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FRANCESCO DONATO PERILLO
DAVIDE BIZJAK
AMELIA ROSA TUNDO

THE COMPANY
IN THE BACKPACK

ELMECO'S FROM VICO SAN LIBORIO
TO THE WORLD

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Luigi Maria Sicca

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*Arriving at every new city
the traveler finds a past of his that he no longer knew he had:
the foreignness of you, of what you no longer are or no longer possess,
lies in wait for you at the door in foreign, unpossessed places.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*¹

¹ Translator's Note: All translations by Amelia Rosa Tundo (t/n henceforth) unless otherwise noted, as in this instance (Calvino, 1974, pp 28-29).

Sgrunt. University and Business, *beyond* managerial and scholarly rhetoric

Luigi Maria Sicca*

Background. The classroom layout on the first day of class for a three-year Business Organization Course, one of those super packed courses, where students flock to scrutinize to understand first and study later, is always a *trigger event* for the boiled frog research experiment. Initially conducted at John Hopkins University in 1882¹, the story of boiling the frog resurfaced at the end of the Second Millennium in Daniel Quinn's novel *The Story of B* (1996, 266):

Systems thinkers have given us a useful metaphor for a certain kind of human behavior in the phenomenon of the boiled frog. The phenomenon is this. If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death.

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¹ During experimental research, a frog thrown into a pot of boiling water would jump out to safety. If the pot was full of cold water, instead, and was heated slowly and cost effectively, the frog would not jump to safety.

Students placed in that spot of the front row, will occupy it through the semester's end; those on the side of the aisle, the best in escape routes, their beanie-hats stuck low to tuck dark curls away or hide moles, shaven heads. And then, there is the same old they², one or more of them they, Sgrunt³, always in the back row.

That classroom is a text in the making (Sicca, 2010). It is similar to any other organization. It has a grammar of its own, a syntax that begs for a sign of interpretation, of construction.

If I were to rewind the tape of every first day of class over the years, the scene would always be more or less the same, year in year out, always with a variation on the theme. Just as it never lacked trends, ephemeral at best.

One such trend is the prevalent one carried forth by the generally accepted idea we have about the transition into the new millennium, and even endorsed by big communication players: the same trend that can be traced back to a sort of anxiety from "too much theory" and backed up by the acclaim "for a practical University", as if there were no epistemological leap between the former (theory) and the latter (praxis), a leap that is as physiological and inevitable as in need of being managed responsibly and with commitment.

² t/n: This is the first of several instances where Sicca utilizes an asterisk in the source-text: "il solit*, i solit*" to indicate gender-inclusion meant as men, women and a whole range of third gender persons whose identity ranges from fixed to fluid. Sicca is part of a new school of thought, one that is carrying into Italy and its highly binary, gendered language, an evolution that began long ago in a New York bar, Stonewall. In the same spirit, I translate the asterisk as "they is" where "they" stands for a person, whose value transcends all of society's affixed labels. Moreover, since I interpret the asterisk in the source-text as a visibility awareness signal, I shall include it in-between square brackets at each instance henceforth. I will do the same for "Mx", transgender and non-binary conforming persons' choice of personal title, by now legally accepted in various countries.

³ t/n: A disgruntled oh that's just fine! replica of sound as commonly found in Italian versions of Mickey Mouse comic strips.

Each one of us, in the areas of Economics or other fields, plays the teaching game as best as we can: we switch on our subjectivity and educational autonomy; we lay our cards on the table; we present our point of view and let our gaze on the world. It comes from the education we received and over time we articulated and shaped and, only some time later, we began to share from this side of the podium. Yet when back-row on the first day Mr/Mrs/Mx [*] Sgrunt slowly heads towards the podium to say their [*] piece, well, then yes, and this is true for just about anybody and everybody, the prophecy of the frog that knows how to avoid getting cooked actually becomes true, even if it doesn't exactly reach clambering out. It so happens then that Mr/Mrs/Mx [*] (Sgrunt/frog) ends up saving his/her/their [*] own life and thus, slowly, gives *meaning* back to the Institution that he/she/they [*] (Sgrunt/frog) takes on.

