

# On the Sidelines of the Manifesto “The Enterprise We Want (A New Enterprise in a New Economy)”. Reflections and Provocations for a *Debate We Would Like*

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Some colleagues involved with Impresa Progetto – Electronic Journal of Management have chosen to contribute to the debate sparked by the publication of the Manifesto by Il Sole 24Ore, titled “The New Economy We Want and the Salvation of Civilization” which appeared on September 19, 2023. This resulted in a document, called Manifesto “The Enterprise We Want (A New Enterprise in a New Economy)”. We are adding further considerations to this text, which reflects the academic business-economic culture of its proponents, hoping to foster a fruitful dialogue.

This English version was first discussed by Prof. Giovanni Masino, who lectured in a ‘Class on the Lawn’ at the EURAM Annual Conference in Bath, June 25-28, 2024. We therefore think it appropriate to open it up to the international community, thus broadening the scope of theoretical reflection.

## 1. Background: “Do we want?”, can or should we understand?

The title, “The Enterprise We Want,” in our opinion, implies a question: do we – as academics – have the legitimacy to suggest to the business world how we would like it to be? Or is our institutional mandate to read and interpret the phenomenology of economic and social action and reconstruct it based on this or that conceptual structure or category? And, possibly, can we hypothesize that our categories are free from desires and imaginations in the name of a presumed principle of neutrality in deconstructing and decoding organizing? Suggesting to delve into these questions, on the one hand, [re]opens the centennial question

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(understandably never entirely resolved or resolvable) about the positive or normative nature of business-economic disciplines; on the other, it problematizes the risk of sponsoring a sort of hierarchy between “those who think” and “those who do” business (and not only that), with the risk of resulting in a prescriptive arrogance too often the cause, perhaps unintentionally, of that separation (chased out the door it comes back through the window) between academia and the business world, always considered a barrier to overcome, but often left there to mark the perimeter of the two worlds. So, in short, between saying and doing, listening is better. Perhaps.

That “we want,” proposed in the title, might, therefore, let the idea shine through that our desires (those of us academics) – the result of the serious and passionate research work we do on our subjects – can already design a desirable future for the world. Moreover, that “desire” seems to pair with the idea of the centrality of purpose entirely internal to the proposed document. This term, once again, risks emphasizing our need to resort to vocabularies to handle with care [and words are important, as the Italian cinema director Nanni Moretti reminds us “trend, he said trend” !]: not neglecting the awareness that the Italian history of business economics and that of our enterprises has always absorbed and made its own the value of international literature (which since the post-World War II period has developed in that powerful forge of business culture that are American business schools) that allows understanding the peculiarities of our economic-industrial system and the policies that guide its development, expressions of geopolitical histories in some respects not reducible to those of the Anglo-Saxon world. Purpose, therefore, is fine, as long as it does not become a “new mantra,” which implies processes of reification of the enterprise and, once again, of organizing, of being together and cohabiting (our subject of study) and its (hoped-for) purposes; so close, for example, to the history of large corporations, so far from the traditions of small and medium-sized enterprises, still the beating heart of entire economies.

## **2. Subject, Object, and Intersubjectivity**

Let’s return to the “desiring” dimension, which, as such, is by definition on the ridge between the subject who activates investments in reality and the desired object. Who activates this dimension? Entrepreneurs desire (perhaps that’s why they run businesses), markets do it through consumption behaviors, and institutions do it through political and administrative practices. What does each of us desire? As a transitive verb, desiring is followed by a direct object (who, what). Here lies the issue of objectuality, which we consider relevant (also) to the matter we are discussing. Every object is never only and always an object, but also a subject, just as each object is never only and always an “object,” but also a “subject.” This statement appears to be rarely explored in the literatures belonging to traditions and branches of economic-business research. However, it is (has been) very present in other perspectives: may we consider those who – intellectuals, the middle class, hungry people, academics around the turn of the last century, and so on – for a while,

forgetting this dual level, contributed to the formation of problematic totalitarianisms that marked the twentieth century. Staying in touch with the fact that we all are always a bit subject, and a bit object captures, in our opinion, a crucial point concerning the manifesto proposal launched by colleagues, where the somewhat problematic word “change” is introduced.

