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## Being a post-modern organisation

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Independent Think Tank for Leading Practice

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# 1. Case for action: Social Innovation and the post-modern organisation

The starting point of any reflection on social innovation and post-modern organisation ought to be what characterises post-modernism as such: the individual experience of contingency. This is the experience that everything that is, could be otherwise. Not only the grand systems explaining the world, religion and science, fail to grant orientation and meaning. It is the very, leading discourses of modern society, politics and economy, which cannot provide stability any longer.

The challenge of Post-modernity: contingency...

The experience of post-modern contingency has arrived in the organisations. It is not the individual alone, who expresses the need for meaningful orientation. Contingency and the quest for meaningful orientation became a major concern for the management of organisations; for Management not only for managers.<sup>1</sup> It is the very organisation which has to reinvent or to innovate itself. Organisations cannot rely on the old self-descriptions as being a purposeful hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> In the orchestra of relevant stakeholders the purpose is rather rich than clear. And hierarchies relying on order and obedience do not work any more either. Corporate men are individuals not “soldiers”, if they had ever been. And giving a meaningful purpose to the organisation it not the prerogative of the board members. It is stakeholder business. Generating meaningful orientation for the organisation itself, its members, and its stakeholders is the very challenge of being a post-modern organisation. And there is no outer reference. The generation of meaning and orientation is self-referential and self-generated.

...has now reached the organisation

The challenge is to provide meaningful orientation and sense.

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01\_ Beyes 2003  
02\_ Baecker 1999

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## 2. Thesis: From Personal Mastery to Organisational Mastery

The self-generation of meaningful orientation can work. In fact, it is not the mechanisms or functions which were not in place. Organisations are operationally closed social systems. All they are is autopoietically generated by themselves from themselves.<sup>3</sup> It is the self-awareness which is not there, yet by and by emerges. A change in perspectives from social systems to psychic systems may help to explain what is happening to organisations at the moment.

A lack of organisational self-awareness

After the experiences of the 1980/90s, when the individual had to face a drastic shift concerning risks and responsibilities from the collective towards the individual<sup>4</sup>, what followed in the beginning 21<sup>st</sup> century is described as drift.<sup>5</sup> The individual is drifting in its search for meaning and orientation. And no safe harbour comes into sight. Each individual has to explain the world on its own. The individual is challenged and in the end bound to fail. The “exhausted self”<sup>6</sup> falls into depression and, as it seems, the western hemisphere falls in.

The individual experiences a drift...

So, traditional models of life and career fail. Leading one’s live becomes an art.<sup>7</sup> And like an image of depression it is not the great challenges of ethics and philosophy, questioning where from and where to, live and death. It is the small, daily questions that set the trap: What do I do today, when do I get up, what shall I eat? What do I need to know, how do I raise my children, how do I get along with my neighbour? How do I solve a conflict? Within a cacophony of multiple and different answers the individual needs to decide anew, from moment to moment. And there is no catechism, neither shared nor reliable, to turn to. Those times, if they had ever been, are over now.

...because the grand systems fail.

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03\_ Nassehi 2003, Luhmann 1984  
04\_ Beck 1986  
05\_ Sennet 1998  
06\_ Ehrenberg 2004  
07\_ Schmidt 1998

The described problem of the “exhausted self”<sup>8</sup> and the “flexible men”<sup>9</sup> in a “multi-option society”<sup>10</sup> is well known. Either well known is the success story of Personal Mastery.<sup>11</sup> Be it the shelves of self-help literature or the wide-ranging offers of coaching of all kinds. Personal Mastery works. Something is done very well there, something is achieved what is perceived as being a good and helpful solution to the post-modern challenges. It is the request to observe yourself, to look at yourself and realise who you are. It is an instruction to describe yourself which, if seen cybernetically, changes by observation and description the very thing it observes and describes. Personal Mastery however takes one further step. It combines self-recognition with self-creation. It combines observation and recognition on the one hand with will and decision on the other hand. Continuously repeated over time, the changing form self-recognition to self-creation and back again generates stability, meaning and orientation. The leading thesis now reads as follows: The core competence of post-modernism is a process competence in oscillating between the two poles of self-recognition and self-creation. And that concerns individuals, psychic systems, as well as social systems, i.e. interactions, organisations and societies.<sup>12</sup> So, if Personal Mastery is the solution to gain that competence to face the challenge of post-modernity for the individual, Organisational Mastery could be the same for organisations.

