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# Knowledge Gambles: Academic Casinos and Paradigmatic Roulettes

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Works of art and educational products are being marketed. In order to reach the upper segments of consumers they have to be packaged and advertised. Gentrifying cultural consumption of art can easily be compared to the upgraded and commercialized forms of the individualized mass education. Once upon a time the European social democrats opened up the "gardens of artistic treasures" and "gardens of educational advancement" to the masses. Malraux dreamed of an imaginary museum belonging to everybody. Popular access, however, changed the museum and the university more than expected. «The map of the museum had to be remade, its calendar adjusted to the latest beginning» (Lyotard, 1999: 305). Masses came, but failed to become passive consumers of artistic values prescribed by cultural elites. Today's musea are catering to the broader public and entering the emergent networks of virtual exhibition spaces, but artistic values are as prone to crises as shares on a stock exchange. Likewise, in the last quarter of the century, Trojan horses of the expanding forms of university-level education and of the MBA programs entered the turreted walls of the universities. Macdonaldization and lasvegasification of higher education followed. Pragmatic checklists and multiple choice tests replaced methodological apprenticeship and individual research assignments. Open and flying universities, virtual universities and faculties multiply and inhabit the educational earth. The roulette tables have also been turned in the academic casinos of universities, associations, conferences, networks, publications and the like: paradigms started winning and losing without metaphysical guarantees and without methodological credit cards. The metaphor of knowledge gambles appears to offer much better insights into the daily processes within complex, knowledge-intensive casinos (where governments and companies bet on future outcomes) than the metaphor of organizational learning, which coloured the vocabulary of organizational sciences at the turn of the century.

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## ACADEMIC CASINOS

«Today no one expects teaching, which is discredited everywhere, to train more enlightened citizens—only professionals who perform better. (...) The acquisition of knowledge is a professional qualification that promises a better salary. (...) This point of view only allows defensive and local interventions» (Lyotard, 1993: 6-7).

With the emergence of the MBA programs offered by schools of management usually attached to the universities (or at least staffed by the academic professionals with university credentials), new stakes in educational games have emerged. Do they justify the above statement by one of the leading representatives of the postmodernism? After all,

the very term “postmodernism” has been first used by him in a paper commissioned by the Canadian educational authorities. Let us examine the difference between an “enlightened citizen” and a “trained professional” whose knowledge and skills have been upgraded. An enlightened citizen is supposed to contribute creatively to the quality of social life (for instance by making informed choices in the democratic processes), while a trained professional is supposed to perform more efficiently (for instance by increasing the amount of available goods and services). However, the definition of an enlightened citizen presupposes an opposition between a majority of unenlightened “plain folks” and a minority of “sophisticated professionals” who had access to the higher enlightening influences (exerted by the higher academic institutions, to which only a certain percentage of citizenry could be admitted). Education towards supreme enlightenment becomes more valuable when an institutional development guarantees scarcity but promises to remove it. However, scarcity cannot be sustained, if modern telecommunicational technologies make it possible to expand higher education and put it within the reach of those, who would otherwise be prevented from purchasing educational services by temporary, spatial, social or educational obstacles. And if a promise of educational advance for the masses can be kept (by proliferating the number of educational games in academic and para-academic casinos)—the elitist status which allows “winners” (owners of diplomas) to control values—disappears. The very success of Enlightenment and social democracy in promoting higher education and in making it available to the broader masses changes the social perception of higher education and its relevance as a status symbol.

To be enlightened after a successive enlargement of the army of diploma-holders means that earlier dreams of upward mobility are bound to be frustrated. A single visit to an educational casino is not enough—theories of “permanent education” have thus been launched by the specialists in education (owners of academic casinos) to assure customer loyalty, continuous supply of demand for knowledge products. One becomes a member of a growing “class” of professionals—but one refuses to see this group as a class. “Middle class” serves as a universal label with very unsharp contours and uncertain solidarities managed mostly by professional associations and peer control. Membership in relatively small elites (tenured professors, professional deans and university presidents, chief editors, chairpersons of prestigious networks) depends on power struggles and personal reputation management among the personnel of academic casinos. The fact that someone has successfully collected university diplomas does not automatically confer social authority—the present day mandarins cannot reinvent a class solidarity of the past intelligentsia, nor is the job market ready to automatically recognize it.

