

The Law of Jante in a Local Translation

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Abstract

In this chapter, I investigate a specific aspect of the relationship between literature and social sciences. I believe that the insights of a novelistic imagination become translated into popular culture and, in this way, reach social practices. Thus, social sciences need to pay attention to this process as it constitutes an important part of the circle of representation and formation that connects literature with social practices.

Keywords

Popular culture, social practice, cultural translation, literature and sociology, organizational culture.

The Crucial Role of Popular Culture

There is a long tradition in social sciences that establishes, or rather, re-establishes, the connections between literature, social theory, and social practices. After all, the modern novel and sociology were born together. Zola believed he was practicing sociology by writing novels and many of the Chicago sociologists saw the difference only in style (Lepenies, 1988; Cappetti, 1993). However, as the new social sciences needed to differentiate themselves from other genres, the two grew apart, only to be repeatedly reunited. In 1963, Lewis A. Coser introduced his “experimental” collection of readings *Sociology Through Literature*:

Literature (...) is social evidence and testimony. It is a continuous commentary on manners and morals. Its great monuments, even as they address themselves to the eternal existential problems which are at the root of the perennial tensions between men [sic] and their society, preserve for us the precious record of modes of response to peculiar social and cultural conditions (Coser, 1972/1963, p. xv).

Literature cannot replace systematic investigation, but it can provide sociologists with clues as to what phenomena are important, with field material, and with ideas that they can develop into theories. This was why Coser collected a series of excerpts from world-renowned works

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that students could use. In his eyes, the fact that the book had a second edition proved the experiment' success.

Succeeded but not spread; social scientists interested in literature can see how such interest is almost always present, but rarely as a mainstream, a trickle, rather. Thus, in 1968, Dwight Waldo wrote *The Novelist on Organization and Administration*, in which he argues that both theoreticians and practitioners of administration (modern "management") need to read fiction, because, as he said later, it is an easily available but little appreciated resource:

I judge the broad stream of literature ("literature" and Literature) to be a great resource for knowledge and ... Wisdom, both for students and practitioners (Waldo, 1994, p. x).

Waldo generously included "literature" beside Literature, but both Coser and he concentrated on great works. This is especially clear in the Michael Maccoby's approach who was the US psychologist and the last collaborator of Erich Fromm, who thus described the importance of humanities in general for the industry leaders of the 1980s:

The study of the Bible, comparative religion, ethical philosophy and psychology, and great literature leads one to explore the inner life, particularly the struggle to develop the human heart against ignorance, convention, injustice, disappointment, betrayal, and irrational passion. Such education prepares one to grapple with fear, envy, pride, and self-deception. It raises questions about the nature of human destructiveness and the legitimate use of force. Without it, a would-be leader tends to confuse his or her own character with human nature, guts with courage, worldly success with integrity, the thrill of winning with happiness (1981, p. 231).

My colleagues and I have extended this thought to demonstrate that great literature not only provides ideals and discusses moral dilemmas, but also convincingly *represents* – that is, describes the practice of management, often in ways far superior to those of many research reports (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). Great literature combines the subjective with the objective, plots the fate of individuals against that of institutions, and connects micro-events with macro systems. Literature offers narrative knowledge, which is far more usable than logico-scientific one according to Jerome Bruner (1986), who replaced cognitive psychology with a narrative approach.

Literature does not only tell stories, however trustworthy; it is also deeply analytical. Said Milan Kundera: "The novel dealt with the unconscious before Freud, the class struggle before Marx, it practiced phenomenology ... before the phenomenologists" (1988, p. 32). Mikhail Bakhtin explained this "prescience of the novelists" by the artists' "keen sense for ideological problems in the process of birth and generation," which is often keener than that of "the more cautious 'man of science', the philosopher, or the technician" (Bakhtin & Medvedev,² 1928/1985, p. 17).