The success of Personal  
Mastery

PM combines self-reflexi-  
on with self-creation

Organisational mastery is the competence, first, to recognise yourself to find ways through post-modern contingency and complexity. “Gnóthi seautón” reads the imprint above the entrance of the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi as the basic advice to retain the ability to act. This is exploring an organisation’s possibilities, opportunities, its identity and culture. Self-recognition brings an organisation back into contact with itself.

Application to Organisati-  
onal Mastery

Organisational mastery is the competence, second, to create yourself. Will and decision are the very foundation of self-creation.<sup>13</sup> Decisions create an organisation. They give shape to processes and structures. Decisions organise the organisation.<sup>14</sup> And they create the organisation for itself, being an organisation in its own world.

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08\_ Ehrenberg 1998

09\_ Sennet 1998

10\_ Gross 1994

11\_ Butler-Bowdon 2003

12\_ Luhmann 1984

13\_ Luhmann 2000

14\_ Luhmann 1964, Handy 1976

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### 3. Organisational self-awareness, self-observation and self-description - multi-perspective and poly-centric

An organisation being an organisation observes and describes itself as an organisation. Traditionally, it was the top of the pyramid who was overlooking the whole and describing what it was. ‚L’etat est moi‘ is a quote from Louis XIV which illustrates, what it means if the top of the pyramid sets the meaning and gives orientation. However, the possibility to do so is drowned in questioning legitimacy of doing so.<sup>15</sup> The rules and the awareness of a contemporary political debate for observing and describing itself does not allow such a one-dimensional approach. Observation and description are multi-perspective and poly-centric, in politics as well as in organisations.<sup>16</sup>

Questioning traditional modes of self-observation

The very interest of research in this field is concerned with the practice of this multi-perspective and poly-centric organisational self-observation and self-description. Who observes and describes how, and what are the consequences. It is not only the recognition of the observer<sup>17</sup>, it is the evaluation of the implications of self-observation and self-description for the organisation<sup>19</sup>. You cannot not observe and by doing so, you cannot not intervene.<sup>19</sup> Be it the attempts of In-house Consulting, Quality Management, the board itself, the workers council or Corporate Development departments, be it Six Sigma deployments, EFQM, Total Quality Management, Balanced Scorecard, Value Chain or Business Process Reengineering<sup>20</sup>, be it in the form of applied narratives, vision statements, rumours or balance sheets, observation and description generate the social system that it is for itself. This is how organisations generate meaning and attribute sense.<sup>21</sup>

multi-perspective and polycentric self-observation and -description...

So, in the search for meaningful orientation organisations have all the possibilities at their fingertips. What they do not have until now is the awareness, that they do so. A systems theory perspective gives insight into the autopoiesis of organisations, into the processes of self-recognition and self-creation based on self-observation and self-description that create the very organisation. And it allows access to ideas of organisational self-innovation and Organisational Mastery and Excellence. The mechanism behind these ideas is to be found in the practice of social design.

...create the organisational

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15\_ Luhmann 2000

16\_ Kieserling 2004

17\_ Baecker 1993

18\_ Hahn 1987

19\_ Klein 2005

20\_ Ten Have/Ten Have/Stevens/Van der Elst 2003

21\_ Weick 1969

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## 4. The praxeology of the organisation of social practice

The described linkage of social innovation and the post-modern organisation is meant as an approach towards a praxeology of the organisation of social practice, or in short towards a praxeology of social design. Such a praxeology is about the various ways to face the inevitability of the others. And it is about the way these answers are organised, respectively how they organise themselves. The perspective on the organisation of social practice attracts attention to social engineering and its cultural implications. It is about social design: it is about the conditions of possibilities for a meaningful or better a meaning creating practice of life. It is about creative solutions to conflict. It is about the negotiation of models of cooperation at work in post-modern organisations and about the vision of the healthy organisation. It is about the cultural implications for a societal whole and it is about the question what leading technology in the sense of social engineering and cultural technology might be.

Answer to the inevitability of the other

Cultural implications of Social Design

### 4.1 Reflecting social practice – approaches and solutions

For dealing with social innovation and the post-modern organisation a thorough reflection on social practice is necessary. The interest is on the design of social engineering and social techniques. The implications are twofold. On the one hand it is necessary to gain a perspective that allows in the sense of models, methodologies and instruments access to the disposability of social practice. And, on the other hand, it is about the possibilities to evaluate the implications of such a design and to feedback these evaluations into the design. The setting reminds of a (self-) regulating feedback loop and that is the actual ambition. However it will be recognised that not only the ambiguity of the term design, being an action and the actions result, tends to blur the boundaries of the endeavour to its object. It is observation that creates objects and tends to materialise them in the world.<sup>22</sup> In this sense social design needs to be observed.

