Gothenburg Research Institute

University Fashions

Barbara Czarniawska

Organizing in Action Nets

o a n

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

University Fashions

Abstract

There is no doubt that in the present well-connected world, universities form an organization field, or perhaps a subfield of field of organizations that produce education. But I am concerned only with that subfield. It is to be expected, therefore, that, as in any other field, isomorphic forces are at work, with imitation or mimetic forces in the fore. As in other fields, what is often imitated has a loose connection to any specific practice, and, as in any other field, one can expect waves of fashion coming and going. The focus on fashion has been daringly extended to managerial practices (usually with negative commentary), and now and then even to research practices. It is now time to extend it to universities – especially to fashions in university management. After the period when ideas about university functioning spread from Europe to the rest of the world came a period when such ideas spread from USA to the rest of the world. It seems that we are about to witness another change of direction – the center moving to Asia. Is the presently declared "crisis of the university as an institution" the beginning of a new era for the European universities, or is it its end? As the history of the study of fashion amply demonstrates, it is impossible to predict future fashions, but it is possible, and promising, to take a closer look at fashions and their ways of spreading in the global university field of today.

Introduction

The immediate trigger for writing this paper was an event that occurred at my university earlier this year. Our president had announced that, in the face of poor results achieved by our university in seeking research funds, an internal centralization must be undertaken. The existing 9 faculties and about 170 departments and units are to be centralized into 4 or 5 new faculties. As most of the professors did not think this was an especially good idea, our union organized a meeting, to which full professors from our neighbor, Chalmers University of Technology (17 departments and 10,000 students to our 40,000) were also invited. Leaving the "resistance meeting" (which proved successful), I met a colleague from Chalmers, who told me that their university was also going to be centralized into a few faculties. In their case, however, the reason was different: they succeeded in attracting a great many research grants, and an effective management of those grants was therefore necessary. The two contradictory motives for the same move made me think that management fashions were not limited to companies and public administration units. In what follows, I briefly summarize some insights into management fashions, and then try to apply them to European universities.

Management fashions

Fashions are changing modes of appearance or ways of doing things that are popular during certain periods. In the literature one can also encounter the term "management fads", which denotes short-lived fashions. Management fashions often acquire proper names, which are the names of prototypical action programs that became fashionable: Total Quality Management, Business Process Reengineering, Balanced Score Card. Fads are incipient fashions that fail – fleeting enthusiasms that fade away, leaving no trace.

As Czarniawska and Joerges (2005) noted, fashion is a phenomenon treated with disdain and neglect in contemporary social theory (for a recent example from philosophy, see Svendsen, 2006), and that disdain has trickled across to organization studies. Yet an understanding of fashion seems to be the key to understanding many puzzling developments in and among organizations. Paradoxical as it may sound, fashion can be seen as the inseparable part of the iron cage, as Max Weber called the institutional order – as an experimental field in which new practices are tried before they become institutionalized (Czarniawska, 2005).

The scholarly interest in managerial fads and fashions can be traced back to diffusion theory, as propagated by anthropologist Everett Rogers (1962), who, in turn, was inspired by Gabriel Tarde – the French sociologist, contemporary and rival of Durkheim. Tarde postulated that imitation is the basic social mechanism, and that it is directed toward the imitation of novel inventions. Thus fashion. "[I]n our European societies … the extraordinary progress of fashion in all its

forms, in dress, food and housing, in wants and ideas, in institutions and in arts, is making a single type of European based upon several hundreds of millions of examples (Tarde, 1890/1962: 16).

Tarde's idea of diffusion was far from mechanistic. To the contrary, he postulated that particles diffuse in the same way ideas do, not the other way around. Thus by highlighting the variation resulting from each displacement, he differed from the diffusionists (an early school of anthropology opposing evolutionists); and by pointing out the role of action (i.e. imitation), he differed from the evolutionists (he spoke of evolution by association, 1893/2011).

Diffusion studies multiplied from the 1920s onward, so that Rogers, writing in 1962, could describe formal characteristics of the process fairly accurately. Diffusion curves tend to be bell-shaped, and patterns of adoption allow one to distinguish among innovators, early adopters, early and late majorities, and laggards.

The topic of management fashions was first assumed by Mintzberg (1979) and later by Abrahamson (1991, 1996a, 1996b, 2011), Kieser (1997, 2002), and Røvik (1996, 2011). Others followed. Newell et al., for example, edited a special issue of *Organization* under the title "Management Fads and Fashions" (vol. 8, no.1, 2001).

In most of those studies, however, fashion has been portrayed as an irrational deviation from rational managerial behavior, as indicated by a frequent repetition of the hendiadys[1] "fads and fashions" (for reviews and critiques, see Clark, 2004 and Sturdy, 2004). Because of the stubbornness of the phenomenon, however, its simple denigration to the status of deviant behavior did not solve the problem. Fashion following was too frequent and too persistent to be classified as pathological. Economist Paul Nystrom noted this fact as early as 1928, and he set out to find a rational explanation of fashions (1928/1930: 193).