This is the background of *The Company in the Backpack. Elmeco's, from Vico San Liborio to the World*. The reader will find this story in the Storytelling recounted by Francesco Perillo, manager-writer lent to the University as well as in an all-academic Case Study by Davide Bizjak, a scholar of Organization and Human Resources Management who uses his researcher's lens to single out the key points of that narrative with the same wisdom of a craftsman's haute couture. It is the story of a firm and of life experience (Sicca, 2019), initially sparked by Mr/Mrs/Mx [*] cap-wearing Sgrunt who sat in the last row. It has since become the chance of an on-going, mutual and fruitful discussion between university and business. *Beyond* managerial and academic rhetoric. It is the very same outlook that had been Salvatore Cortese's. Known as "the little Archimedes" (Cortese, 2018) and as Elmeco's founder, he had always vividly hoped to see this book come to life. It is to Salvatore Cortese that Elmeco's second generation of entrepreneurs wants to dedicate this book.

The classroom experience. Asking students to “come forward” always goes well beyond the simple physical gesture of coming forward from the rear of the classroom. For me, this call on students means bringing up ideas, topics, food for thought, an opportunity for discussion during my courses. This call for me explores at least a couple of attitudes. The first regards motivating students to get-in-the-game and participate (after all, college students are just about done with their school training and a step away from the working world). The other attitude does, perhaps, aim at deeper dynamics as it attempts to make as human as possible how life is experienced in an organization, outside the classroom context, and thus bring to life the black ink on manuals’ pages, making it real, matching what happens in the classroom with what happens in the organizations that we all experience daily, even if this simply occurs as customers (Piro et al., 2018). It so happened that during the 2014/15 Academic Year, I met Umberto Cortese. He was on the same boat as *Sgrunt* and was his fishing buddy as well. Very cautiously, Mr. Cortese came forth to suggest a company history that I turned into an extra learning opportunity for our course. As a matter of fact, I did not stop at merely meeting this entrepreneur in my Department to learn the story that I was later to report to the students. I actually turned it into a project work. I first introduced the company and defined a tiny problem that concerned only it. I then created subgroups whom I entrusted to diagnose, using a clinical method (much like a medical doctor does with a patient) (Norman, 1977; Schön and Argyris, 1974; 1978), an organizational process and therapy prescription (if any were needed) or suggestions for intervention, aimed at Elmeco’s direct interest. By doing so I was *putting-to-work* categories from a Manual of Organization and Human Resources Management. They were to have a hands-on learning experience, learn *how to*, which is technique, or rather *technè* (τέχνη) another word for art in ancient Greek. Knowledge acquired by trusting one’s own senses:

- how can the need for a return on short-to-medium investment, one that creates value for the customer and consumers, be combined with a long-term vision for the general public, while influencing production processes and taking risks on the increase of production costs?
- how to manage the relationship with suppliers, logistics and components supply chain?
- how is assistance to be handled, namely those highly critical moments in the life-cycle of the relationship between Elmeco and struggling customers? And, how can the firm deliver “certified” solutions needed not only for a *green label* stamp but also to create programs and strategies that are sustainable?

These questions are the result of an emplotment (Czarniawska, 2004) that comes up from its roots to a high soaring artifact: [and/or artefact whose meaning here is intended as] *artis* and *factum*, made to perfection, something that only art can produce, a piece of artwork that emerges from a transformation process that is intentional on the part of those who have authored this book; just as it is from the observation point that each of them brings in: the one of a long-term manager lent to academia (Francesco D. Perillo), who employs Storytelling as his leverage device; the observation perspective of a young researcher (Davide Bizjak) who relies on the more established tradition of the Case Study, with a resource as valuable as a cameo within the management education tradition of Business Schools imprinted on the North American model; and, for the English version of this book, the voice of our Italian-American translator, whom I shall introduce in Part IV below. This brings me to the next point in which I will focus on the observation and analysis of the business experience, the two methods that the reader will find *put-to-work* throughout the book. This is because for us at puntOorg, a single method is often too little and, where two methods help to understand a little better what we handle, the third is entrusted to readers' free

