Tightening and loosening as organization creation: theoretical analysis for the governance of higher education systems.

Sub-theme 06: (SWG) Revisiting the 'Publicness' of Organization, Management and Bureaucracy

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In the last decades many reflections and empirical studies faced the problem of loosely coupled organizations becoming more complete organizations, the opposite of what they have been recognized. What is less investigated is a reflection over what makes an organization be or become more tightened (or more loosened) and under which circumstances, conserving theoretical coherence within the constructionism paradigm and sense-making theory. Considering the restricted field of higher education and the more recent debate about the universities as organizations changing into complete organizations, a more general perspective is faced to understand how theory can see these processes from a bigger picture point of view. Although in a tentatively way, the discussion includes which conditions and enacting features may trigger an organization to become more tightened (tightening organization making), or vice versa more loosened (loosening organization making).

Keywords: sense-making; universities; loosely coupling; tightening coupling; decoupling; change.

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1. Introduction to the topic. Hybridity and the role of environment

The definition of organizations reminds essentially to the classical assumption by Max Weber and his classification, being the bureaucratic type the first we generally have in mind. This type is eventually split into private and public organizations, being the latter clearly oriented to the creation of public goods. The nowadays panorama of debate more and more has coped with the evidence of hybrid organizations that challenge and hamper the usual definitions and borders within classifications and borders of each organization with its environment. By the same token, the environment is under discussion. It is not only a matter of blurring organizations imposing a reflection about when something ends and the external world starts. It is even a matter of the theoretical assumption of the role of environment. In a classical model environment is a place where row resources are taken, transformed into something of some value plus some refuse the environment will take as a negative externality. The classical reflection over public organizations is substantially different as the externalities ought to be positive (i.e. a better, or even at least some, education for everybody) and the internal machine of public organizations are ruled by stiff rules and roles that assure rights for citizens like a private organization could be in order to make goods or to deliver services.

Two theories, mostly coherent to each other, successfully invaded the debate. The sensemaking (cit ! Weick 1995) and the new institutionalism (Selznick? Paul&DiMaggio?) both were born in USA in the 70s to investigate the actual mechanism of strange organizations, namely *professional organizations* (Mintzberg XXXX) like schools, universities or hospitals because they have great leeway of freedom and disconnect from the expected way to control their "productivity", despite they are clearly public good producers. After some decades of impressive citations and uses of these organizational theories, the events reshuffled the reality pushing private companies to be sensible to informal dynamics, enacting creativity conditions and so forth. On the other hand – which is the sake of this article –, public sectors have been pushed to work in a private style and to become in some cases "normal" organizations, that is, tightened organizations. Convergence, if not confusion, seems to dominate the scene (Aghion et al. 2010) while most of the terms "organized anarchies" (cit! March et al ?), loosely coupled organizations (cit), decoupling (cit) and other are seldom contextualized or updated into the new contexts and much more often used as easy labels to define recurring conditions or, heuristically worse, to assume that actors in a sectors should be nothing but having those feature (disregarding those exceptions that hardly are fully explained from a more general theory).

In this paper I assume the theory of sensemaking and the neo-institutional paradigm as a matter of starting stance, taking into consideration the issue of public organizations and more specifically the higher education ones (hereafter called for simplicity "universities" though the latter would not include the binary systems or other national terminologies, like "colleges"). In particular, I shall try to connect the most recent debate (both scientific and more policy oriented) to give a broader framework to analyze, in a constructivist perspective, what conditions make universities be more tightened (the condition they have been expected to become) or still more loosened (the condition they come from "by nature").

The paper develops as follows: the next section provide an insight into the field of higher education and its scientific literature. This helps to give a context to the general issue. Thus, the tightening and loosening are introduced as theory. A more policy oriented section follows to detach description from outcomes of policies, a milestone of neo-institutionalism. The core of the discussion is faced later with a tentative introduction of features that cause or explain (nothing but associations are pretended to be argued even though the assumption is that the tightening and the loosening are reactions from other conditions) the changing of universities toward one or the other pole (tightening and loosening respectively), considering more probable implications. Conclusions try to wrap the contribution for the ongoing debate.

2. The field. What higher education institutions are and have been becoming.

Nowadays higher education organizations are reckoned peculiar sort of organizations (Musselin 2007). Notwithstanding, universities can be public or private, even though they may be considered a public good or a public service, but always with the positive externalities to filter the most educated people for the next élite, at national or even international perspective. Despite the many ways to classify universities, even public universities are nowadays ruled more and more under the credo of new public management (NPM) and further evolutions of it, emphasizing the shift toward the entrepreneurial pole of Burton Clark's triangle (Clark 1986). At least, any universities, even those in continental Europe traditionally patterned by the *hollow* model (Whitley 2014), are induced to take carefully the internal management of the black box of the creation and transmission of knowledge. This change is similar to other public organizations that provide other sort of services. For instance, all public organizations delivering services or any other good on behalf of a specific policy have been by the time asked to be more accountable and to demonstrate to be effective (and efficient) in meeting those goals. Accountability is in fact a way to have an acknowledgement of what is done and what is actually achieved. Achievements are usually measured by indicators, and

indicators tell the performance of a "unit", of any production cell. Units may be individual, teams, departments, such as universities themselves. To this regard, the more pretending expectations and the more competitive contexts trigger the emphasis over productivity and their producers, being them individual or more often collective. As Meyer and Rowan (2006) advised, educational organizations, usually defined loosely sort of coupled organizations, are not always and no more so clearly so. Refreshment in theoretical assumptions looks to be needed. Or simply we should revalue the theories in accordance with most recent empirical findings?

What makes universities different is not only the specificity *in se*. It is even a question of trying to change their "peculiarity" (being loosely coupled) into "normality" (being tightly coupled). This is striking, as since the 70s the educational organizations – especially universities, school and hospitals – were studied for their specific loosely coupled assets. This uncommon and intriguing pattern was highlighted for its extrinsic advantages in terms of persistence, buffering, adaptability, satisfaction of members, and, last but not least, effectiveness (Orton, Weick 1990). Agent-based simulations moreover are at the basis of the so called "anarchic organizations" (Cohen at al. 1972; 1986), a captivating definition aimed at explain why under certain circumstances such as uncertainty of *modus operandi* (the knowledge and awareness of "technology of production" in their terminology), an organization takes an asset which is very far from that of the classic ideal type of the public administration based on rules, hierarchies, stiff career ladders and so forth, which reminds to the Weberian description. To this regard evidence reinforces that universities would be the ideal example of organizations labeled as "organized anarchies" since, for instance, in these organizations decisions are most likely and effectively to be taken *by flight* (a sort of decision taken rapidly and grounded inthe assumption that problems can be dealt with in the very specific moment in which they emerge). Hence decisions are taken by flight because those organizations are more likely dominated by: 1) possibility to leave a position for another; 2) adopted solutions that may have not taken into account previous discussions on the same issue; 3) actual performance rules over discretional predispositions (Takahashi 1997).