Accordingly, managerial fashions have been rationalized by being framed by the supply-and-demand model (see e.g. Abrahamson, 1996a). Double and triple interpretative loops have been constructed to show that there must be something rational about fashion – if not a promise of efficiency, then at least legitimacy, the striving for which is highly rational in modernity. Benders and van Veen borrowed the notion of "interpretive viability" from the German sociologist Günther Ortmann by claiming, ingeniously if tautologically, that fads that survive and become fashions (and are therefore "viable") are characterized by an interpretive viability. Furthermore, the phenomenon has been tamed by having been divided into stages (Gill and Whittle, 1993, suggested invention, dissemination, acceptance, disenchantment, and decline), making fashion appear orderly and therefore predictable. Thus fashion could be rationally explained after all: there was a market for it, as it was rationally (although not in a simple sense) demanded by managers and supplied by consultants.

A new direction for the area was marked by abandoning the quest for determinist explanations of fashion and allowing for historical contingency in organiza-

---

[1] An expression consisting of two words connected by "and".

tional dynamics (Sturdy, 2004). Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) tried to bridge the old and the new approach, constructing an explanation that was deterministic and historically contingent, structural-functionalist and psychodynamic. Such fusions are, of course, possible, although rare; the usual division lies between a theory's promise of either prediction or interpretation. Other authors, including myself (Czarniawska, 2005), have opted for approaches to fashion that are close to those present in cultural studies.

The original influence of cultural studies on management fashion research began with Hirsch's (1972) study of the cultural industry. The connection between organization studies and cultural studies was forged through the kind of product Hirsch studied. As the cultural industry produces cultural artifacts, an analogy with other products presented itself, and Blumer's (1969/1973) fashion theory was evoked in the context of management. Hirsch's interest lay more in the industry's management of fads and fashions than in managerial fads and fashions, but his article is considered seminal for subsequent studies. In contemporary studies, cultural theory is used as the starting point for an ideological critique, as a conceptual tool, or as a source of metaphors.

The roots of the first stance – ideological critique – reach back to Veblen's (1899/1994) theory of fashion as a passtime of the leisure class and a vehicle of conspicuous consumption. Such contemporary critical theorists as Finkelstein (1989) and Svendsen (2006) tend to assume that fashion followers abandon responsibility for making history and shaping culture.

Ernst and Kieser (2002) used theories of cultural fashion as a conceptual tool to explain the success of management consulting. Although they mentioned several theories, the final explanation relied heavily on Werner Sombart's (1913/1967) "marionette theory", an allusion to Parisian puppets that toured European capitals in the 18th century dressed in the latest fashions. According to Kieser (2002), consultants are creating a demand for their own services by constructing management fashions and by inspiring the anxiety and greed of managers – an opinion shared by many critical researchers.

The other way of using inspiration from cultural studies is through the acknowledgement that fashion is a hybrid subject. Leopold (1992) has suggested that it can be seen and studied as both a cultural phenomenon and as a production system. A mirror-like symmetry characterizes studies of these two aspects in cultural theory and in organization theory. Cultural theory has focused on fashion as a cultural phenomenon, but little to fashion as a production system. In organization theory, fashion as a system of production is actually well researched, but its cultural aspect is treated sparingly. This situation is beginning to change. Mazza and Alvarez (2000) have shown, for instance, that, in contrast to earlier mechanical models of fashion production, the supposed consumers of managerial fashion are, in fact, its co-producers (Clark, 2004, corroborated their point). I would suggest going even further and adopting the circuit model of culture (proposed by the cultural scholar, Richard Johnson, 1986-7).

Yet another take on the phenomenon of managerial fads and fashion has been inspired by the sociology of translation (Czarniawska, 2005). This approach returns to the observation made by two well-known theoreticians of fashion, Simmel (1904/1971) and Blumer (1969/1973), that fashion is a highly paradoxical process. Its constitutive paradoxes are invention *and* imitation, variation *and* uniformity, distance *and* interest, novelty *and* conservatism, unity *and* segregation, conformity and deviation, change and status quo, revolution and evolution. And it is *translation*, side by side with negotiation, that is used to resolve these paradoxes in each practical action.

In management, fashion is one of the ways of introducing order and uniformity into what may seem like an overwhelming variety of possibilities. In this sense, fashion helps managers come to grips with the present, while simultaneously serving to loosen the hold of the past on the present and introducing an appearance of order and predictability into preparations for the future. Fashion makes the management community known to itself, as reflected in the present fashion and in the rejection of past fashions (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995).

