Can the third sector exist in local multisectoral partnerships? Challenges of mutual observation in network governance.

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Governance through local multisectoral partnerships, often described under the concept of new governance or network governance, in areas such as local development, welfare or quality of life is widespread and has been a tool for change. These tend to be places and areas where existing arrangements in the relationships between third sector organizations and government are being challenged with new practices, identities and discourses. Network governance is often associated with the semantics of participation of communities, residents, users and third sector organisations, but a certain disappointment is also taking shape with the distance between the discourses and the practices, particularly with most optimistic discourses about the opportunities opened up by these partnerships to civil society participation.

My objective with this presentation is to contribute to the understanding of the implications of new governance for the third sector, and to propose a theoretical and analytical framework to bring new explanatory possibilities for an account of the challenges new governance brings for currents understandings of the third sector and its future role.

I depart, theoretically, from the contributions of second order cybernetics and complex systems theories (von Foerster, 1981; Luhmann, 1995; Resher, 1998) to analyse the case of a Local Strategic Partnership and the third sector networks and organisations in an English locality. I explore mainly the heuristic possibilities of the concept of first and second order observation as developed in these theories, implying noticing what is indicated, what is excluded with that indication and what is doing the indication. The data was collected through an ethnographic study in the ambit of my PhD research1, which included observation of meetings and events, conversations, interviews, and document analysis.

The presentation is structured in two parts, one intending to describe the third sector local identities and discourses and another one relating this with the partnership structures as observed by third sector organisations. In the first part I describe organisations as observations and organisations as second order observers. I will demonstrate how organisations’ self-descriptions are constituted through their own observations of systems and of other organisations, often made from the point of view of their users, their clients or, more broadly, of persons. In partnerships semantics, these are also the voices that the third sector is supposed to bring to partnerships. Furthermore, it is also possible to identify observations of the third sector as difference, particularly in the semantics of “a sector”.

In the second part I describe the operations of complexity reduction in the third sector as a group of local organisations, coordinated by a sector umbrella organisation, attempts at being rendered observable by the local partnership when trying to design a coupling mechanism through a democratic representative structure of the sector in the partnership. In order to do this, choices needed to be made between the network or the organisational form, concerning the existing third sector structures, between thematic or organisational representation and between representing third sector or the partnership themes. It becomes clear that network governance implies strategic decisions about self-descriptions in the third sector. So, we are in face of a paradox, the third sector needs to be constituted as an observable system, reducing its variety, to be partner in network governance and at the same time needs to maintain requisite variety in order to play its role in the semantics of network governance. The outcome of this attempt is surprising from the point of view of the network governance semantics but not from a systems perspective, able to render visible the instances of closure: third sector organisations abandon the attempt at being represented in the partnership and the partnership enrols in stakeholder analysis. That is, the partnership will observe with the tools of its own observation scheme.

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In conclusion, I consider that it is important to identify the mechanisms of selection and closure operating at the two levels of observation, and the interrelation between these two levels – in the choices of themes, territories, scales and temporalities, which include some organisations and exclude others (despite the need to maintain the openness semantics), and the indications related to the partnership’s observations of its own observations and choices of the tools it uses to observe. In the case under study these selections are visible both in first order observations in the organisations and themes which are selected and in second order observation, by the exclusions from the decisions regarding how the partnership should observe. Departing from the idea that the systems are closed and need to be so to exist I consider that it is more fruitful to search for the possible couplings between the partnership and the third sector than presuming the possibility of communication and risk eternal disappointment.

References