Despite the specificities of quasi-organizations and the strong patter of inter-organizational communities (i.e. epistemic communities *across* universities based on classification of the scientific personnel but even according to mere scientific reciprocal recognition in terms of interests and prestige), this field has observed deeply the consequences of the arrival of private management practices. Nonetheless, the seminal works by Weick, Cohen March and Olsen, Clark and few others are generally left in the background as generic depictions of what universities are. Consequently, literature in higher education studies has tended to highlight the novelty of reforms, to strengthen the comparability over different countries – for instance following and analyzing the consequences

of the Bologna process, if we refer to Europe as this article aims to – and describing the changes in progress. Literature to this regard is solid and continuing updated (Paradeise et al. 2009; Shattock 2014; Gornitza, Kogan Amaral 2005; Musselin, Teixeira 2014; Stensaker, Välima, Sarrico 2012). These advance in the knowledge of higher education systems and higher education organizations have left apart, as a result, a more comprehensive theoretical approach. In fact, in many cases the theories are referred to "ideologies" (Deem) and practices (like NPM and other more recent derivations) or to juridical and managerial processes (Bouckaert Halligan 2008; Olssen Peters 2005). Both are historically and contextually laden, which makes them specific theories and not what a middle range theory would require (Merton). The general framework is even more complicated by the consequences of the NPM inspired reforms: efforts have been made to reduce the loosely coupled trait of organizations in order to govern them in a more managerial way, which pave the way to have better (and legitimized, at least at juridical level) monitoring of the governing and performance of these organizations. The manifest aim of reforms occurred in many countries let scholars focus mainly on this change: from loosely coupled organizations (*i.e.* communities of scholars, or floors dominated by chairs) toward (more) tightened coupled organizations (De Boer et al. 2007; Shattock 2006). Without any doubts, there have been sound and relevant findings, and still now efforts are pursued to understand how this change may happen and which scenarios these new national and transnational patters generate.

So, if the previous seminal studies were aimed at discover the positive patterns of the loosely coupled organizations within a dominant model toward which they were a disturbing and weird presence, the last years were spent by scholars in higher education studies in observing the positive and negative consequences of the reduction of looseness (or –said in a different way – the increment of tightness) of the peculiar world of academics.

To this regard the higher education organizations are a good example of organizations whose natural tendency is to enact loosely coupled assets but whose production and life has become less free, even though with relevant path dependency patterns at national levels. States or other stakeholders (alumni, firms, students, families, regional entities etc.) are interested – and may have some power – to make universities more accountable and prepared to show their value (this referring to performance), rather than assuming adherence to societal values (this referring to ideological and political legitimation). The "publicness" and "universalism" of values, as described by Merton in relation to scientists' world, are – and to some extents have always been (Neave 2012) – subjected to new rules and actors who let them pursue this endeavor, basically giving both resources and social recognition. Hence to understand the implications of new and changing constraints in higher education system is a privileged field to study what Kelman (2007)

admonishes to have happened to be the two separated branches of public organizations from one side and management practices on the other. In this sense, this theoretical analysis – nested in the new-institutionalism – explores this increasing ambiguity with particular reference to the dichotomy of tightening and loosening processes in an organization. This exercise could let read the phenomena of academic organizations in a wider organizational perspective (universities like any other organizations). Attention is paid not only in what makes an organization closer to one pole of the ideal-type, but even in polity consequences that changes (or not-changes) let emerge from policies (the update of the classical *decoupling* dilemma).

Within this framework an attempt is made to consider some of the key features affecting the governance from a policy perspective, such as: the performance indicators and policies, steer at the distance tools (evaluations; quality assurance) (Ferlie et al. 2008), different sets of accountability (Stensaker Harvey 2010), and different rationales for funding. To this regard the recent debate about new ways of governance in public administrations (Bouckaert, Halligan, 2008; Osborne 2010; Pollitt, Bouckaert 2009; Groaneveld, Van de Walle 2011) ought to be included in a wider perspective.

3. What *coupling* actually mean within the sense-making theory? A descriptive dimension.

That of the loosely coupled organization may be seen as a sort of discovery. People thought all organizations in a post WWII era ought to work in a certain way, but at one point things were too much at odds with theory. That of sensemaking and of loosely coupled organizations is, in the contrary, a theory construction called to answer empirical evidence. The first step to understand what theory says is to describe loosely (and not loosely) organizations as ideal-types by some patterns. Table 1 to this regard can be helpful. The tightened organization, or Weberian first type called bureaucracy (Diefenbach Sillince 2011), is characterized by a formal, "tight", structure. It has specific roles and requires an appeasement of those roles and rules. In loosely coupled organizations there are roles, but these are not so pressing and demanding: people – even line managers – recognized that to eschew what roles formally impose is acceptable. On the other hand, in tightened organizations the informal structure is almost denied, generally suppressed or seen as an exception. In loosely coupled organizations informal structures are more likely to govern the whole organization on the basis of some autopoietic dynamics, these being the actual network(s) of bonds that render that organization unitary within its fragmentation. The decision making is radically

different. In tightened organizations formal decisions will impose how activities will be executed; in loosely coupled organizations decisions are elaborated as long as problems arise.

Tightened organizations know how they work; rather, there is a (top-down) consensus over how they have to work and emphasize the need to carefully monitor each activity. The extent to which there is proven thoroughness is a different matter: tightened organizations are organized to fine tune themselves their thoroughness, but of course they would not give up the assumption that must know and share how to act. In loosely coupled organization this technology, this *modus operandi*, is missing or is not recognized. However, if there is an official attempt to measure something, even though this something is hard to be grasped and is contested (see further), the situation is already a different one. Loosely coupled organizations are those where none is *actually* attempting to measure and monitor how activities are accomplished and all members are committed to some degree to avoid checks.

Table 1. Patterns of tightened and loosened organizations.

Patterns	Tightened organization	Loosened organization
Formal structure	Defined and requiring clear roles	Poor emphasis over what is expected by roles
Informal structure	Denial or restriction of shade hierarchy	Influence of shade hierarchies
Decision making	By resolution	By flight
Modus operandi	Consensual rules	Consensus about lack of stiff rules
Checks	Acknowledge on how to inspect above rules in order to know outputs	Debate, disquiet, lack of stable and valid ways to measure what is got and how
Outcome control	Presence of feedback over compliance	Expectation not to handle compliances lever to act for some purposes
Mission	Legitimation by proven hard facts	Legitimation by acceptance of sharing values

Source: own elaboration.

Checks are carefully pursued and inspected in tightened coupled organizations as the quality and quantity of outcomes of its production equal success or failure. In loosely coupled organizations, in coherence with modus operandi, there is no part of the organization that will try to check. On the contrary, the output is taken for granted as the organization itself is a warranty and is, somehow, the product itself (i.e. a college *is* where education happens, no matter *how*). All these last three patterns tell that in tightened organizations nothing is left to chance, whereas in loosely coupled organizations any formal attempt to look inside the black box is useless, at that box is dark itself and does snot store any reliable information.

Overall, missions and legitimation mechanisms are different. In tightened organizations missions are based on the fact that legitimation is proved by hard facts. A private company (such as a public

organization under the credo of NPM) may find legitimation by providing goods or services that "clients" find worthy of the money the producers/suppliers ask for. Following the neo-institutional theorists (Meyer Rowan 1983), loosely coupled organizations are characterized by the acceptance of share values at society level. Compulsory education in a society relying on a strong welfare State will assume that schools are one of the pillars of that Welfare State. As far as a school share this value, their mission and goals are met and they will be funded to exercise its role.