Guided by fashion, managers imitate desires and beliefs that appear to be attractive at a given time and place. The inventions and innovations that are imitated are allegedly superior, both because of their qualities (Tarde called them "logical reasons"; I would call them pragmatic) and because of who coined or circulated them (Tarde's "extra-logical reasons, which I would call "power-symbolic"). It is impossible to tell the difference between logical and extralogical reasons at any given time, as the power-symbolic aspects masquerade as superiority of quality, and because, as mentioned, the notion of "logical" or "rational" has been widely extended nowadays. The third type of superiority, according to Tarde, characterizes ideas that have many allies in other ideas (Latour, 1986). In different vocabulary, it can be said that such ideas fit the institutionalized thought structure (Warren et al., 1974).

Management fashions used to originate in the USA, and then be translated and adapted to various localities, sometimes competing with local tradition (Frenkel, 2005).

Fashion, however, does not stand merely for what is new or for the future. Fashion runs in cycles, although the regularity of those cycles may be in the eye of the beholder – especially a beholder who is keen on periodization. Furusten (1999) demonstrated that Business Process Reengineering is a fresh version of Taylorist ideas. Similarly, it took the concept of City Manager 70 years to travel from Staunton, Virginia, where it was studied by F. Stuart Chapin in 1928, to Venice, Italy, where Fabrizio Panozzo could study it in 2001.

How long are the cycles of managerial innovations? It could be 70 years, but due to general acceleration, it could be shorter. Gill and Whittle (1993) suggested a 40-year-cycle of management fashion, but it seems that a pendulum of reforms in the Swedish public sector requires only about 20 years to swing in the opposite direction (Czarniawska, 1997).

There is also a suggestion that what seems to be cycles of fashion result simply from forgetting. Røvik (1996) spoke of fading, but Karin Brunsson (1998) suggested that the process is much more active – in fact, an organized oblivion. Røvik claimed that unfashionable prescriptions are stored in organizational "wardrobes", to be retrieved after a long period. In retro-fashions, fashionable items are not created but found – found in somebody's wardrobe or at a flea market. They become translated into the idiom of the day, or rather the rhetorical code of the day (Barthes, 1967/1983), and circulated with or without any acknowledgment of their origin.

The conceptualizing of managerial fads and fashions as dependent upon translation processes also helps in shedding the traditional idea of fashion as unidirectional: the trickle-down process (for a critique, see e.g. Partington, 1992). Hedmo et al. (2005) adopted James G. March's (1999) inventory of different modes of imitation. The first, the broadcasting mode, is one in which a central model inspires imitation. Even if the dynamics of this mode resemble those of diffusion, in which a strong central idea or model drives imitation, imitation in the broadcasting mode is driven by the active participation, initiatives, and motives of those doing the imitating. Both those imitated and those imitating are active shapers of the process: the translators.

Whereas broadcasting, by definition, originates in one place and spreads, in the chain mode, an idea is imitated, and this imitation is, in turn, imitated, and so on. This is, in fact, the main mode of imitation described by Tarde (1890/1962). The imitator may have no knowledge of the origin of the model. Thus, it is sometimes only after the fact that one can discern that the imitation was part of a larger trend or fashion. As it becomes clear that imitation may not originate from one source or model, this mode of imitation reveals even more distinctly the active role of those involved in imitation.

The third mode of imitation is one in which the relationships between those being imitated and those imitating are mediated by other organizations and actors, as exemplified by Clark and Greatbatch (2002), and by Hedmo et al. (2005). Imitation does not always proceed from those imitated to those imitating, from fashion leaders to fashion followers. Researchers, media, expert committees, and international organizations are presumed to report on actions and events occurring elsewhere, but without taking any action or pursuing any interest in such events. In fact, they not only mediate ideas, but also influence and shape the activities that occur under their auspices.

In practice, these three modes exist together, and are all active in shaping, circulating, and replacing managerial fads and fashions. The current studies of managerial fads and fashions are moving beyond indignation and contempt to a better understanding of a "time-collective" (Sellerberg, 1994) of management, which creates knowledge of itself by reflecting its hopes and preoccupations in the present fashion and in the rejection of past fashions. Management is as fashion

prone as are the clothing industry, interior design, or science. There is no reason to assume that universities are not following managerial fashions like everybody else.

The newest fad: Centralization

Gothenburg's two universities were not alone in their attempt to centralize; if anything, they were only less successful. The three universities in Helsinki joined into one Aalto University, which proudly presents itself on its web page:

> Aalto – an internationally unique concept
> Established in 2010, the Aalto University is a new university with centuries of experience. The Aalto University was created from the merger of three Finnish universities: The Helsinki School of Economics, Helsinki University of Technology and The University of Art and Design Helsinki. Aalto University School of Science and Technology has been divided into four new schools starting from 1st of January 2011. The six schools of Aalto University are all leading and renowned institutions in their respective fields and in their own right.

> The combination of six schools opens up new possibilities for strong multi-disciplinary education and research. The new university's ambitious goal is to be one of the leading institutions in the world in terms of research and education in its own specialized disciplines (http://www.aalto.fi/en/about/, accessed 22 July 2011).