² Since the 1970s, the works published under the names of Voloshinov and Medvedev have often been ascribed to Bakhtin, who neither consented nor objected. Probably, the works emerged in a group discussion, and the authorship was attributed according to political expediency. Medvedev was a rector of Vitebsk Proletarian University, not yet persecuted (he died in Stalinist purges), whereas Bakhtin had no formal position and in 1928 was sent in exile (Brandist, 2006).

Thus “high culture” can express the ideals, describe the practices of its era, and place them under a questioning gaze.

According to Carl Rhodes and me, the popular culture does the same (Czarniawska & Rhodes, 2006). Mass culture fulfills functions similar to high culture but on a larger scale. It not reaches “the people,” but also *popularizes* high culture. It renders otherwise exotic story plots from Greek dramas, Shakespeare, and the Bible, simple and familiar; it translates them for popular use. By doing so, it perpetuates and modernizes myths, sagas, and folktales. In the process, popular culture might caricature or flatten high culture and mythology – a point elaborated by its many critics from left and right – but also deconstruct or ridicule them, as pointed out by Bakhtin (1965/1984). Importantly, contemporary popular culture reaches many people, quickly.

Popular culture translates and propagates the ideas of its times, and translates back, representing the practices just as the high culture does. Noteworthy, the ideas and the practices might be good or bad, in both a moral and an aesthetic sense. Popular culture shows how to be a hero, but also how to be a villain. Swedish journalists made a documentary about young mafia criminals, revealing that one of the young gangsters knew by heart all of Al Pacino’s lines from Brian DePalma’s movie *Scarface*.³ Thus popular culture not only represents in the sense of mirroring, it also invents, like every translation (Eco, 2003). The practices thus represented may be actual, but they may also be imaginary, which constitutes one of the defining distinctions between literature and social science.

This leads to an additional claim, namely that popular culture not only transmits ideas and furnishes descriptions, but also *actively teaches practices* and provides *templates for interpretation of the world*. In other words, the representation and the formation, the manifestation and the provocation, the mimesis and the poesis are never separated. A manager might read a detective story or watch a Hollywood movie for amusement but might also learn from them about actual or invented practices; and might imitate them, not necessarily via an explicit reflection (Rombach & Solli, 2002). When unexpected events happen at a workplace, people search their common repertoires of plots for the ways of emplotting them, and thus making shared sense of that which does not make sense. This idea is based on Avishai Margalit’s (2003) distinction between a common collective memory that might remain latent, and shared collective memory that is activated. Humanity’s common collective memory is enormous, but only some of it becomes activated to be shared at a given time and place.

Where do the employees look for inspiration and modeling in their sensemaking? Some of them might read the Bible, Shakespeare, or Euripides, but most of them will read a newspaper or watch a TV series. Was Wall Street like Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987) before the movie was made? Perhaps it was, but it may have become even more “wall-street.”

Let me recapitulate the foundational thesis of this article: “Mass culture” popularizes “high culture” by translating (simplifying and modernizing) and circulating it. Popular culture retrieves plots from a common repertoire, and in doing so, it transmits ideals and furnishes descriptions of reality to be shared, and it also teaches practices and provides a means through which we might understand practices. The mirroring and the projection, the expression and the construction, the imitation and the creation stay together.

This thesis is close to the so-called circuit model of culture (Johnson, 1986–1987; Traube, 1992), which suggested that the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products

³ Noomi Liljefors & Mats Sundgren, *Bröder i brott*.

constitute a loop, not a line. Expression becomes control, as popular culture selects and reinforces certain wishes and anxieties of its audience (Traube, 1992, p. 99); control provokes further expression, both of submission and resistance. The easiest way to learn professional practices might be to observe others and imitate everyday routines. However, popular culture, with its larger-than-life heroes, provides material for dreams and rule-breaking behavior. As Linda McDowell notes when analyzing the role of women in London's City, "[r]epresentations of fictional bankers influence the behavior and attitudes of 'real' bankers, and vice versa" (1997, p. 39–40).

