From the moment I wrote that page it became clear to me that my search for exactitude was branching out in two directions: On the one side, the reduction of secondary events to abstract patterns according to which one can carry out operations and demonstrate theorems; and on the other, the effort made by words to present the tangible aspect of things as precisely as possible.

Italo Calvino, Six Memos for the Next Millennium, 1988

Abstract

Through explanatory discourse people apply, construct and explain theories of action and attribute meaning to events and to their own actions and those of others. In this chapter we will conduct a detailed analysis of the structure of explanatory discourse and the character of its rationality. Through this analysis we will
demonstrate (a) that the rationality of organizational actors is an argumentative rationality aimed at the construction of consensus and shared meanings; (b) that the knowledge contained in the explanations is both structured and opaque, (c) that this particular mix between opacity and structuring makes it possible to both accumulate past knowledge and construct new knowledge.

Maps, Finds, Oracles

Let us examine three artifacts and the relative cognitive work that the individual must carry out when he encounters them.

1. **The artifact is perfectly recognizable**: *The map.* The cognitive work consists in recovering “instructions for use” from the individual and collective memory. With a map, the individual only has to activate the theory “how to read a map” and its wealth of ideas, conventions, information, warnings, base knowledge, and “tricks right out of the book” (for example, by consulting the legend, verifying the scale and the orientation, recognizing points of reference in the landscape, etc.). Given this basic knowledge, the possible ambiguities can result from the correspondence between the model and reality (as in the story of the map of the Pyrenees in Chapter III).

2. **The artifact is not recognizable**: *The archeological find:* Cognitive work consists in starting a process of investigation by attempting to give answers to questions such as: Can the artifact be referred to a recognizable structure? How can it be used? What were the intentions of the person who created it? What meanings does it transmit? The most immediate example is that of an archeological find whose functions are not obvious, such as the Phaistos Disk (Figure 1): Was it a calendar? An abacus or more generally an “accounting” device? Was it a cult object? In cases such as these, the individual finds himself, at best, faced with a certain number of alternative explanations that are more or less plausible. He has no choice but to choose one, giving a full explanation as to why that choice is more acceptable than the others.

3. **The artifact is deliberately ambiguous**: *The oracle.* The artifact is intentionally open to a number of possible alternative interpretations. That is what happens with an oracle: An enigmatic phrase is uttered, representing the voice of God. Because there are many possible, even contradictory, interpretations for the meaning of the phrase, the questioner must choose one very carefully. The answer interpretation that Xerxes gave to the oracle of Delphi is famous: “If you go to war you will destroy a powerful kingdom.” Xerxes faithfully went to war. The result was the destruction of his/her kingdom.
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