Yet, tightening or loosening are not static attributions of a sort of organization, but endless processes that all organizations have within them (Weick XXXX). The governance of any organization may be assumed as an eternal changing one, like the Heraclitus' river (Tsoukas Chia 2002; Gioia Patvardhan 2012). Following the main structure of the Karl Weick's theory, the pattern of an organization can be reduced to the micro level of sense production, as the social construction of an organization may be defined as nothing more than the sedimentation of many sense-making activities (Weick et al. 2005; Weick 1976). Nonetheless sensemaking theory is not necessarily a theory of micro-sociological remit, even though it is more often investigated from the "bottom" point of view (Brown Colville Pye 2014). Thus, three constructivist points can be discussed to defend the position that tightening and loosening (or tightly and loosely coupling).

1) The "loosely coupled" organizations don't exist, as any organization are somewhere in the middle of this continuum (Orton Weick 1990). So it is worthy to remind that the theory is not normative and organizations never reflect ideal types (Lutz 1982; Fusarelli 2002; Goldspink 2007; Rubin 1979). The same can be said about a totally tightened organization.

2) As the loosening and tightening are *enacting* processes, it is essential not to f underestimate, the intrinsically dynamic reality. If organizations are seen through this perspective, a single organization – regardless of being private or public its "nature" in terms of public/private nature, industry or national patterns – may change along time in one direction or another. Probably an empirical analysis would consider that in some of its parts an organization enacts tightening, in other it may enacts some loosening. furthermore, an empirical research might asses that some dynamics, in the same place, can be labeled "tightening" while other "loosening", giving room to a more realistic picture of what an organization actually is in concrete, since changes can reshuffle things more than give straight and uniform strokes (see Fig. 1). Essentially organizations all along their life cycle will change (or confirm through the enactions) their fabric.

3) The labeling of managerialism, bureaucracy and public organizations may be wrapped together by the new-institutionalism paradigm in order to understand how the change along tightness/looseness degree may produce desired effect or not (i.e. decoupling and further

development of the term, see further). This third point entails the shift from an analytical perspective toward a policy approach that will be deepened in the next section.

Fig. 1. The Ideal-type of completely tightened and loosened organizations vis-à-vis two realistic organizations both enacting change toward the other opposite pole without changing substantially their *nature*.

Completely tighten organization   Completely loosened organization

α_0 → α_1 β_1 ← β_0

Case α: A more tighten organization that enacts some loosening (i.e. a company)
Case β: A more loosened organization that enacts some tightening (i.e. a university)

Source: own elaboration.

As widely known and often cited (Mintzberg 1979; Murphy Seashore 1999; March Olsen 1972), the education system and research and development organizations are considered organizations or industries whose technology of production is not easily to be defined, measured, planned in its outputs, or even understood by its members. This is one of the reasons why universities, that combine education and research, have always been considered loosely coupled organizations. This pattern of loosely coupled organizations was recognized by Burton Clark in his analysis of authority in universities, which is often spread among several actors, until the individual, often influent, character of the chair (Clark 1986). The change into more complete organizations generally is assumed as a result of reforms and scarcely – due to its deep difficulty – measured. Hence, the change of universities toward tightening organizations is left in the background as a general assumption. A measurement would imply to see, in a hypothetical continuum, where an organization is positioned from a completely tight organization (which would hamper not only the creativity and innovation which is expected from them, but even its existence, unless it were a very peculiar sort of organization and/or under extraordinary circumstances) to a completely loosed organization (which would result, indeed, as a not-organization) (see Fig. 1). These measurements ought strictly to measure same universities along time, in order to grasp the actual change over time, which implies a strong effort in panel research designs.

Another interpretation entails *change* within the framework of this theory. A tighter organization (case "α" in fig. 1) may, on the other hand, be by the time less tight (or getting loosened) than a

different organization that was already in a closer position to the first pole. Nonetheless one might recognize the organization that is witnessing a change into a tighter asset as a *more (tightly) coupled* one (case "β" in fig. 1). Following the sense-making theory of organization, in supposedly more tightened organization (i.e. a company) the point is to reduce some of the aberrations of being very tight (case "α_1" in fig. 1); on the contrary, a supposedly more loosened organization (i.e. an university) may for some reasons be compelled or encouraged to become a little less loosened by enacting intentional or unintentional tightening change (case "β_1" in fig. 1). Previous interactions (given a conjoint of internal and external conditions) have brought these two hypothetical cases to a certain degrees of loosened or tightened organization. Both are still more tightened or more loosened than the other as at the beginning, but distances were once wider and now are – assuming to be able to measure this with some kind of quantitative scale or through qualitative research design – more similar. If α_1 and β_1 are better or worse organizations than their respective precedent statuses is not easily disputable.

I will refer in the development of the triggering feature in section 5 to a hypothetic "β" case and its systemic environment. I will refer to *change* or *governance* whenever the emergent sense-making assumes a relatively clear and stable pattern of organizational functioning. Governance, as some other over-used terms by both academic community and practitioners, is here referred to both informal and bottom-up dynamics such as by managerialist or however top-down operations. At least, the usefulness of the term consists in being able to grasp both possibilities at the same time even though it pays the drawback to be too much inclusive.

If it is almost well known which are the beneficial and negative consequences of one sort or another of organization (from a static perspective), the dynamic perspective is less clear. What is lacking in the literature is how and under which circumstances these two opposite streams enact. What makes a university be more tightened coupled? What makes it shift again toward a more loosened through loosening processes of practices (if any of this change is possible nowadays)? How does any single feature (and which are these) work within this assumption? Can decoupling, which is a regular behavior of organizations within the neo-institutional paradigm, still occur in a clearly landscape that pushes toward tightening fabric of organizations?

4. ... And what *decoupling* actually is? A policy perspective.

As briefly sketched earlier, the loosely coupled organizations arose in the scientific debate as those that had to assure good direct dependent relations with institutions awarding societal legitimacy

(Meyer Rowan 1983), being that institutions ministerial actors more than agencies, which already reminds to the mission of the NPM framework. If one refers to the field of loosely coupled organizations "by nature" it is easy to realize that health and education sectors are in charge to assure *rights* conquered for the masses. The Reagan and Thatcher era turned these systems into goods producers that have to show to be worthy of public funding. In addition, the players of these systems are bestowed or forced to have greater freedom in order to meet their (potential) clients' desiderata (see further about *autonomy*). as a consequence, we are in front ofa substantial shift: there is no more a right at stake, but a *commodity* through which, *à la sociologie française*, social distinction is perpetrated and social dis-equalities reproduced (Bourdieu). Perhaps it is not a case that the discussion about loosely coupled organizations arose in USA, where the national system is a complex construction, whereas in Europe national patters have been still strong despite the possibly increasing role of the European Union. For sure it is not a case that the debate concerned even the rest of Europe both from politics and policies point of view (as reminded in section two). But considering the different geographical, historical and systemic context, is the neo-institutional assumption of evaluation avoidance (called *decoupling*, by meaning that organizations may not pursue the evaluation they were formally subjected to run in order to be part of a national system) still valid, at least under that specific definition?

Decoupling to this regard is a phenomenon developed by every organizations which try to avoid external influences and controls, through the enactment of tactics and strategies (Meyer Rowan 1991) (see further the *buffering* and decoupling features). The most recent literature shows that the decoupling is not only a normal trend of organizations, but it has deep policy implications too, as they refer explicitly to means aimed at measuring and incenting the compliance of goals based on performance in opaque or hard to be defined fields (Wijen 2014; Bromley Powell 2012). For this reason the seminal assumptions by Meyer and Rowan deserve a further disentanglement,.

