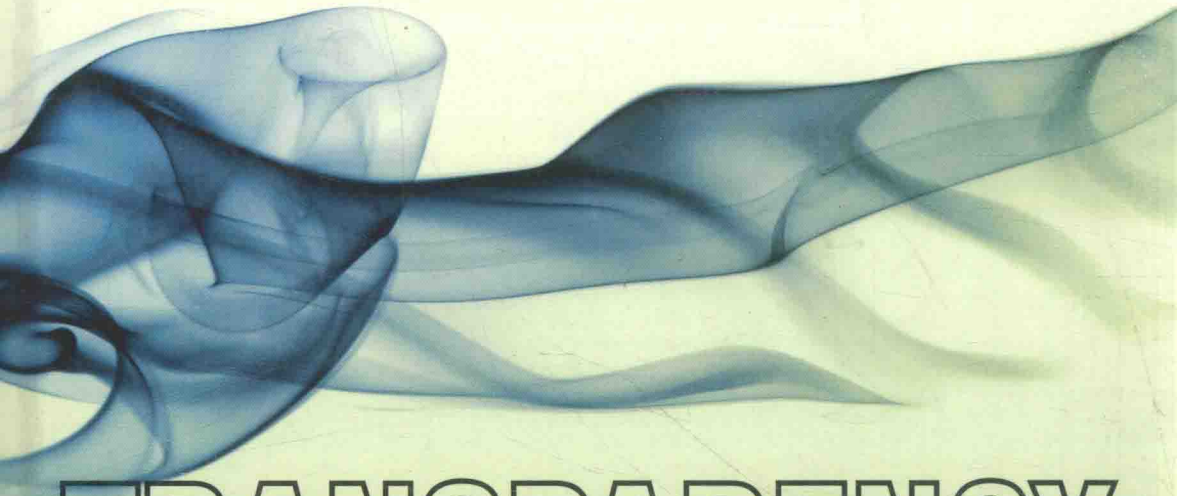

TRANSPARENCY
IN A NEW GLOBAL ORDER

UNVEILING ORGANIZATIONAL VISIONS

Edited by
CHRISTINA GARSTEN
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Transparency in a New Global Order

Unveiling Organizational Visions

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Preface

Is this the transparent book? This was the question often raised by little Andreas, as he observed us working on the manuscript on the computer. Yes it is. In so far as it engages with what 'transparency' is and might be, in social and organizational life.

There are many people, events and influences that have played a role in the writing of this book. The idea was born out of our research into the interplay of markets and cultures, and the role of free-floating keywords, such as 'transparency' and 'accountability' in fashioning globalizing markets. Several colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology and Score, Stockholm University, have contributed in significant ways to drafting the ideas: most notably, Magnus Boström, Nils Brunsson, Raoul Galli, Anna Hasselström, Ulf Hannerz, Linda Soneryd, Renita Thedvall, and Mattias Viktorin.

We tested the early set of ideas out at a conference in Copenhagen, arranged by the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), already in 2002. The contributors to this session on 'The Politics of Transparency', Simone Abram, Bodil Birkebæk Olesen, Liselotte Hermes da Fonseca, Peter Phillimore, and Renita Thedvall, came up with ideas that inspired us to move on towards a book project. Later on, in 2004, we presented our work at the European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS) Conference in Ljubljana, where several colleagues, not least Tor Hernes, gave inspiring inputs. We are also grateful to the stimulating discussions with the participants at the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT) conference in Stockholm in 2006, where we presented a draft of our introductory chapter. Also in 2006, we arranged a panel on 'Transparency and the Global Market' at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Meetings in San Jose, California. The contributors to the panel, Joshua Berson, Jacques-Olivier Charron, Lilith Mahmud, Jean E. Maier, Linda Soneryd, Geneviève Teil, Renita Thedvall, Marc Ventresca and Holger Sommerfeldt, Mattias Viktorin, and Davida Wood, probably do not realize how important their perspectives were at this point.

We are grateful for the valuable ideas and criticisms provided through discussions following lectures given at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Oslo, in particular by Marianne Lien; at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, not least by Roy

Dilley and Christina Toren, and at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Maynooth, by Lawrence Taylor, Jamie Saris, and Mark Maguire.

We also have our esteemed contributors to thank for their patience with our editing. Their belief in 'the transparent book', and their willingness to work on redrafts and revisions, energized the writing process.