Sketching ways to solutions to the post-modern experience of contingency, three approaches come at hand, which like in a Global Positioning System span a solid focus: social innovation, the organisation of organisations and social design.

Three approaches to the experience of post-modern contingency

**Social innovation** being the first approach comes in like a shortcut. Innovation, how-

ver, is a popular door opener to contemporary debates. Yet what is the innovation, what makes news being news? Focussing innovation regularly blocks access to possibilities which are there however not realised. In the search for tomorrows opportunities we forget to realise today's possibilities. A special vice would be to open up a perspective that is able to deal with the presence rather than the future. It would be worth to discover how the presence of today observes itself in fields like social techniques and how this observation is processed further on.

Focussing on innovation blocks access to present opportunities

Screening approaches towards possible solutions this leads towards two areas wherein stable and sustainable solutions seem achievable. The first area, where 'observing social practice' appears, is the organisation of social techniques. This refers to an enlarged meaning of design.<sup>23</sup> With the awareness for social techniques being men-made, disposability comes into sight as well as contingency and in the end a notion of accountability for implications. The focus on organising social practice opens up the access to the other approach to a sustainable solution for the contingency challenge, namely the access to the world of organisations. Recognising organisations as being organised arouses the awareness for organisational contingency and disposability. It is the **organisation of organisations**.

The organisation of organisations

The two approaches, social innovation and the organisation of organisations, migrate into each other. The continuum from social practice through social techniques towards organisations becomes accessible in its disposability. This opens up opportunities as well as responsibilities. – A specific challenge to the approach is the reference to time. This brings into sight aspects of sustainability as well as the viability of organisations. And then it is not far from emergence towards entity. How do social systems be and develop over time? The organisation will be recognised as an actor<sup>24</sup> and the question for social techniques arises again: How do organisations organise social techniques? How do organisations organise organising social techniques? How do organisations come into contact with themselves with their identity and their possibilities? - And for both approaches, the simple, yet far reaching question follows: what cultural implications come along with the organisation of organisation of social techniques? The answers are comprised in the approach of **social design**.

Organisations as actors

How do they come in contact with themselves?

A praxeology of social design is qualitative and explorative in an almost ethnological sense. There are two areas which already contain a rich treasure of experiences in social design, two areas which are sensitive and reflected upon their own procedures in social design: Coaching and Organisational Development (OD). Both areas are with regard to practice and market areas of growth. Within coaching, the practice of personal mastery is manifested as a profession, which in the last years developed tremendously. Here the creation of stability, meaning and orientation from a contingent nothing seems to work. OD achieves similar things for social systems. Although it needs to be said that the awareness thereof is not so far developed and wide spread as it is for coaching. However within these two areas it can be seen what is already possibly today. Here the practice of social design can be observed and can be reflected in a praxeological sense. And it can be explored how this practice reflects and develops itself in communities of practice, in quality circles, in associations of professionals, in the literature of the field and symposia.

Coaching and OD as examples for Social Design

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23\_ Mau 2004

24\_ Willke 1993

Another rich source of reflection on social design is the echo of the post-modern offers of problem- and solution in the media. The greater part of the post-modern questions-and-answers game seems to be delegated to the media. From a personal experience we might assume that reflection is rather small there and the cacophony rather big. However from a praxeological point of view it can be assumed that a closer observation of contributions of the media to the discourses might be rather fruitful. A reflection of practical and cultural relevance happens if it happens at all there.<sup>25</sup> The observation is again explorative and follows the lines of the themes and stories-told along the foci of attention.<sup>26</sup> The research needs to analyse the semantics of the field in respect of their specifics and thus finds access to the relevant distinctions which create world there.<sup>27</sup>

Contributions of the media

The role of semantics

## 4.2 Distinctions and feedback

A praxeology of social design being an inductively generated theory can be checked against the five post-modern offers for a theory of society and social systems: constructivism, systems theory, de-constructivism, ecology and feminism.<sup>28</sup> However, you can go beyond these offers from a perspective of the theory of observation. In the end it is the two operations, distinction and feedback, or the operations of distinction and re-entry, which lie at the very heart of every post-modern theory of society and social systems. Distinction and feedback are the basis of any post-modern construction of world. This puts the calculus of form and cybernetics into the very focus of attention of any post-modern theory building. Theory proves itself in explaining and describing practice and in opening-up possibilities for further development. That theory has to accomplish for practice as well as for the theory itself and in any case of contradiction theory has to incorporate this with the goal to develop. If that is not the case, the search for an adequate theory goes on. Distinction and feedback are the basic operations of the above mentioned offers of theories. And further they are to found, and this is the point, in the successful practice of coaching and organisational development. The praxeology of social design should in the Bateson sense of metalogic combine theory and practice.<sup>29</sup> The praxeology should be sound in form and content and it should in a Luhmannian sense meet the claim for universality.<sup>30</sup> It is not only that it should be able to meet itself observing the world, it should be able to use it for its own development.<sup>31</sup>

