Unlocking: what, when and for whom?

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Being invited to give a key note presentation is always a pleasure. But I was particularly happy to have been invited to prepare this speech at this EGOS conference with this theme. For unlocking organizations is doubly central to our profession. It refers to a central problem or dilemma of organized action, one that is at the heart of organizational thinking, one that has driven its development from the start: the non instrumental nature of organizations, their partial autonomy from the goals we define for them, their “recalcitrance,” to use Selznick’s term. And it also refers to a central task of our profession, which is trying to stay in touch with the world of practice and to help practitioners of organizations to better cope with this problem and to manage it at the best of their and our capacities.

Why am I speaking of a dilemma? For one simple reason: lock-ins do not just happen frequently in organizations, as might be understood in reading the introductory text to this conference. They are an inevitable by-product of collective action and organizing. The unfolding of any collective action indeed supposes the stabilization of patterns of interaction and the effective coordination of behavior. It is unthinkable without the cognitive, normative, material and political frames and structures capable of fixing and aligning behavior, creating routines and repertoires, imposing terms of reference and terms of legitimacy, in other words frames and structures able to guarantee a minimum of orderliness, of foresight and of trust in an otherwise chaotic and uncertain world.

What is a necessary mechanism of collective action, can however easily degenerate into real cognitive, normative and political traps where bureaucratic vicious circles reproduce inefficient internal dynamics and prevent any corrective feed-back through a realistic assessment of contextual conditions. Seen from this angle, lock-ins are really nothing new. On the contrary, they are as old as organizations and collective action, and they have preoccupied organizational thinking from the start. Selznick has called it the problem of bureaucracy, others in the wake of Lukes have called it organizational or structural bias, still others have called it the by-product of institutionalization. And the dilemma of organizational leadership is that it has to constantly unlock organizational dynamics, i.e. their innate tendency to become self-sustained, self-referential and unresponsive to reality, while knowing that it cannot just unlock, if collective action is to be successful or even feasible. The question therefore is not about unlocking in general and in the absolute. It is about gaining a better understanding of the nature of different lock-ins, of their consequences for the various stake-holders, and of the possibility to better manage the inevitable lock-ins on which collective action is based. In the rest of this keynote, I’ll try and address some of these different aspects of organizing as choosing and managing potential lock-ins.
TWO EXAMPLES OF LOCK-INS

First, let me give a couple of examples.

The first example is drawn from a firm in the food-processing industry - let us say for the sake of argument that the firm was dealing with the processing of apples and other fruit into preserves. Under normal conditions, in such an industry, the quality of the raw-material has a direct impact on the quality of its product. There is a problem however: the quality of the raw-material is highly variable and threatens the possibility of producing an end-product of equal and stable quality. In order to cope with this problem, the firm decided to strengthen its research lab and to recruit a young chemical engineer with the mission to get this problem under control. Under the impetus of its new manager, who luckily proved particularly competent, dynamic and resourceful, the research lab expanded. Very quickly, it developed some very focused competencies to compensate for the variations in the raw-material, thus enabling the firm to come up with a final product of unfailingly even quality. In due time the management of the firm had taken good notice that thanks to this resourceful chemist, the production process had become less dependent on the quality of its raw-material. This in turn had two consequences. One the one hand, requests for investment by the research department had a good chance to get accepted as the competencies of research had become central to the production process. On the other hand, the purchasing department, in its constant effort to buy as economically as possible, saw the situation as an opportunity to reduce the costs of raw-materials, thereby increasing the firm’s dependency on the ability of research to compensate for raw materials of lesser quality. A feedback loop was thus put into operation, creating an imbalance in the whole system and leading to considerable over-investment in research, i.e. in the sector which could provide a solution for the problem of making good preserves with raw materials of lower and lower quality. In this process, research ended up capturing most of the resources and prestige in the business, and had succeeded in dictating its terms (its cognitive frames, its problem definitions, etc) to the other sectors and to management. What it all amounted to was a clear goal-displacement that could be characterized as follows: the goal of the business (the way it framed its mission or its essential problem) was no longer just to make good preserves. The mission had implicitly become making good preserves out of rotten fruit.