A shift of interest from a postgraduate Ph.D. to a postgraduate MBA is a case in point. Ph.D. was (and to a large extent still is) an elitist title available only to relatively few individuals, while an MBA is a title available to a much broader class of individuals. Ph.D. course is a poker table, MBA program is a one-armed bandit. The acquisition of an MBA

requires simply following a standardized program. The acquisition of a Ph.D. is linked to a much more idiosyncratic apprenticeship within the professional community of researchers. This is the crucial difference. MBA diploma can be won without a prolonged apprenticeship in the authoritarian communities of academic excellence and without a life-long commitment to them and it makes one eligible for a broad array of jobs, none of which has to bear any relationship to the academia.

Teaching is thus “discredited”, but only from the point of view of someone who expects academic teaching to confer an elitist status—not from the point of view of someone who expects teaching to result in upgrading of professional skills and enlargement of the body of knowledge (conferred upon members of a growing “middle class” of professionals) in order to increase personal chances on a job market.

It is no coincidence that an almost forgotten term “class” springs back to life as we try to understand the difference between the new games played in academic casinos nowadays and the games which used to be played before a dramatic growth of educational services after WWII. In the first half of the century most of the political “leftists”, “progressives” or “socialists” called for a universal access to education. What they meant in the context of their political programs was a universal access to at least a basic level of educational services (let every child play and see how fat he or she gets). With middle-level education slowly becoming a universally accessible service in the developed societies (though perhaps at the expense of the new urban underclass excluded from it), the higher (university-level) and permanent (continuous upgrading schemes) education became focal points of social and political struggles. Part-time educational programs allow working people to become university diploma holders. Holders of university diplomas can continue their educational gentrification by paying for post-graduate education. However, numbers mean the loss of “aura” of university diplomas (Walter Benjamin has already regretted the loss of “aura” of a work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction, cf. Benjamin, 1985). MBA diploma resembles an advanced driving license in an information society, not a royal act of gentrification—not raising to the ranks of intellectual nobility. One becomes more mobile in the knowledge space, but one does not acquire property rights to any province of knowledge (as is still the case with the Ph.D.s who are knighted in their province of scientific knowledge).

There is an interesting historical analogy between this loss of social status of a university-level education (an unintended consequence of a dramatic spread of educational services and of their growing accessibility) and a rapid loss of a social status of art (an unintended consequence of a dramatic spread of the real and imaginary musea and of the growing accessibility of art to the general public). When critics and artists dreamed about opening the “palaces” of art to a general public, they tacitly assumed that art will continue to play the role it did in the past, when access to the works of art was limited and when art could be significant in demonstrating and maintaining status differences. Success in breaking down the class barriers and in broadening access to the works of art contributed to the growth of virtual exhibition spaces

and to the increased mobility of the works of art in social communications—but it also contributed to the blurring of differences between “high” and “low” art and to the loss of a status function of artistic consumption. After a prolonged, continuous mixing of highbrow and lowbrow cultural products consumers end up with a “nobrow” mix (whose value for taste distinctions disappears as quickly as the aura of a reproducible, objectless, happening-like experience-triggering modern artistic “statements” or “constructions”).