### **2.1. To Change or Not to Change**

Change is often and willingly discussed. There is no shortage, from various quarters, of constant calls to its inevitability (with references to philosophy, from the pre-Socratics onward, up to public speeches at every electoral round full of promises all flavored with a perspective of change), yet the question of why it is so important to deal with (and then change) is often left unanswered, so much more compared to taking care of the value of resistance to change itself, or the fact that (often and willingly), when intervening on processes, change makes things worse and that, in many cases, then nothing really changes in the depth of the structures, while forms, rituals, and ways change, to say more or less the same things over time, in every time. Conversely, substantial changes, those associated with paradigm shifts à la Kuhn, are frequently [also looking at recent centennial history] mainly beyond the control and reach of us academics, as well as most of the companies we study (regardless of what we desire)<sup>1</sup>.

Everyone invokes change as a condition for sustainable economic and social development. Companies invoke it (to serve their customers better) and public administrations invoke it (the latter increasingly corporatized and reformed but very little changed). However, little attention is devoted to understanding how to “change” organizations in a way that is more attentive to the needs of people (workers and customers, society). And this – going inside – seems to us to be a methodologically grounded approach to broadly speak about “the enterprise we want.”

### **2.2. ... Is it Interdisciplinary?**

If everything proposed so far makes sense, we cannot escape the complexity inherent in the circulation of ideas and knowledge, both between disciplinary fields and among actors and subjects in dialectic. While it is easy to say that everyone (academics primarily) believes in this circulation and that interdisciplinarity (multi, supra, pluri *and blah blah, blah blah, blah blah*) is beautiful and desirable, it is less easy to achieve. Otherwise, we would not be here writing about it over 50 years after the death of Gino Zappa and over 100 years after Max Weber’s. As scholars of Business Organization, we belong to a group – emerging from a blend of diverse sensibilities and research approaches – that, in defining its own boundaries,

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<sup>1</sup> Sicca, in Senge (2019).

recognizes that disciplinary barriers serve as reassuring structures where the relevance (and utility) of both content and framework can be determined. However, barriers that reassure are sometimes also cages. Finding a balance is as challenging as research ethics, and intellectual honesty can be as simple as breathing.

Therefore, the enterprise that “we want” is first and foremost the beautiful enterprise (which perhaps already exists) that structurally lives through actors in dialogue (but also in conflict, as necessarily it happens where there is something at stake and on which one is seriously committed) on which it is necessary to open up a comprehensive view. To consolidate an integral view, starting from the depth of the knowledge involved, which enriches each other reciprocally and consolidates without replacing each other. But saying it this way could sound like idealism. Let’s proceed with caution.

### **3. But What Would the Enterprise We “Want” Be “For”?**

The issues discussed so far take a step back from the Manifesto’s theme, suggesting a preliminary question (Sicca, 2016a; 2016b): in short, what are these social constructions we call enterprises for? If we start from this, perhaps we can also want or desire. Because, as we know, utility is an important engine and certainly a foundation of economic theory.

The Italian curatorship in 1985 of “Organization & Market” (edited by Nacamulli and Rugiadini) offered a powerful, rigorous, and integrated view of the criteria that guide the efficiency of economic structures to be evaluated, from time to time, through the validity, in a managerial perspective, of possible arrangements. The enterprise was explained as a construct that, through hierarchy, allowed for understanding the nature of the organization, as opposed to markets operating through prices (Coase, 1937). The questions to ask were those of the recent evolution of economic theory. Why is a large segment of production activities not coordinated through market exchanges? Why are there “islands of power” that move not by virtue of market exchanges but by the authority of the entrepreneur? Questions based on widely diffused ideas: the concept of diminishing returns of the entrepreneurial function due to the management’s limitations in coordinating an increasing number of activities; the assumption that the choice between the two forms depends on the comparison between the cost of an additional transaction in the market and the cost of the internal organization of the same transaction; marginalist tradition. “Organization & Market” offered us Williamson’s contribution (1975; 1981; 1980) (crowned in 2009 with the Nobel “for his analysis of economic governance, especially the boundaries of the firm”), with a reading of the contractual relations that preside over the very existence of the firm.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also Commons, 1931; 1934; Simon, 1947; Arrow, Hurwicz, 1972; Arrow, 1974; Chandler, 1962; 1977.

