



### **Chapter III**

# **Post-Modern Decision Making**

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*The modern ideals for decision and action are hard pressed by doubts on their continued validity and by new difficulties in their implementation that emerge just as old difficulties seem to become more tractable. Here I present some questions and reflections on problems and possibilities when the information technological conditions are changed while at the same time modern values are called in question.*

## **MODERN IDEALS FOR DECISION AND ACTION ARE HARD PRESSED BY DOUBTS ON THEIR CONTINUED VALIDITY**

The modern<sup>1</sup> ideal for decision and action is well known. In short, the procedure is to map out the facts of the matter, make rational deliberations (reasoning, arguing) and choices, do the required problem solving, create an optimal plan and execute the plan. *Savoir pour prévoir pour pouvoir*. The paradigm for this is the Project. You set up a goal, create a plan to reach the goal and execute the plan. Characteristically, these three stages are separated in time and performed by different categories of people.

From the very beginning many difficulties are associated with this ideal. People do not follow the plan; they misunderstand, they are careless, they cheat, they reinterpret the instructions to suit their own purpose. On the other hand, the plan is never exact enough to be able to work if followed to the letter. To be completely rational puts so high a demand on information collection, reasoning and deliberation that the methods we in practice can afford and have time to use are unacceptable, with the result that it appears unreasonable (irrational) to be completely rational. The project organization—hierarchy, total central control—prevents individuals from exercising and developing their individual rationality; people are misused and the process is suboptimal in terms of human resources. Specializing and division of labor to perform complex tasks (projects) lead to increasing myopia, even

This chapter appears in the book, *Electronic Government: Design, Applications and Management* by Ake Gronlund.

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for management: what should one take on responsibility for, which facts should be considered, what should be the goals? Local optimization leads to global suboptimization. So-called quality assurance is not about ensuring optimal or even high quality of the result, but about being able to guarantee a highly predictable result (which, in accordance with the theory of quality assurance, should have the lowest quality possible without becoming unacceptable to the customer). An historical example that makes one think is the plan-ruled security work in Stalin's Soviet: each department had to fill (or better, surpass) its centrally allotted quotient of spies and traitors to search out and "disclose" for each period.

Doubts about the continued validity of the modern era's model for decision and action have grown stronger in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These ideals may have been fitting for the industrial society, but now (the argument goes) we are entering a new type of society, the information society. Old (that is, modern) ideals of uniformity and predictability are replaced by originality and creativity. Partly it is a matter of an inherent, slowly self-destructive process. Rationality undermines values by weakening the irrational carriers of values, such as religion, heredity, tradition, family, so that eventually irrationality results—since without values reason makes no move. The only values left belong to irrational forces and agents, some of them evil, whose instrument the rational human becomes. Rationality breaks the spell Man has been under, but turns him into a zombie, a tool for the irrational. The postmodern zeitgeist is now telling us—"yes, wasn't it silly to think that pure ratiocination would bring us the good life and the good society? After all, science and rationality is just one perspective among many others, equally valid." Yet, one has to admit that the modernization project by and large has managed to reach its goal. Rationality and the modern project methodology was intended as instruments of freedom, a way of making life better and easier, to escape being worn down and being able to sit in peace and quiet, angling and reading some poetry. But the discipline and the habit of working in project form created a lifestyle that is hard to give up and to find good alternatives to. To fish for pleasure and read poems full time is not quite as alluring any more. Freedom from work has in the late industrial and postindustrial society become a source of anxiety.

## **NEW DIFFICULTIES IN THEIR APPLICATION EMERGE JUST AS SOME OF THE OLD DIFFICULTIES SEEM TO BECOME MORE TRACTABLE**

Some old difficulties with the modern model become more manageable through the new information technology which obviously now plays a driving and paradigmatic role for the growing information society similar to the role played by mechanical and chemical technology in the industrial society. With programming, the gap between plan and execution is bridged. As it is programmed, so it will be. It is easier to make programs cooperate than human beings. Specifically, this improvement applies to "industrialized decisions," that is, decisions made automatically through regulation, formalization, bureaucratization, as a standardizing of "manual," "craftsmanlike" decisions, strongly shaped and tied to time, place and person, in analogy with how industrial machine production superseded manual machine making. Decisions in principle, as for instance laws and ordinances can be

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