For instance, Pollitt (2013) analyzes this theoretical point as the performance indicators influence the main governance of organizations with possible perverse consequences. In his analysis, the answer toward external "private", "managerial" pressures tends to tighten the organizations even in those cases when members of organizations want to defend themselves from external changes. Decoupling in the sense of Meyer and Rowan implies to split organizational structure from actual activities. In "P6"[1] the same authors are even clearer to the point of external interferences, no matter if coming from outside the organization or from higher layers of the same organization – by citing "inspections and evaluation". The most recent debate bringsto a paradox which is worth of more

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[1] "Institutionalized organizations seek to minimize inspection and evaluation by both internal managers and external constituents." (Meyer, Rowan 1991: 59).

attention: there is a difference between reforms and elusions of them. Bromley and Powell (2012), though highlighting the intrinsic *legitimation* process of decoupling (which is coherent with the original works of the 70s), argue that decoupling goes beyond the first steps of the implementation of a policy if the field is featured by opacity of "technology". In these cases outcomes and effectiveness are uncertain and may produce a different sort of decoupling based on a gap between means and ends. What is more and more general for all sort of organizations, actual implementation of external changes are always implemented due to more policy attention to this fulfilment based on performance's indicators. Another reason that makes again the debate over decoupling to emerge, relates to the difficulty to measure public goods, which is a core preoccupation in public administrations. For this reason nowadays the neo-institutionalism has been again re-discussed by scholars the concept of decoupling, whatever it may bring to desired or undesired effects. The policy dimension is therefore a promising investigation field (see further in section 5).

another point connected to the policy perspective is the study of changes produced by policies and reforms, which is a massive and increasing priority preoccupation of public administration domain, not only to run policies under some ideological scheme, but to have better acknowledgement of the actual consequences of them. Although it is an old assumption that in more tightened organizations – given the sort of features left equal like Firestone (1985) did regarding one the few quantitative empirical inquiries in schools using the specific concepts of tightened and loosened organizations – change spreads more easily, nowadays literature is scattered in terms of enacted change in organization, even zooming only in the so called loosely coupled ones or even considering only universities. Coping without conflicts can enact more loosening (or can be seen as a loosened behavior) if new practices are interpreted in a soloist way or "rational resignation" ends to diffuse, which in change can trigger tightening deep consequences (i.e. the establishment of an *internal* labor market among scholars who gladly let themselves be poached) (Teelken 2015). In this perspective the managerialism of tightening practices may consume and deteriorate the loosely fabric of universities, but may even confirm the loosened fabric. Ayer (2012) found that change can be better planned in loosely coupled organizations if discretion and respect of collegiality is taken into account. On the other hand an organization like a university can be a less laggard player if a leader uses conflicts and uncertainties to legitimate more managerial (i.e. tightening) plans (Padgett 1980). Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) theorize that loosely coupled organizations belonging to the same system (i.e. a national higher education system) may turn to become composed by "complete organizations" (i.e. tightened organizations) as a consequence of general reforms that diffuse themselves in a feedforward way and increasing a unique hierarchy and rationality in context dominated by pluri-hierarchies and lack of apparent unitary rationality. Other

studies led in European universities brought to the conclusion that universities trace and pinpoint the creation of a coupling not about values, but concerning indicators pushed by the top-management. These indicators have consequently a crucial role in penetrating the existing hierarchies, or, differently said, in sustaining and legitimizing more tightened universities (Bleiklie Enders Lepori 2015).

If the issue is treated considering triggering features, little literature still know about which specific features make a university (or other supposedly more loosened organization) more tightened or loosened even though in all literature here briefly presented, the nature of universities is at stake and is seen as something that is radically changing.

5. Tightening and loosening: clashing triggering features

Having reviewed the seminal works, and the present debate about the issue of loosening and tightening processes in organizations, this section is aimed at discussing what may favor one or the other process. The general assumption is that both tightening and loosing may happen in a certain organization (considering here a loosened coupled one, with higher education studies' literature occasionally used as referral), but usually under different and opposite conditions. Karl Weick himself (2012) brings to the conclusion that justifications sustain the organization and stabilize them by delivering shared stories about phenomena. Whatever the nature of the explanation at stake (and the sort of actors who may rule, demise or ascend), the sense-making in organization is common in both tightly and loosely coupled organizations and is nothing but a way to look at change. Table 1 will guide the explanation.

Breach and crisis vs. Stability

The first feature is about the condition of the organization in a specific historical moment. Tightening coupling emerges from reactions, conflicts, discontents within the organizations. In one word, tightening may derive from breaches. It is realistic to believe that in some cases this first feature is a by-product of external acts (such as reform of a more general system, see further) that make organizations react with a more "compact" organization which assure more quickness and control of results and performance (see further). Nonetheless, conflicts and other conditions that make organization tighten (in a block against the outside world or in counter-posed factions) may have many origins. Adopting the original terminology of the *garbage can model*, *unsegmentation*

(Cohen et al. 1972) could not work to cope with new changes and therefore dynamics of reluctant acceptance would end to be accepted both from the levels and different roles people embody in organizations that previously benefited from a more loosened asset of the same organization. Even *hyper-specialization* might not play an efficient role, but being not a pole between tightness and looseness, unsegmented patterns are uncertain in their outcomes. Symmetrically, organizations will always tend to give some more degree of loosening, regardless their industry (i.e. the knowledge of their technology) if other external changes are not occurring. Breaking rules and incipient new patterns let actors group (or regroup) in order to define the new situation and find a new way (including a conservative or resilient one, tightening is not necessarily progressive or liberal) to cope with a new external world. This tightening can be to *game* such as to *cheat*, while the latter is doomed to have a short living (Pollitt 2003). Another feature is nonetheless relevant: what if the groups and factions that get more tightened are in opposition to each other? Tightening may even be a reinforcing of loosened patters, as people may fight to continue to rule themselves in a loosened way. In other worlds: a change may push people to defend the advantages to be "an anarchy". This aspect can be coherent with any case where at least two parts (let's say innovators and conservative, to give some easy labels) may reinforce informal hierarchies and the implicit evidence that within an organization more hierarchies and groups can be present in loosely coupled organizations (Brunsson Sahlin-Andersson 2000). If external changes force a university to compete (fund such as prestige), universities more likely can be led by seniors or other leaders who tighten the whole organization with the promise to reach up those resources (Humphreys, Brown 2002). Being a case like a matter of redefinition of identity and strategy, both possibly under deep review, the organizational formal change into a more managerial (so, more tightened) university made Humphreys and Brown acknowledge that a failure in meeting those promised goals frustrate the university's members who may enact a backlash into a more loosened asset again. Converging tightening in the meaning of a creation of a real complete organization from a loosely coupled organization can therefore happen if the perspective of positive advantages let demise or temporarily suspend the advantages of an organization ruled by lack of actual rules, or ruled by relevant degrees of ambiguity. To this regard to chase the prestige and recognition in the academic world, both at institutional, sub-unit or individual level, may favor the rise of institutions as main actor. That is, more tightened organizations.