interpretation, in Weber's sense of "[man is an] animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun" (Geertz, 1973): a reading entrusted to Perillo, Bizjak and Tundo and their respective interpretation process. Akin to native subjects of tribes that an anthropologist studies, they have respectively moved freely within their own system of meanings, leaving readers with the task of "explicating explications" (Geertz, 1973). It is within this space, within the powerfully creative force of the reading gesture that innovation is generated, beyond any certainty at all, with a strong foothold on the innovative potential that comes from the classical world: *Et pour cela préfère l'Impair* (Sicca, 2012: 83).⁴

* * *

Bringing changes about means experiencing strong emotions, modifying one's own beliefs, revising one's own mental schemes, being ready to question oneself and daring, so as to get into a new and often somewhat undefined path. But it also means becoming persons who bring forth new demands, people who motivate others into change, people who generate novelties.

Each person in charge, along with their managerial community, is the flywheel of processes dealing with organizational change in businesses wishing to keep the pace up

⁴ This is the second verse of Paul Verlaine's "Poetic Art [whose English translation by Eli Siegel reads: And for this like the Odd more]." It is the manifesto of that tendency to enhance symbolism, [a tendency] that rises from one of the crises of reason and from a deep distrust that reason can rationally describe life, and man, and – in our time – those places (we call "companies" where most of today's contemporary activity emerges, develops and proliferates. I invite all of us, then: students, scholars and readers alike to go beyond formal rationality and seek "dissonance", always. I also invite us not to settle for the making-do [Neapolitan: *appareare*], in the pure sense of this verb, as we are used in the dialect tradition(s) of Naples and Campania. This is because it is in the odd count that lies the essential restlessness that guides what is occurring "simultaneously", [namely] research and innovation from any time period and from anywhere.

with the continuous cycles of transformation. Indeed, they avail themselves of communication, both within the organization and in addressing stakeholders, to be their key competence because it can boost and reverberate the company's ability to renew itself and compete.

Storytelling has this precise objective: to spread and develop awareness and core competencies within the managerial community to facilitate and convey change.

Storytelling is foremost a process that individuals use to structure their personal experiences, place them in order by connecting the stages and phases of their personal development. This is not so much a cognitive-rational process as it is mainly emotional: their convergence triggers the effectiveness of this device now in readers' hands, both in terms of training where behavioral skills are concerned and in terms of communication and promotion of one's own image and of the Self.

In *recounting our story*, we are indeed taking stock of our lives, which are also the subject of an enterprise, and thus rich in epic connotations. Epics comes from *épos* (ἔπος): word, speech, story. Something narrated, anyhow. A firm *narrating itself*: the reflective mood of the [Italian] verb "to narrate" shows that a firm may be of interest to students or scholars of economics and management who want to learn about it from the outside. Yet, it may also be so for entrepreneurs or managers who rather than studying the firm, experience it from the inside. It may interest just about anyone with the tools to read and write about organizations, or that wants to acquire them, in order to interpret and to build. It can be done by re-appropriating oneself of resources and discovering new ones. All in all, *recounting their own story* motivates entrepreneurs to redefine themselves, their work and life environment and to become more aware of it.

Knowing how to do it is essential and Perillo is a master at it. As with any competencies, Storytelling too requires practice, willingness to test one's own abilities, patience in refining

one's craft the artisan's way. Knowing how to narrate involves communication, empathy, authenticity and fluidity, vocabulary and technical language.

One of the best features of knowing how to tell a story is that it can transform an otherwise impersonal and boring topic and give life to it. So then, why not extend narration to express (and promote) a firm's *way of being*?