The second example is drawn from a study by my colleague Henri Bergeron on the French public health policy toward drug use and drug addiction. It shows that it is not just organizations, but also complex inter-organizational systems (in this case a complex public policy field) that can become victims of a lock-in.
Roughly speaking, public authorities have the choice between two strategies to cope with drug consumption and drug abuse. The first one would be a causalist strategy, aiming to take action on the causes of drug-consumption, namely addiction. It can make use of different therapeutic techniques such as therapeutic communities, or methadone treatment with progressive withdrawal, or psychotherapeutic treatments trying to cure the personality problem causing the addiction. But in any case, its primary goal is to cure addiction by obtaining abstinence. The second strategy could be called consequentialist: here, the primary goal is not to cure addiction, but to cope with the social and medical consequences of drug consumption considered as a risky practice both for the addicts and for public health. In this perspective, among other measures (such as needle exchanges, first line aid centers, etc.), methadone treatment is considered as an appropriate indication not as an instrument for obtaining abstinence, but as a means to create the conditions for drug users to become re-socialized, thus enabling them to seek help with their respective health (aids, hepatitis C, etc.) and social problems (housing, a job, administrative registration, and so forth). Such a policy, that aims at reducing the public health hazards that drug addicts are exposed to and represent, is called harm reduction policy.

From the beginning of the eighties on, the situation of drug consumption in Europe worsened dramatically. Drug abuse increased sharply, with the moral, social and medical situation of addicts deteriorating rapidly, in particular under the impact of the aids epidemic and hepatitis C, that both took a particularly heavy toll on that population. Faced with this situation, the public policies for drug abuse in all West-European countries shifted from curative, abstinence seeking policies towards risk or harm reduction policies based on methadone substitution. Great Britain and the Netherlands took the lead. The others quickly followed suit, including Latin countries like Spain or Italy. By the second half of the eighties, the shift had been accomplished practically in all West European countries, with one exception, France. French public policy in the field remained as it had been: strictly curative. Its major goal was abstinence, and above all, there was by and large only one kind of therapy developed all over the territory: psychotherapy inspired by psychoanalysis. The two other major curative treatments (therapeutic communities and methadone treatment with withdrawal) were not present in the French health landscape. Only in 1995, i.e. a good six to ten years later than comparable societies in Europe, did the policy shift also occur in France, although then very rapidly.

These ten years of delay in adjusting to the new drug scene were costly in terms of lives and public health hazards. They can be understood as the symptom of a cognitive, normative and political lock-in of the system of individual and institutional actors cooperating in the implementation of the French public policy for drug abuse. Indeed, as we have been able to show in successive studies of local policy fields for drug abuse in the beginning of the ‘90ties, this system was increasingly disconnected from the reality of the drug scene and functioned in fact in a fantasy world. Although
the population of drug addicts increased sharply and became more and more de-socialized, the
frequentation of drug-centers actually dropped and competition for drug addicts intensified among
them. In the absolute, drug addicts were not rare. Their scarcity was relative: it concerned the number
of addicts that were ready to go through the relatively long and uncertain path of psycho-therapy and
that were thus acceptable for the system. Indeed the system had completely lost touch with reality and
had become increasingly self-referential. It functioned not to take care of the addicts as they were. It
functioned to select the clients that it was able to process.

These are two examples of lock-ins in very different settings. What do they have in common?
One could say that their common underlying structure is goal-displacement and what could be called
logical inversion of the means-ends relation. It is the story of frames having outlived their usefulness.
Set up to solve a problem, an organization or a policy system end up imposing their solution on the
problem, implicitly redefining and crystallizing the problem in due course.

How can we explain such situations. How can calculating and profit-maximizing managers
end up so clearly mis-investing scarce resources? How can intelligent and well-meaning social-
workers, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, public officials and the like go on acting as though the drug-
scene had not changed and the aids epidemic had not occurred? How can they go on clinging to a
therapeutic strategy that for outside observers was clearly out of touch with reality?

There are really two questions here that have to be distinguished. The first one concerns the
reasons why frames are adopted and become institutionalized. Peter Hall (1993) among others has
proposed a plausible theoretical account of how ideas win out. For him such a process typically
supposes a group of critical actors who, by taking advantage of their situation in a broader institutional
framework, succeed in forming a “dominant coalition” or a “policy network” able simultaneously

1. to define what is to be considered the “right and proper thing to do” in a given
situation or in the face of a given problem,

2. to incorporate them “into the standard operating procedures of key segments of the
relevant actor system” and

3. to have them absorbed into the world-views (the problem definitions, the logics of
action, the rationality) of those who manage these segments.

