



## Journal of Organizational Change Management

Destabilizing or stabilizing the identity of Slawek Magala?

Arjo Klamer

### Article information:

To cite this document:

Arjo Klamer, (2016), "Destabilizing or stabilizing the identity of Slawek Magala?", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 29 Iss 1 pp. 24 - 28

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-12-2015-0232>

Downloaded on: 11 November 2016, At: 01:40 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 0 other documents.

To copy this document: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 48 times since 2016\*

### Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2016), "Legacy: Professor Slawomir Magala (Slawek)", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 29 Iss 1 pp. 8-17 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-11-2015-0218>

(2016), "(Un)Conditional surrender? Why do professionals willingly comply with managerialism", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 29 Iss 1 pp. 29-45 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-11-2015-0221>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

### For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit [www.emeraldinsight.com/authors](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/authors) for more information.

### About Emerald [www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com)

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

\*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

# Destabilizing or stabilizing the identity of Slawek Magala?

Arjo Klamer

*Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication,  
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Slawek Magala and the author have a great deal in common and that the author is putting the differences to an interesting use in the Erasmus Honors Program designed for the top students of all faculties of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The model of education gaining the upper hand in contemporary universities should be balanced with the more fundamental humanist upbringing of students-citizens.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper has been written as an empirical report based on five years of participative observation, regular analysis and group discussion of student essays, and on the on-going application of qualitative techniques in designing a curriculum, running the program and joint evaluation of its intended effects with the main protagonist of the paper, namely the colleague Slawek Magala. The labels “traditionalist” and “postmodernist” have been codified according to the most frequent academic usage.

**Findings** – If Slawek manifests himself as a typical post-modernist who does not believe in stable identities, the author will be then the neo-traditionalist, who tries to connect identities to value choices and value choices to stable philosophies of virtue and moral choices. Both of them have multiple identities. Slawek is a Pole who has adapted the Dutch nationality. The author is a born Dutch who also carries an American passport. What brings them together intellectually, the author thinks, is a conviction that they have to bring culture into the scientific pursuits.

**Originality/value** – Very few academic studies pointed out that cultural repertoire of value choices involves an on-going cultural negotiation. The author has succeeded in legitimizing the concept of culture in the teaching and research. Other researchers may employ the notions of culture and value to develop a value-based approach to the economy. The paper helps to show that identities get stabilized, that people are in need of stabilizing their values, and with those their identities.

**Keywords** Identity, Issue, Slawek, Special

**Paper type** Research paper

Slawek Magala and I have a great deal in common. That is why we have been teaching an honors course together for the last four years at the Erasmus University. Yet in that course we stress our differences. Then Slawek manifests himself as a typical post-modernist and I will be the neo-traditionalist. In other words, students learn from him to destabilize anything that seems fixed and from me the need to stabilize meanings and values in daily life. While quite a few students are left in confusion about their own identity, Slawek and I are only confirmed in ours thus affirming my argument. At least, that is my claim. He will disagree.

## What we have in common

Slawek is a Pole who has adapted the Dutch nationality. I myself am a born Dutch who also carries an American passport. I do not know what he studied as he does not announce his degrees – not even on his website. I suspect he has studied social sciences and the humanities. I studied econometrics and economics. He has been with his current



---

wife since his youth whereas I remarried my high-school date, having been married with a South American in between. Even so, he constantly makes sexual innuendos whereas I present a chaste persona. Politically am quite a bit more to the left than he is. But as it is with intellectual identities, all these personal differences do not matter much.

What brings us together intellectually, I think, is a conviction that we have to bring culture into our scientific pursuits. We both do so in disciplines that are not inclined doing so. As for me, culture is not on the index of economic texts; it is not a concept in economic teaching, and hence is not considered to be a factor of economic importance, at least according to the conventional wisdom of economists. Slawek has to deal with business scholarship with a penchant for the instrumental aspects of doing business. We both deal with academic communities that consider “culture” “soft,” and “financial entities” “hard” where soft rhymes with unscientific and hard with scientific. Even so, we are set to include culture in our work, and make it even a core concept.