I.   *CHANGES AND CRISES MAKE TIGHTEN THE ORGANIZATION BUT:*
        a.   *IT MAY BE TO RESIST INSTEAD OF TO CHANGE*
                i.   *THOUGH IT WILL MORE LIKELY BE A TEMPORARY, PROGRESSIVELY RESIDUAL LOOSING FACTION*
        b.   *IT NEEDS A PARAMOUNT INCENTIVE TO BE ACCEPTED*
        c.   *IT MAY HAVE HARSH BACKLASH INTO "ORGANIZED ANARCHY" IF MISSION FAILS.*

Another intriguing aspect can be born in mind. When times are quite and there is no pressure and quests for structural changes, what is more likely to happen is *loosening* (or lessening the tightened coupling). Being other patterns equals and having no changes in the system where organizations are, the latter will tend to adopt a sort of dynamic which favors loosening. This point may explain one possible paradox in examining organization through the lenses of the sense making enacting processes: the tightening processes can be detected more easily as they appear in visible and tangible moments and *loci* (a whole sector, a single organization, a single part of an organization), while loosening remains a process in action that cannot be detected easily, as it is intrinsically quite in the mode it happens. If people are doing always the same daily job, more likely they are not changing retrospectively their assumptions even though they are probably confirming the status quo as "sensemaking never stops" (Weick 2008). A not changing context, in other words, is more likely to have a loosening outcome to the organization rather than a not affecting outcome upon the nature of its structure (loosened vs. tightened).

II.   *STABILITY IN ANY SORT OF ORGANIZATION – GIVING NO FURTHER SPECIFICATIONS – LOOSENS ORGANIZATIONS*

Institutional vs. Positional Autonomy

The issue of *institutional* and *positional* autonomy is a key tool, especially to see the higher education system in a long run time perspective. In higher education, the advent of the mass higher education after the very first decades after the WWII, which is usually seen as the golden age let took the apex of positional autonomy, a route began with the modern era: the principle of "legal homogeneity" was adopted in Europe in the aftermath of the post-Westphalia national States era in order to build the nation through a creation of an elite. (Neave 2001). The new acquired right by all social classes to, at least, try to attain a higher education degree was discussed as a matter or deep and rapid change (Klerr 1994: pages), if not just a drift (Neave mocked).

Coupling reshape an organization in coherence with the neo-institutional assumption that an organization works in order to survive – "P1" by Meyer and Rowan (1991:45)[2] – and will adhere to the context to find a path of legitimation. In other words, the tightening could be seen not only as a system where the hierarchy is strong and stiff, but more interestingly as a process during which an organization enacts a kind of meta-governance (Magalhães et al. 2013), along the governance in normal and regular times. This argument fetches again into organizational change.

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[2] "As rationalized institutional rules arise in given domains of work activity, formal organizations form and expand by incorporating these rules as structural elements."

Former studies underline that leaders of professionals need the support and the sharing to pursue actual changes in their organizations. Some forms of collaborative leadership equal some suspension of loosening in favor of tightening dynamics (at least temporarily). Denis et al. (1996) found that in loosely coupled organizations change probably ought to be forced, such as the more it is not-shared, the more it has disrupted outcomes apart with tightening effects. Yet, a naturally loosely coupled organization (i.e. hospital) can be ruled by external or imposed changes in a cyclical path that alternates reconstruction and reconsolidation steps (Gioia Chittipeddi 1991). This evidence highlights the necessity by organizations to give to themselves the time to operate in both directions of "substantive change" and "political realignment". These are two terms that remind to an overt corresponding to respectively tightening and loosening dynamics. This balance is found in newly established market in higher education system in US in the 80s and 90s (Gioia Thomas 1996). This dynamic is useful to shed light over the paradox of isomorphism. Mimetic force is enacted by the polity end to *differentiate* a system by performance and standing criteria (a criterion usually denied, with relevant exceptions, in modern era, especially in continental Europe), but at the same time even though emulation is well performed and the system is sufficiently elastic in welcome new "top of the piles" (Paradeise Thoenig 2013), performance standards work in a *discarding* way. Not everybody can win and rankings, for instance, tell just this: who is up and who is down.

III. *AS A SYSTEM MOVES INTO AN INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY PRINCIPLE, THE MAIN ACTORS WILL BE THE ORGANIZATIONS AND SO ORGANIZATIONS MORE LIKELY WILL BECOME COMPLETE ORGANIZATIONS*
   a. *ISOMORPHISM WILL PLAY A STRONG ROLE*
   b. *NONETHELESS RANKING AND GENERAL DIFFERENTIATIONS WILL SEDIMENT, FEEDING THE TIGHTENING PROCESS*
IV. *AS A SYSTEM MOVES INTO A POSITIONAL AUTONOMY PRINCIPLE, THE MAIN ACTORS ARE LEFT FROM EXTERNAL SOCIETY TO SELF-ORGANIZE AT WILL, ENACTING LOOSENED FORMS OF ORGANIZATIONS (ORGANIZED ANARCHIES)*

Management Buffering vs. Concealment Buffering

According to new-institutionalism to tight the loosely coupled organizations in their technical compound equals to force them into unnatural paths. What is worse from a theoretical point of view, the same authors admitted – before the advent of neo-liberalism and NPM and therefore without complaints at those times – that their theory is ambiguous about a hypothetical presence of both pressures to have institutional (typically that of loosely coupled organizations) and technical (typically that of tightly coupled organizations) enforcing (Meyer et al. 1983). The events have overcome the more strictly scientific endeavor, as the NPM – that clearly presuppose to push the technical aspect in institutionally enforced system like those of the welfare state – has dominated by

storm the turn of public administration field toward a business management perspective (Kelman 2007) and by an ideological perspective, even in higher education systems (Deem). Still following Meyer, Scott and Deal (1983) institutionally elaborated environments require institutionally requiring structures. As introduced until now, the environments can be of one kind (*technically complex*) or of another (*institutionally elaborated*) accordingly to the type of organizations and system[3]. Each sort of environment requires adherence to its core dimension. Therefore, organizations that are in systems dominated by technically and complex environment may elude the institutionally elaborated values. Vice versa, systems like those of higher education are institutionally elaborated (i.e. they require the prove to share values) and hence may elude the technical activities. In both cases, this mechanism is the *buffering*. In loosely coupled organizations, or at least the traditional ones depicted during the 70s, the buffering is needed to eschew technical activities that much probably the professional bureaucratic organizations formally have and formally should have to appraise. Buffering as *insulation* and *concealment* is considered to be the loosening dynamic, while *management* buffering is considered the meaning of the tightening enactment, without underestimating that "to buffer" is a sort of universal behavior by organizations. This point brings to what reforms really reform.