Even if ex post it may seem so by optical or historical illusion, this process is hardly ever
simple, linear and fully under control. On the contrary, it is a process full of path-dependencies, but
also surprise, coincidence, contingency, chance, unanticipated events and feedback-loops. It happens
more than it is planned. But once established it becomes a framework of reason and legitimacy. It becomes a guide to action. It becomes a matrix for path-dependencies.

However, the coming into existence of frames, potent as they may be as guides for action, is really beyond the scope of this exposé and I shall not discuss it any further. Frames per se are not lock-ins. They may and will become so only if and when they outlive themselves and their usefulness. How this can happen is the real question posed by lock-ins.

Let us put aside from the start explanations that would be based on bureaucratic perversions or on more or less sophisticated versions of structuralism where human action is explained by some impersonal and internalized pattern of domination generating false consciousness and alienation. If lock-ins were just a question of routine, alienation and social conditioning, there would not be much to say, and even less to do, about them. The problem lies elsewhere: all actors involved act in good faith. They all have their good reasons, and not just utilitarian reasons, to act as they do, to define problems in a certain way, to believe certain solutions to be adjusted to these problems. What are the mechanisms involved here?

With Herbert Simon (1947) and Raymond Boudon (1986, 1990), we can start by distinguishing between what he calls a “positional effect” and a “dispositional effect”.

The first one really opens a cognitive perspective. It holds that you see reality according to the position you occupy, that your position in a field of action (an organization) surrounds you with informational climates and provides you with instruments and action repertoires which will structure the reality you get to see. Typically, technicians from the research lab or the production lines of our food processing company had no trouble convincing themselves of the basic unreliability of the raw material they had to work with. And the strategy of the purchasing department certainly did nothing to alleviate this belief, quite to the contrary. By the same token, the professionals and experts working in the drug policy field typically did not encounter drug-addicts who were in such a poor shape in regard to their social and medical characteristics as to convince them to switch to a harm reduction policy. Such drug addicts only appeared in the treatment centers when and because that switch had already been operated. As has been shown in other areas, fields or organizations tend to select their appropriate clients whose characteristics in turn tend to confirm professional beliefs.

The second, or “dispositional effect”, which operates simultaneously, refers to the fact that theories or beliefs become progressively internalized and form a cognitive frame through which reality is interpreted in a specific direction and through which action is biased. For instance, from the psychoanalytic frame of reference, heroin addicts having undergone perhaps ten detoxifications and having been unable to sustain therapeutic treatment were not seen as proof that the prevalent treatment
strategy was not working. That incapacity was interpreted as the sign of the immaturity of drug addicts, who had not yet reached the stage where they could “freely demand” and also sustain such therapeutic treatment. And the conclusion drawn was not to modify institutional arrangements so as to accommodate a greater diversity of patients. It was to strengthen efforts to improve psychotherapeutic competences in the treatment centers and to help addicts to attain this stage of “free demand.”

Likewise, in our food-processing company, problems tended to become interpreted in terms of variability of the raw-material, and problem-solving strategies to become narrowed down accordingly: the strengthening of technical assistance for production, and the development of research into the structure of the raw-material.

“Dispositional effects” are partly the result of past experience and personality formation of actors: in this sense they refer to the “personal” bias with which one looks at situations. But they are also partly the result of sustained “positional effects”, in so far as an actor’s position in a field or an organization will format the experience she can accumulate and the learning that can take place. To this extent, “dispositional effects” are also the expression of positional biases that have become institutionalized.

Moreover, “positional” as well as “dispositional” effects have to be materialized. They are not only the product of ideas, beliefs and values; they are not only cognitive or normative in nature. They are the result also of bias incorporated in technologies, technical devices, instruments for measurement and control, management tools and other “investments in form”, as Laurent Thevenot has called them. In short, what is generally referred to as “the standard operating procedures of an organization or an organized system” includes ideas as well as material devices. It is all the more robust (and therefore potentially a source of lock-ins) as it has been successfully materialized and incorporated into technical devices. Ideas, beliefs and values act directly, in the head of actors. But they also, and perhaps mostly, work through material arrangements, instruments and technical devices.

