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From dualisms to dualities: On researching creative processes in the arts and sciences¹

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Introduction

Creativity and organization are usually considered as contradictory or even paradoxical (e.g. DeFillippi et al., 2007), not only in the arts but also in the sciences. For creativity implies the creation of something novel and, at least potentially useful (Shalley et al., 2004) and, as such, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for innovation widely praised to guarantee the survival of organizations if not societies. Creativity is traditionally assumed to be fostered by individual freedom and slack resources. By contrast, organization – or organizing – with its emphasis on formality, rules, routines and systemness does not seem to foster but rather to hinder the unfolding of creativity in time and space.

While temporary as well as partial forms of organizations are considered principally more supportive in this respect (Burke and Morely, 2016; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2018), I will argue in the following that any analysis of creative processes in and across organizations has to focus on both freedom and constraints – as well as on the tensions and contradiction arising from there, no matter whether these are of a truly paradoxical nature or not. Any process research on creativity, of a strong or more moderate nature (Fortwengel et al., 2017), should not only study “patterns in *events*” (Langley, 1999: 692) but focus on the interrelating of the two poles of the tensions, more appropriately conceived as a duality than a dualism. For Giddens (1984), whose work has been quite well received by economic geographers with respect to his concept of duality of structure and agency (e.g. Bathelt and Glückler, 2014), a

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duality is a melding of opposites. In more concrete terms, and following the definition by Graetz and Smith (2008), a duality comprises “the simultaneous presence of competing and ostensibly contradictory” (p. 270) properties, *not unlike* in a paradox. Ashforth and Reingen (2014), in a recent study of the relationships of idealist and pragmatists in a natural food cooperative, not only build on this definition and differentiation. Rather, these authors rightly emphasize that “the notions of ostensible contradiction and unified whole provide more conceptual space for exploring how the elements may in fact be complementary” (p. 475). With regard to such complementarities, or even supplementaries in a Derridean sense, including the more often than not productive role of (even self-imposed) constraints in creative processes (Ortmann and Sydow, 2018), we do need a more reflective and balanced account of organization and organizing – one which was already asked for by Adler and Borys (1996) more than two decades ago with regard to the enabling and constraining effects of bureaucratic structures.

In fact, the four papers accepted for publication in this themed issue reflect to a large extent the long-needed move towards recognizing the importance of such a focus on tensions and contradictions as dualities (Farjoun, 2017). As correctly emphasized by Hautala and Ibert (2018) in their introduction to this theme issue these papers even share a processual approach to such dualities. In what follows, I will recap the tensions which not only of the four papers but also the commentary by Grabher (2018) address and inquire into exactly how they address them, for instance by unearthing the concepts these authors mobilize to theorize them. I will conclude that, from an organization theory perspective, economic geography seems on a good way to a more balanced and conflict-sensitive, even dialectical process understanding of creativity and organization that could well be pushed a bit further into this direction by not only considering tensions and contradictions as conditions and

outcomes of organizing for creativity but also as important *means*. In addition, a more explicit study of tensions and contradictions and their role in creative processes in arts and sciences *across* different levels of analysis may be useful. At the same time, organization research has, despite some attempts to consider spatiality more seriously (e.g. Clegg and Kornberger, 2006), to learn a lot from economic geography about the multidimensional character of spatiality of creative processes.

Four Papers and One Commentary

Brinks, Ibert, Müller and Schmidt (2018) investigate the role of serendipitous and purposeful mobility in creative processes in three distinct domains: biotechnology, legal services, and board games, thus comparing creative processes across artistic and scientific knowledge domains. Interestingly, the authors take a multidimensional, relational approach not only to creativity but also to ignorance by distinguishing cultural, social and temporal dimensions of both. Brinks and colleagues contrast ignorance – their core concept – with the role of knowledge in innovation. Knowledge – or knowing (Orlikowski, 2002) – has received much, perhaps too much attention in economic geography over the last two decades. The authors argue for being more sensitive towards the role of the contrary: unrecognized as well as specified ignorance. Moreover they allow for purposeful and serendipitous search which, as the authors correctly point out, sometimes overlap (e.g. in the case of sabbaticals or conferences as forms of “organized serendipity”). And the authors consider both, not unlike intended and unintended mobility, important for a better understanding of the time-spatial dynamics of collaboration for innovation. Brinks and colleagues (2018) give a convincing example for the duality capturing of their approach: “For instance, purposive search in one creative process can lead to serendipitous discovery related to another process of inquiry” (p. XXX).