Observe a heading typical for fashion followers – while doing what everybody else does, or attempts to do, the concept must be "unique". And apart from the usual platitudes about "new possibilities" and the commonly shared ambition of being "one of the leading", there are great many "logical reasons", as Tarde (1890/1962) called them, for the centralization move. Apart from the usual recourses to efficiency and effectiveness (both decentralization and centralization are usually justified by these goals), and local conditions (indeed, the universities joined to form Aalto University, like those that constituted Linnaeus University in Sweden[2], were all very small), some other less official but still logical reasons are given. Centralization allows the new university to join the ranking game (Wedlin, 2006; 2011), and searching for legitimacy and recognition is seen as logical in contemporary management (for a Luhmannian take on this issue, see Esposito, 2011).

Now, the ranking itself, especially in relation to business schools, is not a new phenomenon. Inspired by the US rankings that started in business schools as early

---

[2] "An attractive academic environment. Increased quality, attractiveness and developmental potential. New opportunities for co-operative ventures. Linnaeus University will become an exciting academic environment in the Småland region of Sweden." (http://lnu.se/?l=en, accessed 22 July 2011)

as the 1970s, it arrived to Europe with the *Financial Times* ranking from 1999 (Wedlin, 2006), and grew within the social trend to scrutinize cultural activities in "audit societies" (Power, 1997). It can be said that ranking itself is a fashion; however, no centralizations have been undertaken immediately after it spread.

U.S. News & World Report published the first university rankings in 1983, but the serious reactions began only when the Shanghai ranking arrived in 2003, sending yet another signal that the center is moving from the US to China.

> The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) is [sic] first published in June 2003 by the Center for World-Class Universities and the Institute of Higher Education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, and then updated on an annual basis. ARWU uses six objective indicators to rank world universities, including the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, number of highly cited researchers selected by Thomson Scientific, number of articles published in journals of *Nature* and *Science*, number of articles indexed in Science Citation Index - Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index, and per capita performance with respect to the size of an institution. More than 1000 universities are actually ranked by ARWU every year and the best 500 are published on the web.

> Although the initial purpose of ARWU was to find the global standing of Chinese top universities, it has attracted a great deal of attention from universities, governments and public media worldwide. A survey on higher education published by *The Economist* in 2005 commented ARWU as "**the most widely used** annual ranking of the world's research universities". Burton Bollag, a reporter at *Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote that ARWU "is considered **the most influential** international ranking" (http://www. arwu.org/aboutARWU.jsp, accessed 22 July 2011).

And further, indicating the path that led from ranking to university restructuring:

> The ARWU and its content have been widely cited and employed as a starting point for identifying national strengths and weaknesses as well as facilitating reform and setting new initiatives. Bill Destler, the president of the Rochester Institute of Technology, drew reference to the ARWU to analyze the comparative advantages that the Western Europe and US have in terms of intellectual talent and creativity in his publication in the journal *Nature*. Martin Enserink referred to ARWU and argued in his paper published in *Science* that "France's poor showing in the Shanghai ranking ... helped trigger a national debate about higher education that resulted in a new law... giving universities more freedom.
> Starting from 2009, the ARWU has been published by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, a fully independent organization. Besides ARWU, the Consultancy is going to provide various global comparison and in-depth analysis on research universities, supporting relevant decision-making by national governments and universities in global context (http://www. arwu.org/aboutARWU.jsp, accessed 22 July 2011).

Indeed, as McKenzie (2009) pointed out:

> France's poor performance in the rankings is in large part due to the criteria applied by the two principal ranking systems and in particular, the importance they place on research activity and outcomes. France suffers here on three fronts. First, full time researchers in France are often employed by (…) *CNRS*, and publish their work under that reference rather than under the name of the university to which they may be attached. Second, well resourced *grandes écoles* are largely teaching-based institutions, with little research activity. Lastly, the vast majority of the recognised international journals which count for the rankings are published in English. (…)
>
> France also fares badly due to the size of its universities and the narrowness of their offerings (McKenzie, 2009: 45).

As to "giving universities more freedom", the autonomy reform in Sweden (2008 in Sweden, 2003 in Denmark, 2009 in Finland), fashion at a state level, demonstrated in full Blau's (1970) observation that decentralization of large bureaucracies results in power shifting only one level down. "University autonomy" means that university presidents, at least in Sweden, are free to do as they wish, as there was no suggestion that collegial governance was to play a role of any importance. And they wish to centralize management in their universities: fewer faculties or departments, strong and large central administration (we are charged 72% of our grants for the alleged "services", of which there is hardly any trace).

In the meantime, a fourth international conference on world-class universities is in the offing, which can be considered a catwalk for university fashions (Löfgren and Willim, 2005):

> In the past decade, the term "world-class university" has become a catchphrase. Not simply because it represents excellence in teaching and research, but more importantly because it also signifies university's capacity to compete in the age of global higher education marketplace. Consequently, many national governments have developed policies and special initiatives to promote and support the creation of "world-class university", and an increasing number of universities have included becoming "world-class" in their mission statements and have begun implementing various measures (http://gse.sjtu.edu.cn/WCU/WCU-4.htm, accessed 22 July 2011).