In higher education studies the literature about reforms has been increasing massively in the last 15-20 years, mainly due to adoption and implementation of new public management reforms and the Bologna process (see section 2). So, how this general schema works under potentially structural changes? Reforms are manifest actions, usually pursued by policy makers and a country level, or beyond (i.e. European convergence programs or other international organizations' goals). Organizations subjected to any reforms, even when these reforms are aimed at propelling more resources and expanding the system, influence toward a "patient" that can be seen in its stable description such as in the motion. Organizations are entities that manage and create change themselves. The starting assumption of a constructionist is that whenever external reforms are introduced, organizations are capable to define *how* to change (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). However, change can be proposed and enacted through a leadership that cares about "subsuming" voices. To organize, legitimate, give echo to bottom's requests is a possible way to rule actual and not cosmetic changes and this may happen in a conservative, against actual changes, case (Abolafia 2010), such as in a progressive, in favor of changes, way (Zilber 2007). In both mentioned cases,

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[3] In this perspective, an educational system may indeed change from one type into another. This change may occur, even though this change has mid-long range span as explained in the previous point and, and is supposed to be apparently not visible, let's assume, for decades (unless particular historical events occur to signal a radical change whose premises and backlashed makes of this event a conventional date a comfortable tool to split historical phases). In this feature we assume that sort of environments are constant to understand the consequent step that organizations enact before to acquire the common end of any organization (i.e. social support, resources, success and survival).

tightened organizations have some concealment buffering. From not-complete organizations' point of view, such as groups of professionals, things are coherent alike. Collegialism in fact has always seen since Weber's reflection as a way exercised by influent autonomous actors (i.e. professionals) to cope with external world. Forms of organizations are in these cases stressed in order to take position through the main way of regrouping and expressing an official line under some specific (formal or informal) forms of representation and delegation (Waters 1989). Tightening is therefore the act of realizing the need to have a move and to act in a specific way to perform it. Yet, this "voice" can be toward the outside of a community or organization, such as an internal debate within the community/organization. In all cases, this buffering looks to be a management one.

V. *BUFFERING ALWAYS HAPPENS AND MAY BE A KEY TO DETECT WHERE AN ORGANIZATION IS GOING (MORE TIGHTENED OR MORE LOOSENED):*
   a. *CONCEALMENT, LOOSENING, BUFFERING ARE TYPICAL OF SYSTEMS WHERE INSTITUTIONAL VALUES ARE MORE DOMINANT OR ARE BECOMING DOMINANT;*
   b. *MANAGEMENT, TIGHTENING, BUFFERING ARETYPICAL OF SYSTEMS WHERE PERFORMANCES OUTPUTS ARE BECOMING MORE DOMINANT.*

Contraction vs. expansion of slacks

The next feature is one of the classic one in pre-new-institutional sociology of organizations: resources (Meyer Scott 1983). Slacks are part of the organizational life. Organizations probably couldn't either exist without a certain extra-amount of resources. As the garbage can model explains (Cohen March Olsen 1972), good times followed by bad times are nothing but a matter of reduction of slacks. These changes bring toward a tightening hierarchy. Even recent development of the original experiment brought to confirm the original agent based simulation run with much less powerful machines (Fioretti Lomi 2012). So far unfortunately, agent model simulations, to this regard, have never tested if the reverse process would exactly produce the opposite phenomena: from a more hierarchical organizational toward a less one, toward a more loosened organization. If this process looks to be coherent with the general assumption of the neo-institutionalism, empirical tests should be required as the pace and depth of an eventual inverse process might be quicker, slower, or having a different curve. The "cash cow" situations and any general context where organizations may live with a reasonable slack of resources is, on the contrary, that sort of situation when loosely coupled organizations should – other features being equal – loosen their fabric.

VI. *REDUCTION OF AUTOMATIC SLACKS (I.E. HISTORICALLY BASED FUNDING IN CONTRAPOSITION TO COMPETITION FUNDING) – BEING OTHER FEATURES NOT CHANGING – WILL TIGHTEN THE ORGANIZATION TOWARD A "COMPLETE" ONE.*
VII. *INCREASE OF SLACKS (OR AFFORDING RESOURCES WITHOUT CONNECTION TO ANY EVALUATION OF ACHIEVEMENT) – BEING OTHER FEATURES NOT CHANGING – WILL PERMIT ORGANIZATIONS TO BE MORE LOOSENED*

Top-down vs. bottom-up locus of power

The fifth feature considers the locus of power. Tightening should concern more emphasis over the top of the organization and, consequently, its hierarchy. An organization which is assuming a tightening pattern is looking for clearer definitions of roles. One cause of this pursuit may be that of coping with the change governing bodies and/or their actual function(s) as a consequence of compliances. This might be the case of reforms that indicate expressively changes toward – this is the case of several European countries in higher education systems – the institutional autonomy. On the contrary, an organization which is becoming, whatever the reason and the cause, more loosened, is leaving the locus of power and decision making processes at its bottom. In higher education empirical cases, it is a matter of how governing bodies legally and actually are made work. An important distinction to this regard is the toggle between *election* or *nomination* of chairing characters, being the latter more adjacent to a tightening mode of governance, and the first typically a mode to let peers self-rule. Mandates of any part of an organization toward the rest of it describe if it will let have more *voice* at the bottom (loosening function, typically the Rector *primus inter pares* weak authority) or if it will push more limited arch of freedom to others (tightening function, typically the President of an university as a CEO). These changes are noticed and communicated by radical modifications of terminologies. In higher education systems many terms highlights the shape from collegiality to managerialism and this fact only naively would be reckoned a mere fad. More realistically, the adoption of new terms for new roles affect the expectations and the identities. Nonetheless, the introduction of modification in an organization toward more emphasis over the top-management – that might be pushed by the external world through reforms or by a strong leader and his/her vision, or by necessity – may let rise the tightening by those part of the organization that will suffer it by losing the advantages of being in a more loosely coupled organization. It is to be noted, in fact, that the tightening function does not merely shift the power to the top of an organization. Rather, it makes enact a clamp down reaction by those who are not taking advantages from it. Tightening is, following Pollitt (2013), a strategy (a naturally emerging one) to react, for instance, against some NPM inspired reforms which may hamper, at least from the scholars' point of view, their freedom or some room of maneuver. On the contrary, loosening happens when a situation remain stable, no matter if stability is in an organization whose top-management is strong. An organization whose formal structure is based on a clear hierarchy may develop some extent of *disconnection* between formal structure and actual activity, as Meyer and Rowan already theorized (1991).

Strong vs. Lack of, or sloppy or obsolete, performance indicators

The following feature is pivotal in a discussion about the changes in nowadays public organization: the discovery/implementation of ways to measure the performance of organizations. Regardless the sort of organization we are looking at, a sound and not failing system in acquiring information about how an organization is performing might be crucial to detect if that organization may tightening or loosening itself without knowing no further information and data. Academic systems might not have a clear way to understand *how* they produce top level knowledge, but they know indeed how to recognize, at least in the long run, which works are goods and which are poor. Reputation, moreover, might be only a matter of informal or sporadic awarding, confined in not-material rationales (only prestige, but not financing, neither promotions), or even a *post-mortem* fact (a person who is recognized a genius after his/her retirement or death, or however many years after the actual publication of a work, like in the case of Nobel prices). So, even though any organization and any system rarely don't have a way to judge its members (single persons, groups, part of organizations such as department, single universities etc.), the question is to what extent some indicators (or other tools or manner to diffuse information about productivity) are reliable and valid to measure performance but, even more importantly, if there are *official* measures that signal who is good from who is less good. In fact, the existence of some indicators, for instance simple ones like rankings, establish a sort of dynamic of reliability regardless their actual capability to measure the phenomenon they are supposed to estimate (Sauder, Espeland 2009; Espeland Sauder 2007). Yet, measurement of performance is not a question of "numbers & stats" in contraposition to "stories". The balance of crude numbers with peer review effect (Musselin 2013) is by no means intertwined with policy makers' use of both row data and steering practices and decisions (Weingart 2005). Performance measurements, hence, are an invading force but not necessarily an introduction of new personages. If at all, those personages acquire different powers, which is the case of top-management and its staff as previously analyzed in the case of a university turning into a more tightened organization. More likely, it is an event that let shape roles through new rules; makes redefine assets that therefore create an incentive to tighten the organizations at least as long as these