However, there is one more central dimension to add. The good reasons actors have to perceive reality in a certain way and to act in the way they do, in other words their always bounded rationality, is always also structured by the way they think that their capacity of action (their interest) is linked to, and affected by, the problem-definition (the goal structure) that has emerged in the system. What is at issue here? In order for an organization to function, problems have to be solved or at least coped with: as such they are a constraint that we quite logically want to get rid off. But problems are also the stuff around which the interdependences are structured that link actors one to another. As I have shown elsewhere (Friedberg 1997) our relative relevance in the face of the problems that we share with our counterparts in an organization, will condition our relative importance (our relative capacity of action) in the field of action in which we are situated. The more our contribution is essential for coping with problems our counterparts have to solve in their work, the
better we will be able to negotiate the returns for our contribution. What this really means is this. Problems, problem-definitions as well as the “standard operating procedures” which have been materialized and institutionalized, always also have a **strategic dimension**, as they condition our capacity to pursue our interests (in whatever terms we would want to define them: strictly utilitarian or more open to axiological considerations).

We touch here upon a basic ambivalence that we all have in the face of problems and problem-solving. The problem-structure and the power-structure in a field of action (an organization) are the two sides of the same coin. In defining the problem or the mission of any structure of collective action (be it a formal organization, an inter-organizational system, a policy network or the like), one also defines its power-structure, i.e. the relative relevance of what the participants in this collective action are able to contribute. For all the participants involved, or at least for those who are the most relevant, the problems therefore are not just constraints. They become **central resources** in their dealings (in their bargaining) with the other participants. And as a resource, a problem is not just something to get rid off – it is something to be cherished, developed and if necessary defended. It is the stuff with which we maintain and develop our capacity of influence and action. And unless we have lost all interest in the structure of collective action we are a part of, unless we want to exit this structure, we can never completely neglect this dimension. It will therefore color and bias our perceptions, our intentions, our anticipations, our calculations and our action.

Lock-ins thus always have a political dimension. They are built on, and reproduce, a power-structure which has cognitive and normative consequences, as it conditions the way participants will perceive reality, define their interests and understand appropriate action.

To come back to our examples, the food-processing company had structured around a basic uncertainty, which was the unreliability of the raw-material. The institutional actor capable of coping with the ensuing problem (the research lab and its director) had become powerful in the sense that the satisfactory functioning of the production process depended on its focused competencies. And the rest of the organization had over-adjusted to this competence (which was also a dependency) in two ways: by overinvestment in research and by a purchasing policy which brought short-run gains but worsened the dependency of the system upon this competence. The important fact to add at this point, however, is the following: this over-adjustment was actively driven by at least part of the organization for which it was profitable and which had an institutional interest for the raw-material to be unreliable. Instead of attacking that problem at the root, it thrived on solving the technical difficulties it raised in the production process. It had succeeded in translating a general uncertainty into an organizational uncertainty that had become its base for power and influence, tilting the system in its favor.
The case of the policy field of drug abuse can also be read in this manner. It can be interpreted as the story describing how a certain group of professionals, namely psychiatrists believing in the psycho-analytical treatment strategy, were able to impose their problem-definition and, as a consequence, to take power in the field by structuring it (by organizing activities and professional practice, by forging personnel hierarchies and professional identities) according to their interests. The history that Henri Bergeron tells in his book is the story of how the French public policy towards drug use and abuse slowly became a public policy for drug addiction or, to be more precise, a policy for certain drug-addicts that required a particular kind of care and expertise. It had generated a social world oriented by a specific scenario which in turn produced a more or less stabilized system of power relations, favoring certain actors and interests over others and producing a policy that slowly became more or less isomorphic to the aspirations of those actors.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT LOCK-INS?