The concept of "popular culture" as used in this text includes popular literature, films, TV series, cartoons, journalists' tales, as well as how-to bestsellers, magazines, and the Internet (Gustavsson & Czarniawska, 2004). The boundaries between "high" and "low" culture are judgmental, political and arbitrary (Street, 1997), therefore, can also be destabilized. In addition, contemporary mass culture tends to appropriate "high" cultural forms (Traube, 1992, p. 76), following even in that the example of high culture appropriating many older folk culture forms (of which opera and folk tales are the most obvious instances).

In my previous work, I have explored the route suggested by this thesis looking in fiction for the history of companies in Poland (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Czarniawska, 2007a) and in Sweden (Czarniawska, 2004); exposed the strong plots of the need for a leader in crisis and of the inappropriateness of women in finance (Czarniawska, 2005b; Czarniawska & Rhodes, 2006; Czarniawska, 2007b); and pointing out evident analogies between detective stories and organization studies (Czarniawska, 1999). In the following part, I will present an example to illustrate the translation processes suggested above, namely the popularization of literature by mass media, the resulting simplification and modification of the message, and the circle of reflection and formation of practices.

An Immigrant Comes to Sweden

One of the first culture lessons I received upon coming to Sweden as an immigrant in 1983 was a warning against the horrible "law of Jante" that was oppressing my new country, not the least at its working places. Curious to learn about it, I was directed to its source: a novel by Aksel Sandemose, *En flyktning krysser sitt spor*, from 1933. I knew Sandemose from the Polish translation of *Det svundne er en drom* (1947), and I threw myself enthusiastically onto this key to my new culture.

I emerged from the reading more puzzled than ever. "Jante" is a Danish village where the action of the novel takes place, and "the law of Jante" is a point of the novel, summarized by Sandemose in the form of a decalogue. Its first law is "You ought not believe that you *are* something," and the remaining nine are but variations on the same theme. This is a story of a murderer, Espen Arnakke, who came to Jante and, in the words of Louis Kroneberger in *New York Times* (quoted when the book was published in the USA in 1936), "was too early imbued by his environment by the sense of guilt, to be turned overnight into a haunted man. He was one already. Long before he could have felt that the world has a warrant out for him as a murderer, he felt it had one out for him as Espen Arnakke." In other words, Jante judged Arnakke before anyone else did, and before they learned of his deeds.

Sandemose himself saw his novel as a sociological treatise. It is easy to agree with this. Since Zola, many writers have aimed to depict, and criticize, the society they lived in. But what

was the theme of this treatise? One popular interpretation is that the novel illustrates the pressure exerted on an individual by the members of a small community. Another interpretation, more typical for the times when the book was written, concerns its early premonition of the mechanism that might give rise to fascism: psychological fascism, which forces people to conform to what is seen as a norm.

Neither of these interpretations could explain the popularity of the law of Jante in today's Sweden. To begin with, "conformism" is a phenomenon well-known and described in detail by social psychologists, psychologists and sociologists. (Recently, the institutional theory in sociology replaced this negatively loaded Latin term with its Greek synonym, "isomorphism.") Furthermore, even before Sandemose, European literature dedicated a lot of attention to the oppressive influence of small communities. We may find an excellent example of this in Ivan Bunin's novel *Derevna*, "Byn – Suchodol," from 1910, which must have been known in Sweden as it was translated and published when Bunin received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1933.

As to fascism, seventy years later, we understand its roots much better as scholars have explained them in many works, to mention only those of Hannah Arendt and Stanley Milgram, both inspired by Eichmann's trial in 1961. Milgram's experiments (reported in *Obedience to Authority*, 1974) showed that Nazi crimes could have been committed in the USA. Interestingly, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1970), Arendt quoted the example of the Danes as the people who were able to resist cooperation in the Final Solution.

One could put forward a conjecture that the phenomenon is universal, with the popularity of Sandemose's description stemming from its stylization and its expressive power, as evidenced by its numerous translations (though notably not into Polish) Sandemose himself indicates such a possibility:

Even though the Jante Law is hopelessly universal, and not least makes its demands in so-called 'important conditions', and is more rampant with its passion to conform in Brooklyn than in the small town whose name I have given it – for me the language of Jante had become inextricably intertwined with the culture of Jante. It had become the voice of the Jante god who refused to be used by a Lucifer. (Preface to the Swedish edition of the book, written in 1955).