Distinction and feedback as core elements of post-modern theory building

Social design ought to be metalogical

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25\_ Bolz 2003

26\_ Franck 1998

27\_ Klein 2002

28\_ Schwanz 1999

29\_ Bateson 1972

30\_ Luhmann 1984

31\_ Nassehi 2003

### 4.3 Exploring solutions

There are four interwoven aspects to explore solutions:

1. The genesis of culture. From pragmatism – we are what we do and idealism – think positive.
2. Social techniques – the routines of self-observation and its consequences.
3. Organisational excellence – from organisational development via organisational mastery to organisational excellence
4. Kulturtechnikfolgenabschätzung – organisation as the condition of possibility of a dialectic development of culture.

First is the re-consideration of the aspects of the **genesis** of culture. Starting point is the contemporary debates on a guiding culture, multi-culture and on organisational culture change. Here it seems as if the pragmatic aspects of the genesis of culture were out of sight. The contemporary approach seems to be idealistic. It seems, as if it was all about the implementation of conceptualised or preferred values. Initiatives like the British “Change the world for fiver” ([www.we-are-what-we-do.org](http://www.we-are-what-we-do.org)) are able to get the debate back on ground. The focus is on the practice. There is a great need to link this practice to the overall values. What comes into sight is a dialectic cascade of institutionalising and interpreting values for a practice. If values want to rule the practice of leading live, they need to manifest themselves in institutions and organisations. And the other way round: the successful practice can be stabilised and so to speak transformed into sustainability, if it is organised and institutionalised. A short excursion to idealism and materialism seems to be inevitable. The goal in focussing the genesis in culture is to prepare a terrain in which **Kulturtechnikfolgenabschätzung** can operate.

Genesis of culture

The discourse needs to be grounded again

The access lies in the systematic/systemic exploration of **social techniques**. It needs to be shown how processes of self-recognition and self-creation determine social techniques. To reflect on self-observation and self-recognition seems to be the easier part. It becomes more difficult, if the focus shift towards self-creation. It is the aspects of will and decision that comes into sight. Whether an excursion to the philosophy of Heidegger and Nietzsche might be recommendable needs to be considered. In the end it is about the validation of the guiding thesis of the personal mastery as a model for explanation and design for a broader scope of social techniques. Different images come toward one’s mind: tutorial programs of top universities as well as action learning settings. Team building processes will be found in the centre of attention as well as business process engineering along six sigma instruments or employee assistant services. A special interest is on the settings of facilitation and mediation. It can be presumed that once such a perspective on social technique is established further scopes of exploration come into sight. The calculus of form and cybernetics provide figures of observation and feedback which ought to be reconsidered in terms of building models which are able not only to bring the organisation of social techniques into sight but more than that provide access to design. That is the goal to gain clarity about social techniques and what they accomplish.

The process of self-recognition and self-creation determines social techniques

One of the most interesting contributions to a praxeology of social design comes from **organisational excellence**. Being aware of social techniques and being aware of its disposability, the boundary towards an organisation of organisation has already been crossed. This specific interest in the organisation of organisation lies in reconsidering

the organisation as an actor. Being an actor means that the organisation is a self-observer and self-creator.<sup>32</sup> The point of origin is the practice of organisational development.<sup>33</sup> Lately, organisational development has achieved a few considerable successes. In the end, however, it has never exceeded a mere instruction for organisational self-observation. Against the background of personal mastery, the equivalent, namely organisational mastery, comes into sight. This specifies how an organisation comes into contact with itself, with its identity and its possibilities.<sup>34</sup>

In any case, what is the actual transition between **organisational development** and **organisational mastery**? How does an organisation advances from self-recognition to self-creation? It needs to be specified what an organisation might be. And it needs to be specified how an organisation reaches the decisions creating itself. Yet, once this notion of organisational mastery not only comes into sight, but will be established, it is not far from organisational excellence. With access to social design and to the disposability of social practice, the organisation of social practice and ambitious goal-setting becomes possible. Strategic, even normative aspects of management gain an enormous relevance, and responsibility as well as accountability comes into sight.<sup>35</sup> The organisation of organisation and its implication will become object to a direct responsibility. With this concept it is two steps which can be taken from organisational development to organisational mastery and further on to organisational excellence. And this notion has an overall implication for the genesis of cultures. The headline is: change of organisational culture. All this will merge in the vision of the healthy organisation or the health creating organisation. In opposite to today's organisations which are under suspicion to create illness with its employees there, is the access to the possibility for organising organisations in another way which leads to a different social practice which in the end is more healthy or even health generating in contrast to what we experience today. First of all, the vision of the healthy organisation is an intellectual experiment, yet it is the first step to find access and to evaluate implications.