At this point I hasten to add that Sweden, or at least Stockholm School of Economics, could perhaps qualify as a fashion leader, as "becoming world-class" was already a catchphrase there in the second half of the 1980s.

After Bourdin's report, France (2008) felt the need to correct its old-fashioned ways and joined the leaders[3]:

(Paris, 17 May 2011)
The Executive Committee of IREG Observatory on Ranking and Excel-

---

[3] Among which was German *Exzellensinitiative*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_ Universities_Excellence_Initiative, accessed 22 July 2011)

lence adopted the IREG Ranking Audit Rules. The document describes in detail the criteria and procedure that will be used in assessing the quality of rankings.

The purpose of an audit, conducted by independent academic teams, will be to verify if a ranking under review was done professionally, and observes good practices, providing students, their parents and employers with information allowing them to compare and assess programs offered by higher education institutions. In their proceedings the audit teams will be guided by the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions, adopted at the IREG-2 conference in 2006.

The Ranking Audit rules have been adopted following broad and open discussions and consultations conducted at the IREG-5 conference in Berlin in October 2010 and on the IREG website. The IREG Ranking Audit is expected to:
  - enhance the transparency of rankings;
  - give users of rankings a tool to identify trustworthy rankings;
  - improve the quality of rankings.

IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence is a non-for-profit association of ranking organization, universities and other organization interested in the improvement of the quality of international and national rankings of higher education institutions. The association has close to 20 member organizations from Asia, Europe and America.

The IREG Ranking Audit will be conducted on a voluntary basis. Any international or national ranking can ask to be audited. Rankings that pass robust evaluation will be entitled to use quality label IREG approved. The results of the first ranking audits are expected in the Fall 2011.

The Audit Ranking Audit Rules were announced at the UNESCO Global Forum Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses, held at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, 16-17 May 2011. (http://www.arwu.org/IREG_Ranking_Audit_Rules_adopted.jsp, accessed 22 July 2011).

The aim of my discussion, however, is not to issue moralistic judgments, hard as it may be to avoid in the context of one's own workplace. Let me simply follow with two questions raised by treating the logical reasons seriously. Does participation in ranking improve the quality of research and education? Does centralization help increase a university's ranking?

As to the first question, IREG is somewhat mild in its answers:

Rankings and league tables of higher education institutions (HEIs) and programs are a global phenomenon. They serve many purposes: they respond to demands from consumers for easily interpretable information on the standing of higher education institutions; they stimulate competition among them; they provide some of the rationale for allocation of funds; and they help differentiate among different types of institutions and different programs and disciplines. In addition, when correctly understood

and interpreted, they contribute to the definition of "quality" of higher education institutions within a particular country, complementing the rigorous work conducted in the context of quality assessment and review performed by public and independent accrediting agencies (http://www.che.de/downloads/Berlin_Principles_IREG_534.pdf, accessed 22 July 2011).

Many critics disagree. Harmon (2006: 234)) claimed that ranking-induced competition "obliterated any evident connection between research productivity and the furtherance of any praiseworthy social, practical, or intellectual values". Adler and Harzig (2009) developed this critique, claiming that ranking systems "undermine the scholarship that matters" (p. 73) and called for a "temporary moratorium on institutional rankings" (p. 84). As a university professor, I couldn't agree more; but as a student of fashion, I tend to agree with McKenzie when she says that "[w]hatever the flaws of international rankings, and there are many, they will remain popular with the prospective students, within academic circles, and among journalists who rejoice in their simplicity" (McKenzie, 2009: 45). And whereas the passionate debate about the ranking primarily concerns their validity (including Adler and Harzig, 2009), my interest is concerned with universities' eagerness to participate in them. After all, there is little surprise about which are the top-ten universities: Harvard, Berkeley, MIT, CIT, Stanford, Princeton, Columbia, and Chicago in the USA; and Oxford and Cambridge in UK. Of some interest could be a place in the top 100 (7 Nordic universities have made this cut), and even in the top 500 (24 Nordic universities). Thus the first ten can compete for their relative positions (apparently, rankings vacillate from year to year, Dichev, 1999), the first 100 about theirs, while those outside the 500 (my university, for example), could try to get in. Another question would be why countries such as Poland, which is not placed in the rankings, should pay Ernest&Young for a report that will help them enter the lists[4]. It has been suggested, however, that a connection exists between an unfavorable image or reputation that a university develops (or its association, by country, to universities ranked poorly) to a halt in their climb or even to a drop in their rankings. Any unfavorable image developed by a group of universities, associated by country, tends to harm their collective rankings, says Paul Z. Jambor, who is teaching in South Korea. For this reason, universities worldwide should seriously consider adhering to internationally accepted standards, so they do not run the risk of sliding in the ranks on the international front (Jambor, 2009). Still, it is difficult to imagine that the ranking, apart from the pleasant feeling of being among the winners, or at least among the runners, could be of crucial importance to the actual practices at any university. Poor ranking can motivate the sponsors perhaps even better than good ranking, and students choose their universities according to a complex set of diverse criteria. One of the commentators to Jambor's blog in THE (2009) said that "Any institution that sacrifices its unique original identity for a boost in what are biased