Is "Lucifer" in the quote the criminal Espen Arnakke or Hitler? Difficult to say as the utterance is very cryptic. Is it good to oppose a Lucifer? Else, is Lucifer a symbol for an angry angel, for a disobedient quest for freedom? Further, the village of Jante judged Espen before they knew him to be a murderer. Was it because they were xenophobic on principle or because they guessed his true nature before he revealed it? In other words, were they prejudiced or astute?

However, these are not the questions discussed in the public discourse in Sweden. We arrive at the process of "popularization," that is, a translation from "high" to "mass" culture usually performed by the media. The contemporary interpretation of the law of Jante, as is often the case with mythologized stories, has little to do with both Sandemose's intentions and the critics' (including mine) readings. It treats it as an archetypical tale grasping "the Swedish mentality" at its worst. A short visit across the Internet shows that, especially in the context of work organizations, the discussion of the law of Jante never ceases.

Here is a short review (citation taken from Czarniawska, 2005b, p. 50):

- Hans L. Zetterberg (sociology professor and former editor-in-chief of *Dagens Nyheter*) claimed in DN on 27 April 1999 that the Law of Jante, which ‘expresses equality without dignity’ is behind the myth of the welfare state.
- Björn Horghby wrote in a series on ‘Swedishness’ in *Kultur & Nöje* on 13 July 1999, under the heading ‘The disciplined Swede’, that the Law of Jante is behind Swedish ‘moderation’ and the tradition of consensus. Liberalism has won over communism, Horghby explained, and so now Swedes must fight against the Law of Jante.
- The online Technologist’s Guide encouraged young technologists to do away with the Law of Jante (and present their merits in full to potential employers).
- *Entrepreneurs in the Midnight Sun* (www.eightseasons.com) reported that during the market days in Vittangi in 1998, a trial was held against Jante (who has gone from being a town to being a person) and as a result, Jante is now dead and the Law of Jante is invalidated throughout the Kingdom of Svea (that is, Sweden).
- SACO, the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations, agreed in its writings on the role of managers (see for example Gunnar Wetterberg’s ‘Foreword’ to *Möjligt att leda*), agreed with this verdict.
- The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs crushed the Law of Jante in 2003 (in radio *Brus nr 4*), but without much success: the Law of Jante prevails in Silicon Valley even now, commented Jonas Ryberg in the magazine *Ny Teknik* from 5 September 2005.
- *ManagementMagazine* (a Swedish equivalent of *Harvard Business Review*) has also followed the wave of personification of Jante and has come up with the following contribution: ‘Jante, which is our heritage as much as forest and steel, is unfortunately not possible to turn into an export success. Instead, it has invaded both our minds and our hearts, leaving us standing like panelled chickens around the walls while new economies take up all the space in the swirls of the world economy’s dance floor’ (Ulla-Lisa Thordén in No. 3, 2005, p. 49).

We should consider Jante as a kind of a Scandinavian prophet, who announced his decalogue to the Scandinavian population. The Swedes face accusations of following his laws too closely (scholars often discuss the theme of overeager adaptation to, e.g., the EU laws, see e.g., Jacobsson, 1997). This obedience to the law of Jante faces strong and common criticism and it explains many working place failings. It is supposed to dampen initiative and foster conformism.

As the quotes indicate, the law of Jante serves as a symbol of “the old Sweden,” the welfare state in the most obviously political utterances, or just a nation of shy people, seeking consensus and satisfied with moderate achievements. People contrast this symbol with the demands of “the new world:” the New Economy (before it collapsed), the European Union, and global competition. The normative message of such popular interpretations is very clear: rebel against the law of Jante, and you will gain success while Sweden will attain prosperity.