We have earned our academic credits for doing so. Slawek after all has occupied the chair for cross-cultural management, which he is about to relinquish, and I occupy the chair for the economics of arts and culture, both at the Erasmus University. So we have succeeded in legitimizing the concept of culture in our teaching and research.

In Slawek’s case the argument is directed at organizational settings. In his many books and articles he sees in culture the concept that gets us to consider the variety of meanings that get generated in organizational life, in environments that are increasingly complex. When I began teaching cultural organizations he recommended the book by Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*, that I have been using ever since. The book enables a wide array of perspectives on organizations, one as valid as the other, and as meaningful. By switching metaphors an organization lights up in completely different ways so much so that it appears to be entirely different. Such an approach teaches students to be flexible and to be conscious about their own particular take on organizations. It is an approach that I associate with Slawek’s.

The notion of culture incites the concepts of “meaning” and “value.” Sure, it is tempting to problematize the notion of culture for it has a great range of meanings – Slawek will make a point of this – but most interpretations will end up including the concepts of meaning and value somehow. Cultures may refer to what a group of people share and what distinguishes them from all other people – my favorite definition – and the sharing usually focusses on values. The sharing of values makes for distinctive cultures. And the acting upon values gives meanings to actions and things. Taking off one’s shoes has a special meaning in Korean and Japanese cultures and quite another meaning in a European setting. The meanings are fueled by the values that underlie such a custom.

To speak for myself I have taken the notions of culture and value to develop a value-based approach to the economy (Doing the Right Thing: A Value Based Approach to the Economy, forthcoming). In this approach economics becomes the discipline that focusses on the realization of values by people, organizations and politics. Exploration of the field with this point of departure has led me to introduce concepts that are quite different from those common in standard economics. It should not come as a surprise that the notion of values takes center stage. By displacing “preferences” in standard economics with “values” the leading question shifts from

“what do you want,” to “what is important to you.” The answer to the latter question usually leads to the relevant values.

A difficult part of this approach is the articulation of the relevant values. People and organizations are often not aware of their values. And when they have a sense, they have a hard time articulating them. The reason may be that in an instrumentalist era people are not used to spell out their values. The value-based approach provides four dimensions of values: personal, social, societal and transcendental values. Take the theater, a subject that interests both Slawek and myself. Actors and directors engage in theater to realize artistic or transcendental values, to contribute to society somehow by illuminating, shocking or maintaining a tradition (societal values), to form a solid, vital and creative vital theater group (social values) and to exercise and develop their skills (personal values). Of course, they also generate an income for themselves, but, so this approach suggests, income is an instrument, a potential to realize values. A monetary amount is not a value in and of itself (contrary to what is commonly thought).

Even though I am not sure that Slawek will follow me in this, I am sure that he appreciates the provocation of established practices, as he is doing something quite similar with his work on meanings in organizations, the social life of values. Like me he likes to rattle the cages of dominant approaches, and to find his own way, finding curious and critical students in his wake. It is in this intellectual habitus that he and I identify with each other.

### **What makes for a difference**

When it comes to the issue of identity, we run into our differences. We get the students after they have taken a few other courses about identity. One focusses on the psychological aspects and another on sociological ones. Slawek and I are supposed to discuss identity in business and political contexts. When we get them, they are totally confused about what identity is and without a clue about their own identity. Apparently, they have gotten so many different perspectives that they lost track. That is fine for Slawek. If anything he will try to add to the confusion, and strengthen the conviction that identity has many sides and we all have multiple identities. The texts that he has them read are mostly complex and almost impossible to grasp.