Juxtaposing ignorance and knowledge opens the door for dealing with tensions in creative processes more generally. According to the authors, such processes typically start with overlapping local opportunities that allow participants, who are unaware of their ignorance, serendipitous encounters in local vicinity. Once the ignorance has been specified, mutual attraction across distance is possible due to augmented reciprocal awareness and participants may initiate and maintain even long-distance relationships. Ignorance or not-knowing, no matter whether unrecognized or specified, certainly constraints collaborative creativity but, at the same time, also enables interactions to produce something novel and potentially valuable as “it influences the ways in which actors search for external resources and use space in order to benefit from spatially and socially distributed learning opportunities” (p. XXX).

Lam (2018) investigates careers crossing the boundaries between professional arts and academia, more often than not requiring some of the spatial mobility studied by Brinks and her colleagues (2018). Lam, in her study of professional artists in design, drama, music, and media arts, emphasizes the tensions arising from more or less familiarity with not only the two distinct domains (e.g. arts and sciences, academia and practice), but also more generally between structure and agency when she distinguishes between role-taking and role-making (only mentioned) and brings role (focus on structure) and identity (focus on self-concept) together. Thereby Lam rightly emphasizes the need to acknowledge agency not only in the study of “hybrid role identities” including the mutual constitution of role and identity. Rather, by referring to networks as structures and network brokering as agency and by emphasizing agency of career actors and psychological aspects of spatial mobility, Lam explicitly addresses the ongoing under-emphasis of agency in network research (Tasselli et

al., 2015), thereby moving this research, not unlike others in the realm of creativity (e.g. Long Lingo and O'Mahoney, 2010), more into the direction of dualities.

Towards this end, Lam emphasizes the need for familiarity with the worlds of arts *and* science (and academia *and* practice) and proposes the concept of “third space of hybridity” (Bhabba). This third space constitutes the boundary-crossing locale where actors are prone to deal with tensions arising from engaging with different domains. Two kinds of third space emerge from her empirical research: (1) “organic hybrids” where careers in arts and academia overlap and where the resulting ‘overlapping spaces’ are an unintentional byproduct of intentional actions; and (2) “intentional hybrids” where artists-in-academia make “conscious efforts to construct ‘transitional spaces’ to bridge the two previously separated domains” (p. XXX). Hybridization, i.e. the active (re-) production of hybridity, here at the boundaries between existing knowledge domains on a chosen career path, is obviously a concept thriving research towards the recognition of tensions and contradictions in the study of “creative generativity of boundary spanning ties” (Dokko et al., 2014).

Vermeulen (2018) also develops a deeply processual approach looking at the emergence of system biology as a new, more holistic field of multi- or interdisciplinary inquiry, combining among others wet/laboratory and dry/computational approaches. This processuality is reflected not only in the author’s talk of a “choreography of a new research field” and its specification around aggregation, circulation and oscillation of new, interdisciplinary knowledge. Rather, it is also reflected in her use of social movement theory, applied to scientific/intellectual movements, and her acknowledgement of the role of space that, in the process, may even be created, locally and globally.

Starting from the – for every organization researcher – fundamental tensions between differentiation and integration (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967), Vermeulen acknowledges stickiness in movements as much as the role of decentering in centering, despite her overall finding that “the choreography of systems biology shows how different local configurations of research have combined in a more or less coherent international movement, shifting systems biology from the periphery towards the center of research into life and making it a global scientific fashion” (p. XXX). These two dualities, stickiness/movement and de-centering/centering open space for variety and multiplexity of oppositional movements leaving room for agency and ambivalence in more or less creative institutionalization or ordering processes necessarily situated in space which enables and constrains them.