This message is firmly based in traditional sociological theories that contrast innovation with imitation. The triumphant return of Gabriel Tarde’s (see the special issue of *Distinktion*, 2004, 9) opens the way for a revision of this truism, showing that innovation and imitation go hand in hand. People who think they *are* something (rather than that they did something of value) create difficulties both in social interactions and in organized work: they have no respect

for their co-workers, and shamelessly claim and maintain special privileges. However, this is my own interpretation of the law of Jante. It emerged as I met, on my own fugitive tracks, more and more people “who thought they *were* something.” This conformism might be universal (and worse in Brooklyn than in Nykøbing that stood the model for Jante). However, it is also possible that, at least in Sandemose’s times, the Scandinavian societies lacked the self-regulating mechanisms of self-irony and irony that existed elsewhere. I tried to verify my interpretation by unsystematic interviews with the natives, and although they were far from agreeing with my interpretation of Sandemose, they accepted my premises.

Consensus-striving and the accompanying conflict avoidance constitute a widely recognized trait of the so-called Swedish and perhaps Scandinavian culture. This trait has been a topic of various discussions involving many contexts, pertaining both to political sciences and organization theory. Moreover, these were sometimes critical and sometimes admiring discussions. Consequently, the use of irony and self-irony are not appropriate interactive devices (although texts can deploy them). People perceive irony as aggressive, while self-irony invites reciprocation, and therefore, people also perceive it as aggressive. In other words, there exist few interactional devices to defend oneself from people “who believe they are something.” The law of Jante, or the subtle disapproval of peers, serves as the main device against it. However, such interpretation is at odds with the popular culture; most importantly, it does not explain why the law of Jante is alive in contemporary Sweden.

Chronotope: Sweden at the Turn of the Last Century

Whichever of the interpretations suggested above we may find most convincing, the fact is that at the times of global economy and the Internet, there are no small closed communities, especially in Scandinavia. Moreover, although Sandemose wrote about a Danish village, and some critics were guessing that he might have meant a Norwegian or even a Finnish one, he never even alluded to Sweden. Why did the Swedes willingly adopt a story by a Norwegian, born and educated in Denmark, a story located in Denmark, and a clearly negative story, as an expression of a “national soul”? The power of the decalogue, that most powerful narrative? An in-born masochism? A tendency to self-flagellation? And why now, or rather, why still?

One possible interpretation connects this interest in Jante’s law to the Swedish modernization process, which equaled Americanization (Löfgren, 1990). Sweden was not alone in this respect, the USA was the symbol of prosperity and modernity for most European countries after the Second World War:

At that time [1950s], Sweden was often portrayed as the most Americanized of the European nations but America represented both an utopia of modernity, informality and efficiency, as well as Hollywood vulgarity and low taste. The contemporary discussion about Americanization mirrored this ambivalence and a middle-class fear of loosing [sic] the position as a clearing-house for the import of international fashions as well as the role of unquestioned arbitrator of good taste. Through the new popular press American ideas and ideals were now made available to everybody and anybody (Löfgren, 1990, p. 26).

A half-century later, the USA is no longer the arbiter of good taste, but certain ideas and ideals are still alive. One of them is the central importance of popular culture, including popular press; another is the ideal of a successful businessperson. The law of Jante is highly relevant in the latter case.

At this point, we could ask, how is this possible if the law of Jante is observed more common in Brooklyn than in Jante? However, the US literature found its remedy against the law of Jante: the story of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Bach, 1970). The 1960s in the USA were the era of the fight against conformism and Bach's book promised New Age solutions to old problems. Jonathan the Seagull was not afraid of being excluded from its flock: he went abroad, learned new way, and returned to its "home flock" to share his newly discovered ideals and recent experiences, prepared for the fight against the current rules of Jante. Swedes remained in Jante.

Even here, we may note an interesting translation. Jonathan the Seagull was to symbolize a quest for transcendence, but it proved to be easily combinable with early heroes of American literature such as Silas Lapham, a successful paint manufacturer from Boston in the 1880s (Boland, 1994). Jonathan and Silas were both entrepreneurs, both desiring mastery over nature. They both won it at various costs. Business is never solely about money, at least not in literature. We cannot find any such heroes for our times in Swedish literature. Like *Buddenbrooks*, they tend to lose their fortunes, not comprehending the new times and the new demands (Czarniawska, 2004).

