described embodies past, present and future at the same time, endurance (e.g. of local and past meanings) and change (regeneration) at the same time – as opposed to a rhetoric of almost only

future orientation in mainstream management theory (e.g. “objectives”, “projects”, “mission”, “vision”, etc...).

This in turn implies a **rupture-order tension**: if endurance and change are co-present, then no possibility of equilibrium is there and rupture is ever present to move a project on – as opposed to a rhetoric of inclusion, convergence, agreement around goals, strategies, etc. of mainstream management knowledge. Instead, Gianluca seems to show how an entrepreneur can reach agreement (as a new fragile order) by continuously subverting the perceived one. There are indeed strong calls for rupture in his wording: e.g. “*to break the schemes*”; “*the cultural impatience against clichés, déjà-vus, mimetic attitudes*”:

To use thought through systems and not established praxes or codified models is something that definitely tends to challenge standards and fundamentals of the “normal” organizational life.

The tension lies in the fact that, besides rupture and through it, some new order is achieved in the form of “*wide support networks*” and “*shared meanings*” in the territory. The expression “*responsible assault*” of the potential of these abandoned sites probably best expresses this rupture-order tension. What emerges is a need for chaos within the desire for order and vice versa in the view to “break responsibly”, and continuously – opposed to both a Schumpeterian view of innovation (creative destruction, that implies periodic stability) and to an evolutionary one, on which most theories of organizational change rest upon.

Finally, this conflictual rupture-order tension implies an **ego-alter tension**, as a dialectic between the ego of the entrepreneur/strategist and alters (partners, stakeholders of any kind, but also the Dolomites and the abandoned sites) both indispensable to an entrepreneurial project.

Instances of Ego: “*The project is intrinsically linked to a personal and subjective vision that accomplishes itself through open networks and thought through strategies*”.

Instances of Alters: “*The sustaining platform of the project [the network of actors] is the its foundational architecture, its skeleton*”.

DC was made successful by “the territory” (i.e. a network of alters, both material and human) who were however activated and enabled by the entrepreneur (i.e. ego). This is a view closer to ANT, and opposed to more mainstream entrepreneurship theories.

Concluding remarks

Certainly, the idiosyncrasy of any process reality does not open up the field to generalizations. Yet, some lessons can be already learnt, when this account of the “making-of” of an entrepreneurial project is confronted to mainstream management theory that portrays organizational phenomena as linear, rational, sequential, and measurable, where the goal is to minimize tensions

and contradictions in order to control uncertainty. A process view of organizing suggests that coordinated actions are made possible by collective experiences that evolve continuously through the creative re-construal of shared histories, and the simultaneous generation of alternative futures. This case illuminates this processual nature in a strong way. This story not only read from a process ontology, but also told so and enacted so, shows instead that “success” rests largely on tensions and contradictions and that creating them and keeping them up is the key.

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