Let us sum up. Lock-ins are at the very heart of organized action. To quote the seminal article of Robert Merton, they are the mostly unanticipated consequence of purposeful social action. All structures of collective action are coalitions against nature formed to solve problems through human cooperation. They are built on and around definitions of issues and missions that structure the perception of reality, orient our attention and define the problems that we can set out to try and solve. In so doing, they distribute relevant resources among participants (or single out the resources that can legitimately be proposed), and create unbalanced interdependencies between them. As a consequence, some of the participants (those who benefit from this distribution) will come to have a vested interest in these frames, which means that they will resist attempts to modify or change them, by using and playing out the multiple biases incorporated in them. Feedback-loops will be set in operation that reproduce the frames and generate some local order whose internal structure and dynamics are increasingly self-sustained, i.e. internally rooted and internally driven. Becoming increasingly path-dependent and self-referential, they will be more and more decoupled from the environment and function in a fantasy world. Reality for them is what they think it is and what they have constructed it to be, not what it is.

Lock-ins are the degenerated, pathological form of frames without which there is no collective action. They are the product of excessive institutionalization. As you might remember, for Selznick, an organization becomes an institution by infusing its mission and task-structure with value, by producing distinctive competencies and by creating sectional interests in the service of these missions and task-structure. All of these elements, that for him are inevitable ingredients of the process of
institutionalization, are also potential sources of lock-ins when they go beyond what is “reasonable,” beyond what on could call the “right” amount.

Moreover, let me emphasize this: such a way of formulating the question should not be confused with the fight against excessive stability or rigidity. Flexibility, mobility, fluidity change can just as well be institutionalized dynamics or stifling frames and routines, that eventually become sources of lock-ins. As James March very rightly has emphasized, exploration and exploitation are not to be opposed as good and evil. Both are sources of a dilemma, both are potential lock-ins, as both are necessary, but also self-sustaining and self-reinforcing dynamics or modes of functioning. You have to have them both, knowing that they need balancing out.

So the conclusion can only be that framing, institutionalization and other similar processes are not bad per se: they are not only inevitable, they are also necessary ingredients of collective action. They become pathological when they become “excessive”. **So the question really becomes: how could we avoid the excesses of something necessary and how do we know that there is an excess of frames or institutionalization.** There is no automatic device that will tell us this, there is no red light to flash when we have reached the point of “excessive” institutionalization, whatever that would mean.

The question is further complicated because a lock-in for me is not necessarily a lock-in for you. And even if I recognize a lock-in, I might be reluctant to participate in any unlocking if that would imply a weakening of my bargaining position in the system. A lock-in might become one because a group, a leader, a collective entity declares it such. There is always some diagnosis involved. And diagnosis necessarily means deliberation of some sort, i.e. some process whereby the participants with divergent interests agree to define a functioning as a lock-in and therefore as something to be changed. But it also means leadership and initiative, as any effort to change.

It should have become clear by now that I have no easy and simple answer to the question how to manage lock-ins. I have shown that there is no such thing as an unlocked organization, an unlocked profession, an unlocked policy-network, an unlocked inter-organizational field, not even unlocked knowledge. We reason in paradigms, and we organize in paradigms. We cannot imagine to simply unlock – that reminds me of revolutionary dream of what we call in French “le grand soir”, or of the liberal illusion or myth of the “free for all competition”: and we know of both that they are just myths. We can only try and propose lock-ins different from the ones we are in. We can only try and change the constraints that will later on become institutionalized and probably after some time even over-institutionalized. We have to learn to manage lock-ins, we have to learn to steer the inevitable and necessary process of institutionalization away from lock-ins, while maintaining the “necessary”
amount of institutionalization. (Whatever that would mean and however on would try to make such a notion tractable).

I am afraid that I have nothing very original to say about this subject. What is needed, is institutional leadership à la Selznick capable of inventing what March in his writings on the subject has called a “technology of foolishness”. Institutional leadership is not only, and not even mostly, based on charisma. It is based on a deep commitment to, and deep understanding of, the structure one is responsible for, and it is both very modest and very ambitious.

It is modest as it well knows of its limits,

- of the limits encountered by projects of planned change,
- of the self-sustaining dynamics and the resulting recalcitrance of structures of collective action,
- of the bounds imposed on rational, consequentialist reasoning and action,
- of the possibilities of control.