Christina Garsten and Monica Lindh de Montoya
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Introduction: examining the politics of transparency

Christina Garsten and Monica Lindh de Montoya

Transparency is a concept that has gained increasing currency and favour as an organizing principle and administrative goal in recent years. We note calls for greater transparency directed towards states, markets and corporations, in civil service, in local and national political processes, and in regard to large agglomerating institutions such as the European Union and the World Trade Organization. In a wide variety of situations the idea of transparency is held up as a panacea for the ills that a concentration of power can imply; a way in which citizens can attain a level of justice and control vis-à-vis institutions that affect their lives. We observe transparency in organizational policy, not least in relation to discussions of democracy and electoral procedures. It is invoked in fights against corruption and bribery, and in efforts to promote 'good governance'. In the financial world, transparency is closely linked to pressures for more open and just accounting and auditing procedures. Transparency is also invoked more generally by protective state agencies as a set of technologies that promise to render life safer for ordinary people by close monitoring of risky elements, human and other. We observe transparency not only in organizations, but also more widely in our changing material world – in architecture, design and fashion. Clothing becomes more and more revealing, transparent social life 'on exhibit' is celebrated in endless reality shows and revealing documentaries are praised – subtlety and fiction take a back seat to 'what's really happening'.

The call for transparency intensifies at a time when the modern nation-state is faced with the challenge of governing financial flows of capital, cultural influences and organizational impacts. Transparency runs alongside attempts to organize and control beyond local and cultural particularities. It suggests that visibility, information and openness are closely linked with organizing, and that what is visible can also be represented, objectified, measured and compared. One of the prerogatives of late capitalism, it seems, is making the world hospitable for translocal, universal forms of administration and governance and this entails making the world legible and transparent. As James C. Scott (1998) has shown for the development

of the modern state, a central project from the outset was to make society more 'legible'. Legibility, Scott argues, was part and parcel of the post-Enlightenment process of 'the administrative ordering of nature and society' and the story of the inexorable growth of state power (Scott, 1998, p. 83). That citizens, communities, corporations could be read, distinguished, seen, indeed made transparent, was central for the making of the modern state. It would seem that this is even more central today, with global governance being one of the daunting challenges on the political agenda. In a recent significant volume edited by Hood and Heald (2007), the widespread nostrum of 'good governance' is placed under critical scrutiny, as they trace out the history of transparency and related doctrines in government and public policy. 'Like many other notions of a quasi-religious nature, transparency is more often preached than practiced, more often invoked than defined, and indeed might ironically be said to be mystic in essence, at least to some extent', it is argued (Hood, 2007, p. 1). Yet, the doctrine of transparency has been put forward as a means to make the state and its inhabitants more 'knowable' and 'governable', a process that involves some tricky trade-offs and balancing acts. Transparency, then, is an entry-point to the understanding of contemporary society and culture and the power-games that are played out in attempting to organize it.

Yet few attempts have been made to examine the actual content and playing-out of transparency, such as, for example, the complex negotiations through which it is determined what shall be displayed and what shall remain hidden, how power and control enter into the practices of transparency and the processes through which transparency is (or is not) achieved. How is the concept interpreted, practised, emulated, inverted or used to achieve particular ends?

This volume explores the ideas and practices of transparency in different social and organizational contexts, with the hope of instigating a discussion of the strengths, limitations, ambiguities and many facets of the term. We aim to shed light on this powerful global discourse and the practices around the concept of transparency by opening up the concept for illumination from a broad, anthropological perspective. In this, we hope to contribute to an understanding of the wider organizational, cultural and ideational context in which transparency is used and put to work. It will allow us to assess in what respects and to what extent the global discourse, as well as the practice, of transparency is actually transforming business and governmental practices, social relations and ways of thinking about these. Moreover, we wish to point to ways in which notions of transparency are involved in efforts to fashion, govern and control the whereabouts of people, and ways in which people circumvent them. In our view, transparency is part and parcel of a nexus of associated ideas that together make up the new,

globalized market rationality in contemporary society. It is suggestive of the challenges of organizing society in a period of intense globalization of capital and culture. More specifically, we suggest, transparency is closely linked to a neoliberal ethos of governance that promotes individualism, entrepreneurship, voluntary forms of regulation and formalized types of accountability. It is powerful in that it is inscribed in political, financial and cultural documents, processes and policies that not only suggest, but push for, a certain normative order.

Most of the chapters in the volume discuss ethnographic cases and are tightly focused on illuminating processes aimed at achieving transparency. They cover several sectors, including corporate visions, European policy-making, the new military, financial markets, education and architecture. Together, they provide a diversity of ethnographic material and a wide scope of analysis. Our ambition throughout has been to reveal the connection between the global discourse and local practices of transparency and to contribute to the discussion of the concepts, models and metaphors that guide and shape organizational, social and aesthetical practices today. We believe the volume's primary interest lies in the empirical richness of local case studies and the way in which these are related to wider policy aims, ideological shifts and the discursive dynamics of influential organizations.