4 *Diagnoza stanu szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce*, Ernst & Young, 2009.

rankings anyway would be stupid". Similar reactions, though put more diplomatically, met the reform in Poland:

> Adoption of trends or fashions present in other cultural circles has always been practiced in various societies, and there is nothing wrong with that, assuming that those loans will be adapted to the local situation. Such an adaptation requires not only an idea of how to do it, but, in the first place, a good knowledge of how it is being done locally. Unfortunately, (…) the present reform intends to introduce changes by the *copy/paste* method (Wagner, 2011, my translation, BC).

This postulate can be completed by the one formulated by Michele Lamont (2009), who suggested that a detailed knowledge of how the model to be copied works may also be useful in following fashion.

Izabela Wagner quoted above continued her critique, noting that one of the ways of maintaining a local uniqueness is reaching for the past models of excellence in the same environment: I would call it "automorphism instead of isomorphism" (Czarniawska, 2002; Schwartz, 2006/2009). Indeed, it seemed that Polish universities chose exactly this road to modernization after 1989 (Czarniawska and Genell, 2002). But the Ernst&Young report, read commonly as a condemnation of the poor quality of Polish universities, pointed to another direction. Is the direction favorable to Polish universities? Although the following of fashion is a strong urge, for reasons explained in the previous section, maintaining a distance from the current fashion is a behavior characteristic of both future fashion leaders and the eccentrics, who earn many points for being just that. In other words, if you cannot be among the top-ranked, shouldn't you be looking for another strategy?

Another lesson to be learned from cultural studies of fashion is that sensible fashion followers first choose among (always multiple) fashions that suit them (their body size, for example). Second, they adapt the garment chosen, as Wagner (2011) postulated, or, in my terms, translate it into local terms.

Thus the next question, based on the assumption that it is difficult not to follow the ranking fashion, is whether or not centralization improves rankings. It may improve them, when it is translated into a merger, in terms of the first five criteria: number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, number of highly cited researchers in Thomson Scientific, number of articles published in journals of *Nature* and *Science*, and number of articles indexed in Science Citation Index. The sixth, per capita performance with respect to the size of an institution, is irrelevant of size. But by how much? We shall see. In 2010, Aalto was in the group 401–500 (with its rival, the University of Helsinki, in 72nd place…). And, finally, is centralization appropriate for all universities, no matter what their size? The official line of reasoning is as follows: centralization will improve performance, and therefore hoist us up on all the criteria. Assuming that there is, indeed, such a causal connection, it may work in something like 20 or 30 years. Will the rankings still be around?

On the road to perdition?

There is no doubt in my mind that, whatever "logical reasons" are ascribed to ranking and centralization, the power-symbolic reasons for following the global fashion, in order to be both the same and different ("unique") from all other universities, will prevail. Indeed, one is reminded of the double meaning of the term "rationalization": in management, it means introducing more rational way of production; in psychology, it means finding plausible motives after an irrational act. In time (20 or 40 years?), the present fashion will give in to another wave, possibly reversing the trend (decentralization and local specificity). But it is relevant to consider possible consequences of the present fashion and the related fads.

There is no doubt that the prevailing mode of spreading the fashion is the one "mediated": audit companies, media, and consulting groups are all deeply involved (and no doubt profiting greatly) for that fashion. Furthermore, the "time-collective" and the "organization field" (it would probably be interesting to combine the two into something like time-and-virtual-space collective) become bigger and bigger. Will it have any effect on the quality of teaching and research, and if so, will the effect be positive?

University management, university research, and university teaching are three loosely coupled systems, for better or for worse. For better, because it makes university as an institution more resilient, and because teachers and researchers can hide from too-energetic managers in their professional hiding places. For worse, because research, at least in business schools, remains decoupled from teaching; universities are more and more like schools in socializing their students into traditional patterns of thinking, rather than preparing them for a life of critique and innovation.

Weick (1976) noticed that "[w]hile loose coupling may foster perseverance, it is not selective in what is perpetuated. Thus archaic traditions as well as innovative improvisations may be perpetuated" (p. 6). He has also explained why the reformers usually desire a tight coupling, and why educational systems are prime examples of loosely coupled systems: it is the combination of unclear technology and the strong presence of professional norms that favors such a structure.

The present fashion and the related centralization fad are undoubtedly management attempts to tighten the couplings (they still have not read their Weick). The result might mean the collapse of collegiality, and it is certain to achieve nothing but a mechanical connection of research and teaching. But there is at least one positive effect: like here, in Gothenburg, faculty and students in France, UK, Poland recourse to Voice (though it must be added that many young people in Germany, Italy, and also Poland choose Exit, to refer to Hirschman's, 1970, classic categories). Not much Loyalty is observed.