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[4] These two affirmations are the most similar to those emerged by the "garbage can model". Nonetheless, the way they are exposed here may bring to slightly different implementation in a control of the null hypotheses.

redefinitions are not granted in a reasonably stable way. As a matter of historical fact, for instance, the Jarratt's report impact over UK's higher education system showed that appraisals can't be thwarted at will and that institutional change is doomed to be enacted (Townley 1997). Both statistics and stories require detachment in order to exercise their power of influence: sensemaking, regardless the nature of "indicators", is a gateway to impose some definition of reality, that is, an act of a particular sensemaking pursued by characters who got an hegemonic role (Ainsworth, Hardy 2012). Interestingly, wrong measurements (i.e. lacks of enough thoroughness) may not necessarily hamper the governing of organization based on some kind of indicators *unless* those indicators are able to describe well enough the outputs *and* by output the existence of organizations depend (see buffering features). Pollitt (2013) warns about the possible "cheating" which may occur along with "gaming". In both cases, the performance governance is destined to incentive the tightening and demise the compliance avoiding, more probably based in a means/ends mode (see further). On the other hand loosening coupling may occur not only if knowledge about the technology is absent, but even when it is left fall into obsolescence, or when it is ignored or underestimate by such a large part of a system that none will pay a negative prize to don't "game". This last possibility is basically improbable in scenarios of general national reforms aimed at steer at the distance the institutional autonomy of universities.

Consequences of performance indicators depend by the unit of measurement and by the discretional power held by characters embodied to exercise them: principle investigators (usually single chairs leading no more than a team) may increase their authority as they control funds by which prestige is conveyed – at least as an essential mean to be in the most promising research projects – to all the greater organization (department, university, or whatever) (Whithley Gläser 2014). This brings to tightening coupling because chairs are not all equal as they would be in absence of a regime of performance indicators. More precisely, they introduce ways to differentiate and give recognized stratification.

     X.   *THE MORE AN ORGANIZATION DESIGNS AND COLLECTS DATA TO MEASURE ITS OWN ACTIVITIES, THE MORE THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION WILL – AT LEAST IN THE LONG RUN – TIGHTEN AND BECOME A COMPLETE ORGANIZATION*
     XI.   *THE MORE AN ORGANIZATION DOES NOT UPDATE INFORMATION AND DATA ABOUT HOW IT PRODUCES ITS GOODS/SERVICES, THE MORE THAT ORGANIZATION WILL BECOME LOOSELY COUPLED.*

Means/Ends vs. Policy/Practice Decoupling.

As faced in policy discussion of loosely coupled organizations, decoupling can be *means/end* or *policy/practice*. The policy/practice is the traditional assumption that a system may have a policy in terms of monitoring and formal compliances, but practice is based on the fact that all that is not run

(Meyer Rowan 1991). Means/ends refer to the act of complying, but it misunderstands the actual end of a policy, with the result to replace the achievement of the end with the achievement of some means that are easier to be fulfilled, more convenient to the adopters, and can be told to have been accomplished in order to respect the ends that supposedly needed those means. This distinction is relevant as it implies the advent of some performance measurements (see previous subsection) but at the same time it highlights the possibility that goals could not be met anyway. By this way, organizations may find a bypass to elude policy makers' will. Are these sort of organizations still the loosely coupled organizations whose mechanisms are opaque and can elude these controls? The means/end decoupling reminds to opaque fields that are already under the quest of some tightening, though not automatically these changes assure "zero decoupling" dynamics. Why a system (a system of organizations or an organization seen as a system) that pushes end/mean decoupling can be considered a system that is nonetheless tightening itself? Wijen (2014) puts the question in a clear way by affirming that in a context dominated by the lack of attention, the lack of motivation, and the lack of knowledge, ends/means can be more easily met by setting rules, transferring practices, devising incentives. All these actions reinforce a tighter leadership and enact paths of conjunctions between what more general environment tells (ends) and what single organizations (or part of them) do (means). In the industry of higher education the issue has become relevant, although under different terms. Bromley and Powell (2012) detect the *diverting resources* as a decoupling which is, in a more comprehensive organizational dynamic, more likely a tightening of the organization inasmuch it tends to give power to the formal hierarchy and its staff and bodies that assure the neutrality of data on the basis of which funding, for instance, is bestowed not in an equal way among departments. To this regard it deserves to be remembered that parts of an organization, like sub-structures, units, transversal groups of any sort, can develop alternatives to a certain external pressure for change (Greenwood Hinings 1996), enacting different dynamics. An example of this might be the "tightening to change" vs. the "tightening to resist". In both cases (going into more tightened or loosened organizations), decoupling may be short-living (i.e. reduced to implementation phases) or hard to disappear. Few are the empirical studies that can shed some light to this regard, at least in higher education field. Woelert (2015) and Butler (2003) both analyze the possible pervert outcome of new evaluation of research in universities in Australia, especially when they are introduced in disciplines with short or no tradition in stiff indicators like bibliometric ones. In fact, with rigid, only quantitative indicators of performance, actors enact a clearer mean/end decoupling. To make an example, if salami publications are recognized as the way to go to be successful, the mean of publishing the most numerous outputs (the milieu to show to be productive and worthy of receiving funding, career advancement and so forth) turns quickly to be

an end itself with the net result to have possible lower quality and redundancies in scientific outputs, which is at odds with the original assumption to stimulate virtuous behaviors. As a result, the net contributions of policies aimed at measuring the performance can be in the short run opportunist and threatening quality, while in the long run can generate "reactive", or, in other terms, counter-productive effects. Quality of publications through the vehicle of journal selections is not the only hampered issue. The emphasis upon standardized grants – which is a clear outcome of the grants bestowed to research plans, designs and protocols that may more reasonably have a more probable return on investments – may go at odds with the likewise importance to have cutting edge, long period investments in (basic) research, which more likely are risky and uncertain. Awareness of this trade-off fetched the more recent reflection about the necessity to overly establish unconventional projects in order to secure a proper degree of incognito in the endeavor or making research (Laudel Gläser 2014). This latter example shows that more general policies (i.e. European research programs) not only pave the way to bigger science, but unfold a *different* sort of decoupling. The alternative, not necessarily good or bad, would be to leave a decoupling that does not perceive the substantial compliance. Considering loosely coupled organizations by nature, it looks wiser to give *some* tension toward the tightening stress warranted by the ends/means decoupling. Nonetheless, having not so many empirical cases crisscrossing specific literature upon new forms of decoupling in organizations, it is mandatory to maintain a cautious stance and to affirm that further investigations are needed.

This point may tell that the general meaning of decoupling as eschewing dictates can always be possible, like scraps or errors always are present in any industrial production. More deeply one may glimpse that performance controls enact anyway some changes. On the other hand the flagging and abating of updates in how production ought to be measure through better and refined indicators may let fall (again) an organization into loosening fabric, being this last case not necessarily good or bad.