If we accept the premise *à la* Senge that a firm is as alive as a human being, then it can tell its own story, rediscover its founding values and promote itself. More than a video or a commercial which are decidedly aimed at a traditional marketing operation, a novel with its characters, facts and documents can tell us a lot about something that does not really come across through analytical writing or, even more simply, it is clear but has to be left *unspoken*. A style, happily applied by Francesco Perillo in this text, that opens the way for two plans of effectiveness for the company: inside because it directs the *mood* and sense of belonging of employees who identify with it; outside because it conveys, in an emotion-based and credible way, the company's brand and all of its intangible assets that go from values to people to processes to the innovative nature of its products.

Economy is becoming more and more an economy of experiences. *Customer experience* is in our days the most frequently used way to capture customers in their purchase decision. Storytelling may therefore be included in this line of business development through active and an emotion-based involvement. The narrator's story must somehow meet the story of what is told; or, at the very least, it must leave trace of it. There is nonetheless a trap to avoid. This very same trap, however, marks the distinction between a valid Storytelling and its reduction to manipulation: the fine line that separates reality from fiction must be firmly manned. Perillo knows this well. A well-told story, through an object libido on reality, creates dependency and tends to stretch the quantity of space allotted

to imagination, so that reality and fiction blend together. Fiction in the pages that follow is finely kept from any manipulative temptation: Perillo does not take advantage of it; instead, he plays on the “suspension of disbelief” which good narrative induces in readers and listeners alike since the first-person narrator is always an alert critic over the narrating one.

There’s no overdoing in Elmeco’s story: the reader gets emotionally involved as he goes through the story; and, even if the firm’s epic component gets exalted, it is delivered to stakeholders rooted in facts and in its authenticity.

That’s what Storytelling is: it is incompatible with the sleep of reason that generates monsters. And the monster, in this case, is the illusion of being an individual or an organization that, when faced with reality, dissolves or crumbles like a house of cards.

* * *

Not (solely) for ethical reasons but for business sustainability reasons, knowledge comprehension for us at puntOorg must duly go through the pluralistic model whose *ways* have not necessarily been modeled already (in spite of Etymology). When researchers at puntOorg International Research Network want to become familiar with a company, they adopt an assorted variety of observation lenses: it is at this point, in Part Two of this text, that Davide Bizjak steps in with a Case Study whose method, now a stable point of reference, has increasingly become more consolidated from the second half of the Fifties on, both in research and in Management education. Indeed, fields of studies dealing with companies and with organizational studies in particular, need more than ever the interweaving of stable methods just as much as they need methods capable of raising doubts.

* * *

The educational reform of the Italian university system, despite the quite many hesitations and the off-and-on positions that the Legislator has taken, demands that we reconsider the relationship between theory and practice at the basis of learning as well as the resulting texts that we are to suggest to university students and to managers in the field. This general observation refers back to the professional skill profiles that companies require in the face of a labor market regulation that has undergone a number of shifts. Indeed, these have ranged from a permanent establishment to being somewhat unstable to then again regaining stability, even *by decree*, in Italy as well, around the concept of flexibility and of competitiveness of the Country-System in contexts that, despite being international, are finding themselves rapidly shrinking, due to the paradigm shift that Information Technology has brought about in coming into the daily life of each and all of us.

In Part III of this text, the aim of Davide Bizjak's Case Study is to provide tools that are consistent with the acquisition of professional skills. These application skills have their roots in the management tradition that bloomed in Italian Business Schools during the post World War II Era while they were importing (even in vocabulary but above all else in the most intimate part of the language) the rational military logic, from the time when former American officers began to take over, as winners, the Department Chairs of the most prestigious Business Schools: to name but one, the Canadian Edgar Schein, Organizational Psychologist and prominent professor at Harvard, an enduring point of reference, for however much a fount of criticism (Gagliardi, 1996), for those firmly interested in Organizational Culture.