VISIBILITY, OPENNESS – AND A 'CULTURE OF MISTRUST'

Much of the potential and power of the idea of transparency in organizational life is related to its power as a mechanism for visibility and revelation. So much in human life is charged with the energy that feeds off the tension between the known and the unknown, and is communicated to us though unquestioned practices that are deeply embedded in our social lives. From our earliest years we are taught about concealment, we are taught to clothe ourselves, play peek-a-boo and then hide and seek. We are taught that we must tell the truth, but discover that social fibs are both tolerated and necessary. As we grow older we gradually learn what information is best withheld from parents, teachers, employers, friends. We form groups, we learn the importance of revealing and withholding information for belonging and for drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. We learn to present ourselves, devising self-images that are a compromise of what we think we are, and what we would like to be. Some things are kept as skeletons in the cupboard, as it were. In order to remain viable social beings, we need to provide a reasonable degree of transparency to those around us, an

accounting of who and what we are; and we do so through, for example, curricula vitae (CVs) and resumés, work histories and the life histories we tell friends and acquaintances. Our friends and associates also help us do the job, through the mechanisms of anecdote and gossip.

Transparency implies visibility, openness and communication. It is a metaphorical extension of its meaning in the physical sciences: a 'transparent' object is one that can be seen through. 'Seeing through', however, is always a matter of position and of degree. Quoting Bauman (1998, p. 29), '[w]hat is easily legible and transparent for some, can be dark and opaque for others'. And herein lies the power of transparency as an organizational vision; it can be played with, negotiated and temporarily agreed upon. Vision, seeing and seeing through, as Heidegger would have put it, is a way of engaging with the world. And as such, transparency may in our reading be understood as 'a gaze' moved by a particular 'circumspective concern' (Heidegger, 1982, p. 176). In a much related manner of thinking, David Michael Levin in his intriguing volume *The Opening of Vision* (1988) has traced certain aspects of contemporary Western society and culture to our concrete historical experience with vision. From discussions of egocentric vision in everyday life, the world-view of science, the political economy of modern technology and the paradigm of vision in metaphysics, he draws on the Frankfurt School and Foucault to demonstrate that many of the sufferings, the needs and the injustices of our world are connected to vision, to particular ways of seeing and the patriarchal will to power.[1]

Transparency is about visibility, about the flow of information in the numerous relationships established between citizens, the citizen and the state, the citizen and the economy in which he or she makes a living. Transparency has often been linked to totalitarian regimes, implying monitoring and control by way of repressive technologies.[2] In its present version, it is instead tightly interlinked with the practice of democracy and with neoliberalism, and with a cluster of ideas that have gained increased currency since the beginning of the 1990s and the end of the Cold War, that point towards a certain way of organizing society that emphasizes the individual as the basic constitutive active agent in the construction of his or her fate and of society-at-large. In such a vision of social life, the transactions between citizens and the state and within the economy must be open and observable in the interests of maintaining a level playing field for all concerned. In processes of globalization of markets, tightened economic competition and a fragmented political authority, such ideas gain increased momentum. Thus the calls for transparency grow and spread across the globe. What is notable (in each system of power that has taken transparency on board, we may add) is, in Zygmunt Bauman's words (1998, p. 33), 'the positing of transparency and legibility as a goal to be politically pursued – a task; something which still

needs to be enforced on recalcitrant reality, having first been carefully designed with the help of specialists' expertise'.

Information is the crucial component of transparency processes. Governments and their institutions must provide reliable information in order to be considered transparent in their intentions, their policies and in the implementation of these. Publicly disseminated audits of performance support policies and serve as a measure of how well intentions are put into practice. Through consultation with different stakeholders, government institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can also involve the public, benefiting from their time and input, and providing greater visibility into public processes (Strathern, 2005). The economic sector is equally subject to demands for transparency. Private or publicly held companies are examined for their economic practices regarding labour, accounting, information to shareholders, their economic worth. Their goods and services are examined for safety and for adherence to various standards which are not uncommonly the product of so-called 'soft law', or voluntary regulations. Many goods bear a series of labels indicating compliance with both national and international regulations. Keywords associated with transparency, then, are stakeholders, policy, audit, visibility, accountability, compliance, regulation, governance. Others that might be added are equality, fairness, individuality, responsibility, integrity.

Transparency is appearing in a number of other likely and unlikely areas of our lives. One is in the sphere of the workplace, with glass buildings, open-plan offices and various fora for communication in the workplace. Increasingly, companies and business schools are adopting software solutions that openly reveal each individual employee's calendar and whereabouts. At universities, we are being drawn into procedural exercises aimed at making visible, and scrutinizing our 'outputs' in terms of international publications in high-ranking journals and number of students passed, as well as formalizing and making our policies and administrative routines auditable. The European Bologna educational reform focuses on implementing transparent, comparable educational systems within the European Union (EU) member states, and courses are designed to be transparent regarding content, goals and examination criteria, allowing students to better evaluate what they sign up for and holding teachers accountable (cf. Strathern, 2000). Homes also are becoming more open, with social areas integrated with the kitchen where the family spends much of its time, as are products – see-through watches and appliances, storage boxes and closets. Another arena is between the individual and society, with exhortations to 'be yourself' and show your 'own style', in short to perform one's personality – and consumption is also to an increasing degree becoming a way of manifesting a political persona, through the choice of particular goods and