In parallel, in an essay also from 1985 – in those years when there was the debate on the identity of business-economic research and related managerial practices<sup>3</sup> – Sergio Vaccà recommended a profound understanding of the functioning mechanisms of the post-Fordist economy and, specularly, to rigorously define the representations and formulations in the theory of the firm, to recognize the central role of the industrial enterprise, where “central” also indicates its intermediate position (of regulation, precisely) between macroeconomic dynamics (increasingly shaped by the system of international relations and the territory) and micro-behavioral dynamics, which therefore concern individuals, whether entrepreneurs or managers, consumers, citizens, etc. In short, Vaccà told us of “an unavoidable frontier” because the enterprise generates the change observed at the macrosystem level and symmetrically, the change of the macrosystem is not theoretically satisfactorily observable in the reality of individual enterprises. Industrial reality's evolutionary and innovative dynamics continuously connect micro and macro in an interactive dialectic that no longer makes one understandable without the other (p. 13).

By adhering to these few and fundamental references from the literature, we have thus far highlighted the significance of the centrality of the enterprise in an advanced economy (Sicca, 2022). Whether we want it or not, it matters little.

### ***3.1. Whether We Want It or Not, the Enterprise Encompasses Us Anyway***

There is, however, another role, no less significant and increasingly evident in these first decades of the new millennium (amid wars, noted and forgotten, famines, locusts, and pandemics) marked by intermittences, crises, and binges (of liquidity, the latest played with the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan [NNRP, PNRR – Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza] and now almost behind us): a role, ultimately much older than this cursory blink of an eye in recent history, that we would like to underline here and that questions (whether one wants it or not) enterprises, therefore entrepreneurs, managers, and professionals, and us academics along the plural decision-making chains. We refer here to enterprises' functions as regulators of anxiety, whether innate and embodied in the functioning of our being in the world or induced by contexts (Sicca, 2020). Anxiety is primarily a category of psychological literature whose connection with organizational studies has been relevant for a long time, especially where it is linked to its original psychoanalytic matrix: one example is that a prestigious reference journal for all of us is *Human Relations*, founded by W. Bion, a direct disciple of Freud, and the privileged milieu of the research of the Tavistock Institute in London, a crossroads between mind studies and socio-organizational studies. Without going into the details of the nature and types of anxiety, it is sufficient to remember here that

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<sup>3</sup> See also Cozzi, Silvestrelli (1991); Mele, Sicca (1995); e Sicca (1995), and Special Issue of “Finanza Marketing e Produzione”, 2, 1995, following the first national conference of the Società Italiana per l'Economia d'Impresa, Naples il 2 e 3 giugno 1994.

business organizations also play a role in *containing* anxiety (Sicca, 2020): besides having goals of efficiency, effectiveness, and economy (institutional levers of the economic-business paradigm), they provide work, confer identity, mark the times of sleep and wakefulness, productivity and affections, establish the degree of socially necessary and sanctionable aggression. They are a metronome. They mark the beginning and the end. This is, ultimately, a very significant role that can be attributed to that recent way of organizing human activities that we call industrial capitalism, seen from one side of the world, or market economy, seen from another.

#### 4. Observation and Listening, Method and Perspective

What does “rethinking aziendalismo (a qualifying point of the Manifesto)” mean? Suppose it is true that good intentions surely mark the direction (and thus transversal and openness as key words can become new mantras and perhaps something more, that is, operational dimensions as well as analytical aspirations). In that case, it is equally true that popular wisdom teaches us that the ensuing path may not be the best one to venture on, for a goal that may not be the desired one.

The effort of facing the real reality of companies and using study methods that involve and interact with it seems perhaps the old path to follow, to resume following, in the wake of the examples already teeming in the field of research. Thus, observation (better if participatory) and listening (better if two-way, and perhaps critical listening, difficult, but even better) express the study method (this is our task) for knowledge that contributes to its enrichment and introduces the possibility of field testing. It is a path that asks us (as academia) to value the rigor (of method and posture) of the attempt and to accept the risks (of failure, nothing new to publish?) and the time required for this work (which does not align with the rules of the academic world we are “playing” with) and asks companies for the humility to recognize that external perspectives and contributions are precious and useful investments. However, humility is also necessary on our part, those who study as a profession, and nothing is better than to make this quality a sincere and authentic militancy than learning to formulate questions, even before answers. Moreover, a question that the business studies community is, in our opinion, called to, somewhat as it happens in other contexts (one for all, that of lawyers), is to question what the sources of managerial and organizational knowledge are (Sicca, 2012): in the years immediately following the Second World War, American business schools recruited (the verb *recruit* helps) some senior officers of the victorious army who, in their academic positions, introduced military jargon to teach strategic planning, proposing and producing a lexicon made of *mission, vision, target, tactics*, and more, which today is part of the economic vocabulary and also of common sense, even when going to a bar for a coffee (possibly bitter). That language was the basis of a model adequate to intercept the nature and characteristics of companies in that historical moment of expansion and reconstruction; in short, it described how companies wanted to be and the companies that academics wanted in conditions of more or less constant and predictable system growth. Looking retrospectively at the