The paper by Barnes (2018) provides a geographical history of geography: the writing and publication of two very different but equally creative books by American geographer William Bunge. For explaining the creativity of Bunge, Barnes makes use of Koestler (1964) who, in *The Act of Creation*, sees the clash of incompatible frames of meaning – and its resolution by an act of creation – as the root of any understanding of creativity. But according to Barnes Koestler forgot – as many researchers of creativity and innovation outside economic geography – about the fact that creative acts do not only take place in time but are also a spatial affair. “Creativity is a geographical process” (p. XXX), even if one acknowledges that because of information and communication technology today “being there” may not as necessary for stimulating creativity as it used to be (Grabher et al., 2018).

Catalytic to both of Bunge’s acts of creation, the paper argues, were the marginal spaces in which this author lived, wrote and published; marginal in the sense that they were distant from mainstream American academic geography. While Barnes highlights the importance of the center/margin duality for Bunge’s creative writing he also identifies two other dualities

(‘double mindedness’ and ‘bi-sociation’) in Koestler’s (1964) classic. In the end, however, Barnes puts most emphasis on two other of Koestler’s concepts: blockage and ripeness. Barnes anchors these concepts in geographical relations and helps reformulating the role of constraining and enabling forces in creative processes in general – and in Bunge’s dodgy academic journey in particular. Barnes convincingly shows that Bunge’s creativity did not result from a heroic act of an isolated individual. Instead, it originated “in part organically, ecologically, from the rightly textured and provocative spaces that he inhabited” (p. XXX). But without the collision of two orthogonal frames of meanings in the process, however, these creative acts would most likely not have occurred.

In a final paper, flagged as a commentary, Grabher (2018) discusses the emergence and sustainability of a community of architects – *Baukünstler* from the provincial Austrian region of Voralberg – and highlights even more tensions than the authors of the other four papers: those between connectedness and disconnectedness, centrality and periphery, inclusion and exclusion, novelty generation and valuation. More specifically, Grabher demonstrates – not only in line with much creativity research (e.g. Cattani and Ferriani, 2008) but also Barnes’ (2018) argumentation – the enabling role of periphery which he, however, does not consider as given but created. In addition, Grabher argues for the importance central valuation, in this case performed by leading architecture historians and theoreticians, positioned in institutions of the center, and concludes:

“By emphatically disconnecting themselves from the established professional ethos of architects, the associations governing the architectural profession as well as the regional elites, the *Baukünstler* laid the foundations for architectural innovations. And although this movement is already in the third generation, the *Baukünstler*, rather than congealing into a hermetic and dogmatic school, morphed into an ever-evolving creative architectural field” (p. XXX).

Grabher mobilizes the concept of structural folds (Vedres and Stark, 2010), that is sensitive towards agents who not only really understand two different worlds via intensive social

interaction and deep immersion into the knowledge domain of the other. In contrast with network brokers who span only span the boundaries of these domains, this concept is more in line with the idea of individuals performing “nexus work” (Long Lingo and O'Mahony, 2010), aiming at synthesizing and integrating knowledge, which is often more important to manage tensions and contradictions in creative processes than just communicating ideas or transferring information via brokering ties.

Conclusions

Overcoming dualisms in favor of dualities is a long and demanding journey, in process theorizing about creativity in arts and science in economic geography as in organization research (Graetz and Smith, 2008; Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Sonenshein, 2016) – as much as in practice. Overcoming in particular the all too often still binary and rather static understanding of freedom and constraint, autonomy and control, center and periphery, continuity and change, etc. on only one level of analysis in favor of a more complex, dynamic and multilevel conceptualization of these relationships is an important starting point for studying and contrasting creative processes. In these processes, such tensions and contradictions should not only be understood as conditions and outcomes of – more or less creative – organizing. Rather such dualities should also be considered as the very means to arrive at novel and nevertheless valuable results, even if organizations – and otherwise organized spaces – are not necessarily prone to such tensions to the same degree. Such a more processual and comprehensive understanding would be necessary for studying creativity in the arts as well as in the sciences which, as argued by Hautala and Ibert (2018) in the introduction to this theme issue, provide not necessarily opposing, almost incomparable settings but rather ones in which their manifold interlinkages and overlaps deserve also to be considered a duality rather than a dualism.

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Bio

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