At the same time, it is also very ambitious as it tries to understand and decode ongoing dynamics, and by understanding them, invent the necessary corrective mechanisms, interventions, goals or projects

- that will re-open cognitive, normative or political closures before they harden and crystallize,
- that will counteract organizational and institutional bias incorporated in the structure as well as in the games being played,
- that will be respectful of diversity and find ways to reintroduce it whenever the pressure of uniformity or conformity starts to loom
- that will try and manage the dynamics of imitation and specificity
- that will monitor the necessary routines for organizational learning place to take place without letting them get out of hand.

I shall stop here with this sketch of the many contrary things institutional leadership has to do or consists of. As all serious practitioners know, it is a difficult art to practice, but it is relatively easy to sort of indulge in the many “paradoxa” institutional leadership has to cope with. James March has
said it many times and in many ways that I can hardly improve on: leadership is about the great questions humanity has been reflecting upon ever since it started organizing. He likes to propose the figure of Don Quijote or Joan of Arc to have us think about institutional leadership. I’d like to propose another literary figure introduced by Richard Wagner in his “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg”: the figure of Hans Sachs.

For those of you not familiar with the work, it is the story of a young knight, full of youthful energy and disrespect for established institutions and traditions. He comes to Nürnberg in order to participate in a singing contest organized by the corporations of the city. He thinks that singing is only about having a nice voice and being able to invent beautiful melodies and lyrics. The problem is that for the corporations, singing is not primarily a question of voice and inspiration. It is a question of following rules, very precise rules about how to place the accent, rules about how to associate words and compose a sentence, rules about versification, rules about rhythm and many more. For the guardians of the rule-book (in the opera the figure of Beckmesser) our knight’s singing is just noise, inaudible and intolerable noise. And then there is the figure of Hans Sachs, the father of the girl with whom our knight is in love. His role is instrumental and central. He tells the knight to respect established competence (“Verachtet mir die Meister nicht…”) and teaches him how to sing freely within the limits of the rules, making it possible for him to win the contest after all, marry the girl and be admitted into the world of the corporations. He represents a sort of institutional leader who understands that the crystallized musical world of the corporations needs new blood and new impulses, in other words needs innovation and greater diversity. But he also knows (and has the young knight understand) that there is no creation without rules, without constraint. The question is not: rules or no rules. The question is: what rules and how to bring about and structure innovation without throwing out the rule-book altogether. The real hero of the opera is not Walther, even if Wagner sees himself in this role. The real hero is Hans Sachs, the one who is able to bring about the necessary arrangements and compromise, to bring and hold together two contradictory logics and manage the ensuing tensions.

This could be a nice point to stop. However, let me conclude in addressing a lock-in that in my mind increasingly threatens our discipline. It has to do with the pressure for uniformity that comes with the growing professionalization of our discipline.

Professionalization in a way ushers in increasing uniformity, because it standardizes in order to increase comparability. It is in a way the creation of a market, which, as we well know, is all about organizing. Comparability is actively sought after and even fought for in order to increase quality control, diminish the influence of clientele relations and powerful career-brokers, increase personal autonomy and limit interpersonal dependence, facilitate mobility in the profession, and many more. Its by-product is growing uniformity and selectivity, through the progressive crystallization of quality
standards about what is a good young professional and what is a good scientific article. Such
standards are naturally not neutral. They produce and maintain institutional bias in favor of some
profiles over others. This pertains to recruitment procedures (I often say that on present standards, I
would never have been admitted to the profession) as well as to the standards used by scientific
journals.

What are some of the dimensions of this growing institutional bias. One could think of
several:

• One is certainly a growing tendency of publications to be profession-centered or
  paradigm-centered instead of trying to talk about empirical results.

• A growing tendency to favor quantitative over qualitative research, to use data from
data-bases instead of original research

• A tendency towards cognitive closure of the profession, and a growing segmentation
between those who work in an academic perspective and the world of practitioners
(are we not less and less understandable, and therefore relevant, for practitioners?).

All in all, it could be said that growing uniformity, as well as growing estrangement from
reality threatens our discipline. What mechanisms do we have to control and if possible counteract this
tendency. How can we avoid that the bad sides of professionalization end up outweighing its good
sides? That is a very concrete problem of unlocking and of needed institutional leadership, one that
certainly is not easy to solve.

But let’s be honest: if it were too easy, there wouldn’t be any fun.