Is my interpretation correct? It does not purport to be. In reading literature, and in interpreting responses to it, what Marjorie DeVault (1990) called *novel readings* can be valuable as they challenge the currently dominant readings. Similarly, it would be pointless to claim that the Swedes read Sandemose's work incorrectly. Both Wolfgang Iser (1978) and Paul Ricoeur (1981) explained convincingly why texts acquire autonomy once liberated from their authors. However, my suggestions go beyond studying readers' responses. My reading of Sandemose and of its translations into popular culture expresses my conviction that we must follow such translations, because the popular culture creates life templates and influences our understanding of life. Such readings can both offer reflection and foster reflection: one desirable outcome of a chapter like this one would be to encourage young people to read or re-read Sandemose's book. Finally, such exercise aims to create what Umberto Eco (1990) called "a semiotic reader," namely a sophisticated consumer of popular culture, who can see through its tricks without losing the enjoyment it offers.

This kind of rapprochement between social sciences and popular culture differs from the original unity of sociology and literature. For further characterization, I will use the metaphor of a dialogical relationship, as coined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1928/1982). After all, he was the first to think of "a poetics for sociology" – long before Richard H. Brown (1977).

Social Science and Popular Culture: A Bakhtinian Dialog?

The notion of dialog as a mutual search for knowledge neither party previously possessed gave way to several others, often opposing this idea. For Socrates, a "dialog" meant trapping the student so that he (it used to be "he") could find the answer that Socrates considered to be correct.

For Habermas, an ideal dialog was like a choir of angels: nobody interrupting, and all ending in a consensus. For most academics, it means two monologues following one another. In contrast, I propose the Bakhtinian concept of a *dialogic relationship*, i.e., texts that interrogate the world, as a model for the interaction between social sciences and popular culture (Bakhtin, 1981). Such a dialog does not have to be pleasant – quarrels are inevitable – and does not need to lead to a consensus (one type of new knowledge might be that a consensus with this specific party will never be possible). Massive translations will be necessary. However, it remains important to end the isolation between the two. Benjamin DeMott, a professor of humanities at Baruch College in New York, eloquently expressed his views when invited to deliver a series of lectures on business culture:

The truth is that all of us belong to the whole of the age we inhabit, not alone to the special sector called work, production, investment; none of us can live in a world apart (1989, p. 134).

What kind of interrogations can such dialogic texts initiate? There is already a whole branch of sociology called culture studies, which examines popular culture and its impact on social practices. I suggest turning attention towards less examined connections, for example, between popular culture and management, or business administration, as we sometimes call it. A great many possibilities exist:

- analysis of *translations* performed by popularizers on various kinds of sources (canonical texts, mythologies, folk tales);
- scrutiny of representations of social practices (historical and present) in popular culture, with special emphasis on comparative studies;
- analysis of normative messages (also here across times and places, with a special emphasis on the modeling role of the US media in other countries);
- investigation of “strong plots” (interpretative templates active in a given time and place) and the reasons for their activation into shared memory (studies of fashions – in popular culture and in social practices);
- exploration of disruptive messages (ridiculing the norm, encouraging resistance, offering deconstruction);
- connecting all the above to actual practices (examining the consequences of popular culture).

Analyzing the possible connections between literature and organization theory in another context, I also suggested that social scientists can learn from literature how to write (Czarniawska, 1999). In the present context, I must note that popular culture has a strong limitation: it is always bound to the existing canons. It needs something to popularize or to ridicule. In that sense, it offers a better model for consulting than for research writing. However, popular culture always arrives later to a place already inhabited by avant-garde, which, sometimes at a high cost, attempts to go beyond the canon, make trials and errors, and experiment. To the benefit of us all, social science research could play in contemporary culture a role similar to that of avant-garde in arts, along with fiction writers.

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