I, on the other hand, consider the confusions, the lack of direction in the discussion and the hopelessness when it comes to the self-perception quite unsatisfactory. I am inclined to call it intellectual laziness. For it is too easy to conclude that there are many different possibilities, that there are multiple perspectives and that therefore you cannot know what identity is and what your identity is. Therefore, I have them read texts of Aristotle, Aurelius, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. These texts make the students consider what is important to them, that is, what their values are. I then suggest that their values define who they are. We do the Aurelius exercise that compels them to think of the influential persons in their life and what values those persons stand for. I then let them work with those values. With the so-called utopia exercise I let the students find out about what they are striving for, what they long for and suggest that whatever they articulate are their goal values. The implication is that they are those values, that the values determine their identities.

We subsequently imagine how those values work in the context of an organizational life or on a political or societal level. At that level their cultural differences kick in. Here the lesson is that we get clarity of our cultural identity by the way we characterize others.

---

So I learned about my Dutch qualities by working and living in the USA. And Slawek realizes what it is to be Polish by operating in a Dutch setting.

All this goes to show that identities get stabilized, that people are in need of stabilizing their values, and with those their identities. Without such a stabilizing we are clueless about what to do, what master program to choose, what kind of career to pursue, what kind of organization to seek out. The confusions with which they start, may be intellectually interesting but practically hopeless. They also do not do justice to the way people actually live their lives. At least, that is my message.

Slawek in the meanwhile will do everything in his power to destabilize my message. He will remind the students that the fixation of values is impossible, that in actuality values change all the time, that they depend on the context in which we apply them, and that we operate in many different contexts. He gets much help from students who have complex backgrounds having lived in different countries and often carrying different passports. I proffer that having such a variety of backgrounds is what defines them and makes them different from others who have lived in one country all their life. Slawek will respond by bringing in another complexity, another unsettling possibility.

The last class we have a final debate. Slawek and I begin by stating our positions for the last time and then students have to take sides. Those who join either of us will pick up the argument trying to persuade the undecided to join their side. Sometimes my side gets the majority; last class most students chose Slawek's side. They preferred a position in which their identity remains ill-defined and that leaves the field wide open. The few students that chose my side made a valiant attempt to argue for the need to be clear about your values, to know where you are heading. Till the very last a majority of students remained undecided but when they were forced to choose sides, most of them ended up being most comfortable with Slawek's side. I tried to point out the inconsistency of choosing the side of postmodernism – as that implies some kind of stabilization – but Slawek saw in this put down a bad loser. The students were pleased that the summer vacation would start. They did appreciate the debate, though.

The great difference between Slawek and myself, though, shows in our teaching styles. I have never witnessed a teacher who is so skilled in the art of the anecdote as is Slawek. I have been teaching with him for four consecutive years and each time he keeps surprising me with his command of the literature, his knowledge of the arts, his social network, his acquaintance with prominent figures, his travel experiences (usually with his wife), his repertoire of jokes, many with a sexual connotation, and his skill in telling about those. I suspect him of having a perfect memory, and see in his ability a brilliant aptitude to have endless associations with whatever presents itself. Frankly, at times this brilliance of his drives me nuts, especially when I am in the middle of a well-designed line of argument. Yet, that is his style: to disrupt, to interrupt, to distract with the anecdote, to make an association with another possibility, to find exception, to add a hyperbole, to apply irony.

In the meantime I will try to stabilize, to get things clear, to follow a well lined out path, to follow the argumentation step by step, just as I try to write this essay. With some order, with a point to it. I refrain from the multiple citations, from the unsettling associations, from the complexities. I am trying to keep things simple. It is certainly not Slawek's style.

And here is the oddity. I do suspect that in the end Slawek is more clear about his own identity, more stable in the way he lives his life, than I am. He has not only been

married to the same woman his whole life and pursued a solid academic career, mostly at the same academic institution whereas I remarried, have a complex family life, changed venues a lot, tried to set up my own academy, and recently took up a political position. The destabilizer appears stable and the stabilizer quite unstable. So what are we talking about?

In a few months we will start the next series of classes to discuss our differences.

**Corresponding author**

Arjo Klamer can be contacted at: [klamer@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:klamer@eshcc.eur.nl)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)