evolution of macroeconomic structures, starting from the first major interruption (1929) of the expansion cycle with the oil crisis of 1973, we have witnessed asymptotic intervals between one major crisis and the next, perhaps even more significant, often longer<sup>4</sup>: therefore, 1929, 1973, 1991; 2008; 2020, then who knows, always and in any case accompanied by the same exclamation: such a crisis had never been seen before... . It is, therefore, perhaps urgent, in our opinion, that the answer to the question about the sources of managerial and organizational knowledge starts precisely from the nature of the (macro) contexts in dialogue with the living conditions of companies (micro), in line with what is proposed in these pages. Because starting from that tension, it imposes on scholars to learn to grapple with literature and methodologies different from those acquired in the years when one was a student, accepting to be porous and permeable to traditions of thought that do not fit into most of the training paths of Economics degrees. Traditions that may be outside the perimeter of the reconstructions of knowledge that, ex-post, we assign ourselves in defining sectors or disciplinary groups. However, then we know, inside and outside is a dear issue to organizational studies [pardon, organizing] starting from Karl Weick’s seminal text ([1969] 1979) onwards (Czarniawska, 2014). For example, for several years within the European Academy of Management (EURAM), one of the largest and most numerous management communities, a track entitled “*Arts & Philosophy for Business and Society*” has been launched within *SIG\_01 – Business for Society*. And words, once again, help: already in the title of the track, the invitation to the international community is precisely to explore the hypothesis that art (whatever that means) and the arts (in the plural), as well as philosophy (whatever that means) – as millennial constructs that have stood the test of obsolescence – can be sources for the formation of our (just centenarian) knowledge constructs. A hypothesis to be corroborated also through empirical research work (therefore papers to be presented), to be submitted, precisely, within the Strategic Interest Group (SIG) *Business for Society*, where that resonates precisely in line with the Manifesto “*The Enterprise We Want*”. The reference to ancient and very ancient forms of knowledge (also in the internal evolution of the history of philosophy and the arts) makes us more cautious regarding “a new enterprise in a new economy.” Because, after all, sometimes old is beautiful.

## 5. Some [Dis]consoling [In]conclusions and a [Small] Resumption

What we essentially care about is adopting a diagnostic stance that paradoxically goes beyond hopes and desires to place ourselves in an active and proactive perspective:

- Because reading organizations mobilizes the sense of limitation and the perception of powerlessness in the face of context, needs, and criticalities, while the purpose [pardon, the sense of purpose] often contains an overestimated idea of what we can actually do

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.puntoorg.net/en/> - Homepage

- Because academic knowledge is often very specific (imposed by a system that summons us to deep competition on knowledge segments), pursuing general and common-sense interests is another job: an experience that allows us to distinguish beautiful ideas and good intentions from feasible things. But also, to recognize the strength of the division of labor and coordination, even when talking about cognitive work that interests everyone: academics, entrepreneurs, managers, consumers, politicians, institutions, and so on.
- Because exercising decision-making power from within and over organizations requires going beyond good will, which alone cannot overcome the obstacles that every process proposes
- Because personal credibility is also linked to coherence: constant and continuous commitment and determination, in an ethic of service that is difficult to maintain where the logic of power and appearance often prevails.

So perhaps a possible move is to look for “the enterprise we want” in the landscape of existing organizations, which embody a way of doing business that better responds to the desires (*de-sidera*) of the many subjects who make them, undergo them, and interact with them. The contribution we as academics are obliged to make is to invest in the literature, interpretative categories, and possible methodological approaches that help understand the worlds of yesterday, today, and (leave something for someone for) tomorrow. Let’s try together; maybe we will begin to desire to be like this. Or like that. Let’s think about it.

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