Paraphrasing Bourdieu one might say that cultural capital does not get accumulated in a way which would give rise to neat social distinctions—random portfolios of individual investment of attention, study and cultural competence-building include valuation of high, low and accidental artistic forms, collected with no status strategy in mind. Moreover, collecting “objects” of art becomes less widespread than collecting aesthetic experiences—which, again, demonstrates that what matters in modern cultural space is mobility and ability to participate, not to appropriate and “own” (as in an expression “to own a collection”). Likewise, collecting successive educational diplomas and certificates does not follow a single pattern—some academic casinos have to be visited, some games won, but then, the acquired knowledge and skills have to be mixed with tacit organizational knowledge and exploited for collective and individual success. Individuals are learning how to pack their knowledge and skills and transplant them quickly to another organizational setting in order to reap higher benefits from investing the “wins” from an academic casino. Professional mobility increases, organizational loyalty decreases. Knowledge, packaged and served by academic casinos to winners becomes as volatile and mobile as capital and labour. Educational services increase our mobility. Have we, indeed, become nomads of the present, roaming the virtual cyberspaces of future organizational networks, exploring those regions of information space which knowledge industry did not colonize yet (I am using the term “information space” in the sense defined by Max Boisot [1995])?

## **PARADIGMATIC ROULETTES**

God may not play dice, but academic gurus do. It would be hard to expect otherwise, since the academic casinos have repeatedly been subjected to the knowledge process re-engineering. Re-engineering usually assumes the form of a methodological struggle and is fought over the paradigms in research and curriculae in teaching. The post-Popperian problems with relativism defended by Feyerabend emerged when it had turned out that Popper’s falsificationism could not salvage the neopositivist doctrine. The explosion of recent postgraduate MBA programs demonstrated that a pragmatic, flexible and mass-reproduced curriculum could emerge in the academic environment (in spite of the professional and bureaucratic resistance). Is it surprising that a different social function of academic diplomas and of the postgraduate teaching becomes reflected in a new paradigmatic world order (of the

academic world, which has to water down its monopoly on the most advanced educational products)?

Continuous chaotic movements of organizations, institutions and companies in the information space erased the distinctions between upward social mobility and downward degradation based on educational status. There is no point in climbing to the elitist top if there is a whole army of climbers, with almost equal chances for success. Their sheer numbers turn what used to be an elite corps into a huge, mass-based conscript army. Similar erasing in the political sphere blurred the traditional distinctions between a left and a right, or in economy, the distinctions between a managed, state-controlled and liberal, company-driven industrial policy. In academic casinos, the old hierarchies ("monarchistic neopositivists") with a dominant paradigm in power and the other paradigms ridiculed, marginalized, imprisoned or banned cannot maintain their monopoly and do not sit down to a roulette table with absolute certainty of winning each game.

The strange history of a social constructivism (Social construction of what? Of "Pandora's hope"!) is a case in point. Against the claims that there is a privileged realistic tradition in the academic institutions, and that this tradition allows to distinguish between "progressive" and "degenerating" research programs (as Lakatos [1970] had once suggested), social constructivists suggest that the methodological revolution accompanying the Enlightenment was based on an "extravagant", Kantian form of constructivism and on the elitist fear of the "mob rule" (which might follow in case methodological policing of the research communities was relaxed):

«If my friend's voice quivered as he asked me "Do you believe in reality?" it was not only because he feared that all connection with the outside world might be lost, but above all because he worried that I might answer "Reality depends on whatever the mob thinks is right at any time". It is the resonance of these two fears, the loss of any certain access to reality and the invasion by the mob, that makes his question at once so unfair and so serious.» (Latour, 1999: 7)

Research programs pursued in the departments of business management show the limits of a roulette as a mechanism of choice of the research programs (one wonders if there are cases of Russian roulette being played in the history of modern scientific communities). Which paradigms are being chosen? Which emerge victorious? The ones which stand a chance of being sponsored, financed and which are considered useful in furthering individual academic careers of the researchers (who come and go talking not of Michelangelo, but of instrumental reason, research communities and an on-going debate of the evolving collectives of researchers). Methodologies, however, are also chosen because of the abovementioned increased mobility of knowledge. The latter stimulated replacement of bureaucracies with networks (for research, educational and other purposes). A flexible network of researchers can sustain a research program and adds a new meaning to the catchphrase of a "learning organization" by demonstrating that professionals do not have to see the organizational ladders of standard careers as the only "game in town". Roulette

tables can be turned, and there are many different roulettes to choose from (if Mao was alive, he might have said "Let thousand roulettes bloom" on a state visit to Las Vegas). In the departments of organizational sciences of most schools of management one has, for instance, a choice between a massive, bureaucratic EGOS annual conference, and a much more informal, flexible, and smaller SCOS annual conference (the organizers of both tacitly recognize each other by scheduling their sessions so as to enable the researchers to attend both if they wish to do so).