The last step towards a praxelogy of social design comes along with a **transition from the genesis of culture towards cultural development**. The basic idea has been exemplified already in the notion of cultural changes in organisations and how that could be accomplished under the headline of organisational excellence. This shift of perspective from the organisation across the boundaries of the organisation focussing the multitude of organisations and the implications of cultural change will guide straightly towards an all society perspective. This is ambitious but close. The access to the organisation of social practice as seen in the organisational excellence, exceeds the genesis of culture. What comes into sight is social techniques and the implications of changing social techniques in a cultural respect. Therefore, we can speak of **Kulturfolgenabschätzung**. This means most of all we need access to the evaluation of implications of cultural change. It will be necessary to focus the different debates of culture in society like guiding-culture, multi-culture, diversity and on sideways global governance and civil society. It is about the organisation of social techniques and its disposability being the condition of the possibility of a dialectic development of culture. Whether cultural mastery or cultural excellence could be a goal is not yet clear and would be the outcome of a debate on possibilities and responsibilities. And in all that content has not yet be considered, however it might be that the way is the goal - that the way is an end in itself.

From Organisational  
Mastery towards Organi-  
sational Mastery

The organisation of orga-  
nisation becomes object  
to direct responsibility

Objective = The healthy  
organisation

The implications of cul-  
tural change lead to a all  
societal perspective

The disposability of  
social techniques are the  
condition of dialectic  
development of culture

32\_ Baecker 1993

33\_ Trebisch 2000

34\_ Klein 2005

35\_ Bleicher 1991, Beer 1985

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## 5. Social design

It was the goal to outline a path towards a praxeology of social design. Now, under the headline of social design, the path of development can be summarised and a set of visions should be indicated. The essential benefit lies in opening up the various accesses to the disposability of the organisation of social techniques. This means to draw the attention towards the possibilities, and the direct responsibilities which come along with this notion of designing world. Kulturtechnikfolgenabschätzung in this is a feedback of a praxeology of social design to itself. It can be shown and illustrated which accesses towards a cultural coherence and what possibility for development there are - and how values and social practice can be designed. In a sense of social cybernetics all this brings into sight that social techniques can be designed towards an architecture which is self-regulating. You create the path in walking, however that needs to be done. And, at the very end, there is the question, whether it is at all possible not to move.

A praxeology of social design comes with the invitation for a set of visions which we already met: For the individual it is the vision of a meaningful and orientation generating practice of leading life. A practice that gives stability, meaning and orientation within the contingency of post-modern times. For the social interaction it is the vision of the creative conflict, what is linked to the practice of facilitation and mediation which goes beyond the scope of group dynamics. The creative conflict is a practice that in a systemic sense is able to integrate the context. For the organisation the vision of the healthy or health-generating organisation was set. And for society as such there needs to be the question considered what leadership in social techniques could be. What would be the conditions of the possibility of a strategic cultural development? Cultural excellence, and that is the final thought, might be possible in a much broader scope than we are able to imagine at the moment in order to face the challenges of post-modernity.

SD opens up access to  
responsibilities of social  
techniques...

...they can be designed  
in self-regulating archi-  
tectures

A praxeology invites to  
a set of visions

...for the individual  
...for social interaction  
...for the organisation  
...for the societal whole

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## 6. Conclusions

1. The greatest challenge to post-modern organisations is the provision of orientation and meaning to the individual as well as to themselves. The major problem in this context is that sense-making in post-modern times is organised poly-centrally and multi-respectively.
2. In reference to Personal Mastery, Organisational Mastery enables to face the post-modern experience by self-innovation. The foundation of such self-innovation is the competence to oscillate between self-awareness and self-creation that finds its basis in a focussed organisational attention on its practical processes concerning organisational self-observation and self-description.
3. Social design brings into sight the notion of enlarged possibilities and responsibilities for the being and development of social systems. The newly found ability to act is counterbalanced with Kulturtechnikfolgenabschätzung. Evaluating the implications of a specific social design offers a self-aware and target-oriented development. This marks the transition from Organisational Mastery to Organisational Excellence in times of post-modernity.

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