An optimist like Howard Shapiro would claim that the time for a new transformation of universities is due, and that "[a]ll revolutions or significant transformations are best thought of as the hybrid results of competing visions, rather

than the complete realization of any single idea or approach." (2005: 85). Thus ranking and centralization could be useful if and when they merge with the opposing forces and ideas, to produce something new. Substantial changes usually occur as unintended consequences.

References

Abrahamson, Eric (1991) Managerial fads and fashions: The diffusion and rejection of innovations. *Academy of Management Review,* 16(3): 586-612.

Abrahamson, Eric (1996a) Technical and aesthetic fashion. In B. Czarniawska, and G. Sevón (eds.) *Translating organization change*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 117-138.

Abrahamson, Eric (1996b) Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review,* 21: 254-285.

Abrahamson, Eric (2011) The iron cage: Ugly, uncool, and unfashionable. *Organization Studies,* 32(5): 615-629.

Abrahamson, Eric, and Fairchild, Gregory (1999) Management fashion: Lifecycles, triggers and collective learning. *Administrative Science Quarterly,* December: 327-340.

Adler, Nancy J. and Harzig, Anne-Wil (2009) When knowledge wins: Transcending the sense and nosense of academic rankings. *Academy of Management Learning & Education,* 8(1): 72-95.

Barthes, Roland (1967/1983). *The fashion system*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Benders, Jos, and van Veen, Kees (2001) What's in a fashion? Interpretative viability and management fashions. *Organization,* 8(1): 33-53.

Blau, Peter (1970) A formal theory of differentiation in organizations. *American Sociological Review,* 35: 201-218.

Blumer, Herbert G. (1969/1973) Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection. In G. Wills and D. Midgley (eds.) *Fashion marketing.* London: Allen & Unwin, 327-340.

Bourdin, Joël (2008) *Rapport d'information sur le défi des classements dans l'enseignement supérieur,* 2 July. (http://www.senat.fr/rap/r07-442/r07-442.html, accessed 22 July 2011).

Brunsson, Karin (1998) Non-learning organization. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 14(4): 421-432.

Chapin, F. S. (1928). *Cultural change*. Dubuque, IO: Wm. C. Brown.

Clark, Timothy (2004) The fashion of management fashion: A surge too far? *Organization,* 11(2): 297-306.

Clark, Timothy, and Greatbatch, David (2002) Collaborative relationships in the creation and fashioning of management ideas: gurus, editors, and managers. In M. Kipping and L. Engwall (eds.), *Management consulting: Emergence and dynamics of a knowledge industry*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 129-145.

Czarniawska, Barbara (1997) *Narrating the organization. Dramas of institutional identies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Czarniawska, Barbara (2002) *A tale of three cities, or the glocalization of city management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Czarniawska, Barbara (2005) Fashion in organizing. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (eds.), *Global ideas: How ideas, objects and practices travel in the global economy*. Malmö/Copenhagen: Liber/CBS Press, 129-146.

Czarniawska, Barbara and Genell, Kristina (2002) Gone shopping? Universities on their way to market. *Scandinavian Journal of Management,* 18: 455-474.

Czarniawska, Barbara, and Joerges, Bernward (1995) Winds of organizational change: How to translate ideas into objects and actions. In S. Bacharach, P. Gagliardi, and B. Mundell (eds.) *Research in the sociology of organizations,* vol. 13. Greenwich: JAI Press, 171-209.

Dichev, Ilia D. (1999) How good are business schools ranking? *Journal of Business,* 72(2): 201-213.

Ernst, Berit, and Kieser, Alfred (2002) In search of explanations for the consulting explosion. In K. Sahlin-Andersson and L. Engwall (eds.) *The expansion of management knowledge*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 47-73.

Esposito, Elena (2011) Originality through imitation: The rationality of fashion. *Organization Studies,* 32(5): 603-613.

Finkelstein, Joanne (1989) *Dining out. A sociology of modern manners*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Frenkel, Michal (2005) Something new, something old, something borrowed…: The translation of the "Family Friendly Organization" in Israel. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (eds.) *Global ideas: How ideas, objects and practices travel in the global economy*. Malmö/Copenhagen: Liber/CBS Press, 147-166.

Furusten, Staffan (1999) *Popular management books: How they are made and what they mean for organisations*. London: Routledge.

Gill, John, and Whittle, Sue (1993) Managing by panacea: Accounting for transience. *Journal of Management Studies*, 30(2): 281-295.

Harmon, Michael M. (2006) Business research and Chinese patriotic poetry: How competition for status distorts the priority between research and teaching in U.S. business schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 1(1): 78-95.

Hedmo, Tina; Sahlin-Andersson, Kerstin, and Wedlin, Linda (2005) Fields of imitation: The global expansion of management education. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (eds.) *Global ideas: How ideas, objects and practices travel in the global economy*. Malmö/Copenhagen: Liber/CBS Press, 190-212.