The organizational diagnosis that Bizjak suggests, purposely limiting it to aspects already expounded in Perillo's Storytelling, highlights a fundamental point I wish to hand to the reader in closing my remarks: if it is true that to understand anything about firms, we have no exclusive recipes; if it is true that the

failure of the *one best way* concerns not solely production modes (industrial and/or service) but also the processes of thought building, it is then also true that methodological pluralism (and the underlying epistemological hypotheses, even divergent ones) can represent a lifebuoy so as not to shipwreck in the face of excesses of either optimism or pessimism when faced with the complexity of change: something in between the naivety of *neophilia* and the skepticism of *neophobia*, to call upon two key words from one of the first conferences that the early 1980s European-born and raised Scientific Society (SCOS: Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism) brought to the New World at the ASCOS 2008 in Australia (Sicca e Viscardi, 2008).

“The Company in the Backpack. Elmeco’s, from Vico San Liborio to the World” is two-fold. The first is the thoughtful and narrating gaze of the Storytelling whose line of reasoning favors likelihood over demonstration (true/false). The second is the view of the Company Case Study. Similar to a tailor, this view focuses deliberately on some (not all) of the dimensions of the analysis and fits them with features from the formal rationality that is typical of the Management Studies tradition; in so doing, it offers the opportunity to advance, inch after inch, towards making the University-Firm debate into a virtuous cycle. [A debate] that will move beyond the managerial and academic rhetoric. One that will rise, from the ground, up until it will soften, make less skeptical, more realistic and gentler the disenchanting sound of the usual and rhetorical *Sgrunt*.

* * *

The emplotment (Czarniawska, 2004) in this volume necessarily needs to go beyond the language boundaries of Naples and of Italy. This is where Italian-American translator Amelia Rosa Tundo steps in to bring the message across to the English readership. While aware of the potential risks of the

Italian “translator-traitor” rhyme, so eloquently expounded by Umberto Eco (Eco, 1994, p. 20), her challenge is move across “webs of significances” in the source text (namely Perillo’s, Bizjak’s and mine [Sicca’s]) and provide the reader with her own “explicating explications” (Geertz, 1973). To do so, she relies on her US scholarly training in the Humanities and her translating experience. Yet Ms Tundo also brings in her own cultural and linguistic web whose “oddity” (Geertz, 1973; Verlaine, 1968) goes as far back as her childhood. Indeed, although US-raised, Ms Tundo was born in an oral-tradition only hamlet that is still a Langue d’Oc speaking linguistic-island: Guardia Piemontese, Calabria (settled by Occitans from northeastern Piedmont in the 1200s). Moreover, she comes from a culturally mixed family as the anecdote that she recounts to me. Her maternal grandfather was from a town nearby, spoke his own dialect and, in the early 1920s, married her Langue d’Oc-speaking grandmother. Some 50 years later, in the 1970s, to her paternal, Langue d’Oc-speaking grandmother, he was still orally referred to something that Amelia believes can be transcribed as “straqué”. In the hamlet that survived thanks to its self-seclusion and in an ancient language with no written code, the only shred of meaning left for the elusive *straqué* was something along the lines of “the man from across the river, the one that owns no home”. The elusive, untranslatable and yet excluding nature of this event is one of the drives behind her intentional transformation process to be fair and inclusive to the best of her human capabilities.

Wishing to enhance this inclusive value, and to provide a further glimpse into the complexities of both the Neapolitan dialect and the vital role it has had in the city’s life, PuntOrg has entrusted Ms Tundo to author Part IV of this volume for the English readership. Namely, the brief Glossary consists of a quick chapter-by-chapter reference guide of names and places as they occur in Perillo’s *Storytelling*. It includes Neapolitan expressions that in-text have been transcribed and translated in-

between square brackets. At times, it provides a brief explanation of people's nicknames. Most often, however, it enriches Perillo's Storytelling with entries about places. To compile them, Ms Tundo has used online references as well as her personal knowledge of Naples. It is in this culturally complex world of Naples that Elmeco's is as strongly rooted as it is to carrying its entrepreneurial culture of the Made in Italy into the World.

Coming into contact with the complexities of names and places and how these have been managed through the translation process, an otherwise "traitor" act (Eco), will give readers the chance to read the story while having a more in-depth grasp of its peculiarities within a system of meanings and its way of being an Italian player within internationalization.