XII.   ORGANIZATIONS ALWAYS FIND A SUSTAINABLE WAY TO DECOUPLE WITHOUT ENCOUNTERING SYSTEMIC FAILURES:
    a.   THE MORE AN ORGANIZATION IS MONITORED AND MEASURED (PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT), THE MORE THE DECOUPLING WILL BE A MEANS/ENDS TYPE
    b.   THE MORE AN ORGANIZATION IS LEFT WITH NO EFFORTS IN UNDERSTANDING HOW IT WORKS OR THOSE EXISTING ARE UNDERESTIMATED, THE MORE THE DECOUPLING WILL BE A POLICY/PRACTICE ONE.
XIII.   MEANS/ENDS DECOUPLING PRESUPPOSES AND IMPLIES A TIGHTENING SENSE-MAKING
XIV.   POLICY/PRACTICE DECOUPLING PRESUPPOSES AND IMPLIES LOOSENING SENSE-MAKING.

Complete Organizations vs. Network of Communities

The last feature wraps up the discussion considering the nature itself of an organization, while usually types of organization are defined by industry sector, organizational typologies or charts'

models. Hybridism and change of nature shatter these starting definition into the necessity to have new categories or to describe cases by cases. In one term, the study of change is required. A classic like Selznick already found a key trade-off between responsiveness to new challenges and tradition (Selznick, 1957: 146). In fact what has been developed heretofore is about change and enacting forces to change. Under the theory of sensemaking the question is that perfectly tightened organizations foresee everything (or better to say: they are organized to have answers to some events supposed to happen) but can't react to hindrances; completely loosened organizations are not even "completely" an organization and have as only shared assumption that anyone can interfere in daily, nor extraordinary, practices. They are anarchies with a peculiar veneer of membership whose function is exactly to define who is inside and who is outside this realm of absence of clear rules. As a matter of fact, if "organization" in common sense refers *tout court* to a tightened one, the debate here developed brings to a specification: loosely coupled organizations are by organizational typology more probably "professional bureaucracies" (Minzberg 1979; Diefenbach Sillince 2011): some sort of organizations that tend to maintain something of communities (Brown, Duguid 1991; Wenger 2000). Nonetheless this is unsatisfactory. In higher education cases, even for epistemic fields that are more used to be part of the *bigger science*, current changes should push them into post-traditional communitarian structure. However communicational problems, frustrations, sharing resources, conflicts in the labor division, all may let emerge "communities without unity" (Knorr Cetina 1999: 165). The preoccupation of universities like *complete organizations* (Brunsson Sahlin-Andersson 2000) has been debated, especially in last years in Europe (Seeber et al 2014) and even before in USA (Krücken Meier 2006). Discussions hitherto faced could be seen even as follows: to what extent universities can be shaped into more tightened patterns (Whitley 2000). More generally, the clash between hierarchies and communities of professional is set by the need of the latter to meet, especially nowadays, the new quests for legitimations. This trend is found to be consistent in professional worlds, and maybe reconnected to changes in professional organizations, namely those pushing managerialism (Adler et al. 2008; Adler Heckscher 2006). To this regard, the management, or any character or body embodied to manage loosely coupled organizations ought not to fail the proper degree of openness and closeness (Spender Grinyer 1995) which implies that management – to be effective in terms of meeting goals – should find a way to govern the *emergent*, communitarian life of their organizations that are at the core of organizational production itself. Debate developed so far about change show that this point is still far from being ultimately clarified in their terms. If we remind the Fig 1 exposed in section 3 we have to admit that loosely coupled organizations are going toward a more tightened. Less clear is how – or in how many ways – this is happening, and much less clear are the actual consequences of these changes. If the reflection by

Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) gives a theoretical framework, Courpasson and Dany (2003) found that the power in tightened coupled organization is firmly in hierarchy's hands, being change and concessions to the floor a mean in the hands of management, rather than an autopoiesis. In fact from the bureaucratic organizations' point of view, to instill purposively some loosened stances (or loosening dynamics) into the organization is an optimal managerial technique as far as values are basically the same of the formal organization and the sense of obedience in loosened communities is much higher than that paid to formal hierarchies (Courpasson Dany 2003). The net result for the organization point of view is to have more commitment by its personnel. When loosely coupled organizations tighten themselves not only to resist (tightening as defensive and resilient action against environment change), but even to purposively play the game of competition, do they confirm their nature (a collegial one, for instance) or they are changing it so in their roots? Are both loosening and tightening leeway deeded by respectively tightened and loosened organizations that confirms the *nature* of both organizations? Or organizations can change their nature according to more general changes in society, as briefly sketched at the beginning of section 4? Is the enacted isomorphism by reforms (Brunsson Sahlin-Andersson 2000) a reversible or is an irreversible phenomenon? These questions are without definite answers.

Table 2. Clashing features that trigger the Tightening or the loosening

Tighter coupling	*Looser coupling*
Breaches and Crisis	Stability
Institutional autonomy	Positional autonomy
Triggered by formal, external, changes (reforms)	Triggered by buffering implementations
Reduction (or unequal allocation) of slacks	Exploitation of slacks
Locus of power toward hierarchy and its top management (top-down)	Locus of power toward lower layers, until the floor (bottom-up)
Adoption of (better) indicators of productivity	Lack of (updated) information or meta-information about "technology"
Means/ends decoupling	Policy/practice decoupling
Complete organizations	Network(s) of communities of practices

Source: Own elaboration

Conclusions

All the previous features herein discussed are somehow a contribution to understand what makes an organization more tightened (and what makes an organization more loosened, even though not faced in this contribution), referring to the higher education field that has been challenged for the last decades in Europe to get closer to the entrepreneurship mode (Clark 1998), that is, a more tightened asset.

It is worth noting that the communitarian dimension of scientific communities pre-exists and goes beyond the policies aimed at reforming it, even whenever the reforms have actual relevant impacts (Becher Trowley 2001). In other words, it is worth emphasizing that governance remains a matter of how academics govern themselves as communities (Gläser 2007). "Community failures" in higher education institutions are not a failure *per se*, since knowledge production may need just those trials in order to "expand the frontier", and are – at the same time – compensated and balanced by the peers' control (i.e. conferences, journals, informal reputation and so forth). Many of the possible reforms or changes cited have the ingredient of reinforcing the steer at the distance tool, but seldom there is a scientific knowledge of which mix of features (governance, quality assurance, evaluation, funding, autonomy, external stakeholders etc.) produces the desired outputs with the most reduced perverse outcome. The tightening world of academia will probably build-up and design "successful black boxes" (Gläser 2007), that is, loosely coupled organizations monitored by their outputs and performance through an enduring loose (or relatively improved tightening, but strictly under control of the natural loosely fabric of organizations) check of their through-put. Another aspect that this reflection makes to emerge is the need to overcome the labeled use of the terms loosely and tightened referring to organizations and their changes and meanwhile to improve the convergence of empirical studies into a common domain. When the empirical effort is at stake, theory seldom is king. The field of changing organizations and higher education studies are not an exception, though concepts are not among the easiest to be operationalized and are among the most intertwined with the policy dimension. Orton and Weick examined in a critical way the scientific literature since the appearance of the concept of loosely coupled in the 70s. Their preoccupation at that time was that "[...] researchers must continue to transform methodology to serve theory, rather than transforming theory to serve methodology" (Orton Weick 1990). This warning seems to be still valid alas. Or probably is an evergreen one.

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