Hirsch, Paul M. (1972) Processing fads and fashions: An organization-set analysis of cultural industry systems. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 77 (4): 639-659.

Hirschman, Albert (1970) *Exit, voice, and loyalty. Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jambor, Paul Z. (2009) From where I sit: Slide and prejudice. *Times Higher Education,* 23 July.

Johnson, Richard (1986-7). What is cultural studies anyway? *Social Text*, 16: 38-80.

Kieser, Alfred (1997) Rhetoric and myth in management fashion. *Organization*, 4(1): 49-74.

Kieser, Alfred (2002) Managers as marionettes? Using fashion theories to explain the success of consultants. In M. Kipping and L. Engwall (eds.) *Management consulting: Emergence and dynamics of a knowledge industry*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 167-183.

Lamont, Michele (2009) *How professors think: Inside the curious world of academic judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno (1986) The powers of association. In J. Law (ed.) *Power, action and belief*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 261-277.

Leopold, Ellen (1992). The manufacture of the fashion system. In J. Ash and E. Wilson (eds.) *Chic thrills: A fashion reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 101-118.

Löfgren, Orvar and Willim, Robert (2005) *Magic, culture and the new economy*. Oxford, UK: Berg.

March, James G. (1999). A learning perspective on the network dynamics of institutional integration. In M. Egeberg and P. Laegreid, (Eds.), *Organizing political institutions* (pp. 129–155). Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Mazza, Carmelo and Alvarez, José-Luis (2000) Haute couture and prét-à-porter. The popular press and the diffusion of management practices. *Organization Studies*, 21(3): 567-588.

McKenzie, Zoe (2009) *Higher education reform in France. Some lessons from the Australian experience*. (http://www.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads//pdf/documents/DT_Higher_Education_Reform_in_France.pdf, accessed 24 July 2011).

Mintzberg, Henry (1979) *The structuring of organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Newell, Sue; Robertson, Maxine, and Swan, Jacky (2001) Management fads and fashions. Editorial. *Organization*, 8(1): 5-15.

Nystrom, Paul (1928/1973) Character and direction of fashion movements. In G. Wills and D. Midgley (eds.) *Fashion marketing*. London: Allen & Unwin, 193-205.

Panozzo, Fabrizio (2001) Den överbefolkade ledningen (The crowded apex: Leadership contests in Italian municipalities). In B. Czarniawska and R. Solli (eds.) *Modernisering av storstaden: Marknad och management i stora städer vid sekelskiftet* (Modernizing the big city: Market and management in big cities at the turn of the century). Malmö: Liber, 74-83.

Partington, Angela (1992) Popular fashion and working-class affluence. In J. Ash and E. Wilson (eds.) *Chic thrills: A fashion reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 145-161.

Power, Michael (1997) *The audit society: Rituals of verification*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Rogers, Everett (1962) *Diffusion of innovation*. New York: Free Press.

Røvik, Kjell-Arne (1996) Deinstitutionalization and the logic of fashion. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (eds.) *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 139-172.

Røvik, Kjell-Arne (2011) From fashion to virus: An alternative theory of organizations' handling of management ideas. *Organization Studies*, 32(5): 631-653.

Schwartz, Birgitta (2006/2009) Environmental strategies as automorphic patterns of behaviour. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 8 (3): 192-206.

Sellerberg, Ann-Mari (1994) *A blend of contradictions. Georg Simmel in theory and practice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Shapiro, Harold T. (2005) *A larger sense of purpose. Higher education and society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Simmel, Georg (1904/1971) Fashion. In D. N. Levine (ed.), *Georg Simmel on individuality and social forms*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 294-323.

Sombart, Werner (1913/1967) *Luxury and capitalism*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Sturdy, Andrew (2004). The adoption of management ideas and practices: Theoretical perspectives and possibilities. *Management Learning*, 35(2): 155-179.

Svendsen, Lars (2006) *Fashion. A philosophy*. London: Reaktion Books.

Tarde, Gabriel (1890/1962) *The laws of imitation*. New York: Henry Holt.

Tarde, Gabriel (1893/2011) *Monadology and sociology*. Prahran (VIC): re.press.

Veblen, Thorsten (1899/1994) *The theory of the leisure class*. New York: Dover Publications.

Wagner, Izabela (2011) Jedno wielkie chałturzenie. *Uniwersytet Warszawski. Pismo Uczelni*, April, 20-23.

Warren, Roland L.; Rose, Stephen M.; i Bergunder, Ann F. (1974) *The structure of urban reform: Community Decision Organizations in stability and change*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

Wedlin, Linda (2006) *Ranking business schols: Forming fields, identities and boundaries in international management education*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Wedlin, Linda (2011) Going global: Rankings as rhetorical devices to construct an international field of management education. *Management Learning*, 42(2): 199-218.