Which flexible strategies do the researchers invent as they go ahead gambling for the growth of knowledge? Can their strategies contribute to the virtual mobilization of netizens (networked professionals, who demonstrate their enlightenment to the status of citizens)? Do their responsibilities begin with the dreams of storming the Cyberian Bastilles and of manning virtual barricades or do they dream of a peaceful coexistence of paradigms, whose followers compare their research results in virtual spaces traversed by empowered temporary coalitions rather than permanently structured groups? One thing is certain: both the conservative and the rebellious members of the research communities agree on experimenting with change and trying to make organizations learn. Here is the conservative statement to this effect followed by the rebellious one. Both refer to the same methodological flexibility and pragmatic twist, although they come from different paradigmatic environments. The former comes from an acknowledged academic authority in established organizational sciences, while the latter has been written by the contesting newcomers to the paradigmatic battlefield, namely the social constructivists:

«Manipulating the level of risk taking, or the salience of diversity relative to unity, or the amount of organizational slack is a conspicuous example of the ways by which history can be affected by changing the level of variation or the effectiveness by which lessons and opportunities of the environment are exploited» (March, 1999: 108).

«Alternative and new forms of democratic and eco-sustainable organizing and managing with social audits of human resources are here. (...) How to deconstruct status quo practice, explore and reverse the problematic hierarchies and then to resituate how the firm is managed? Resituate means learning new harmonies, new balances of power and freedom in a sustainable postmodern organization.» (Boje and Dennehy, 2000: 33).

The problem, however, is that both paradigms are sustainable and both can result in winning (or loosing) at the roulette table. How can we instruct a knowledge gambler?

## **GAMBLING ORGANIZATION**

Institutional casinos and paradigmatic roulettes point out towards the gambling organization. "Gambling" is as a better metaphor for what happens in most of the present organizations than "learning". It allows to understand the architectures of academic casinos and the strategies

of the paradigmatic communities. Still, most of the authors of managerial literature mention a learning organization as if there was a single most appropriate ideal type which all real organizations want to resemble. In spite of a growing literature on evolutionary developments in organizational forms even on a scale of a population and in spite of the growing awareness of the significance of unanticipated consequences and paradoxical outcomes (Jaffee, 2001)—very few stress the uses of the gambling metaphor. March mentions the cob-weblike organizations which in his conservative eyes resemble throw-away products, marriages or companies, and indeed some forms of educational services are probably closer to McDonald's than to a restaurant with a well-balanced menu. However, he does not give chance a chance and remains far from the gambling metaphor.

Modern neo-institutional economists add chapters on organizational learning to their handbooks, but fail to add that knowledge transfer, development of competence and management of meaning are highly risky gambles which make organizations closer to the casinos filled with roulette tables than to the orderly structures for exploring and exploiting knowledge. Frozen in and devoted to the transaction costs metaphor, most of the scientists assume that organizations' genetic codes and mortality rates can be reconstructed by the inventors of some new research program (organizational ecologists, tacit knowledge theoreticians, organizational culture and climate researchers or political economists of information space). However, universities and other academic casinos witness paradigmatic roulettes and wait for a "rien ne va plus" knowing there will be another turn since every theory is a fair game.

**Slawomir J. Magala** (Ph.D. philosophy of science, Poznan, Poland) is currently a professor of cross-cultural management at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. He has published numerous books, chapters, articles in *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management*, *Corporate Reputation Review*, etc., in the area of cross-cultural management, networking mode of organizational change and flexible governance structures within the global networks of states, markets and NGO's. His recent interests include the studies of paradigmatic gambles and management of knowledge and tradition.

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