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Professionalization and dissemination of Project Management in Italy. Structuring an organizational field.

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Abstract

The prevailing view looks at Project Management (PM) as a neutral and objective corpus of managerial knowledge. This perspective explains its growing popularity as an adaptive response by the organizations related to some significant environmental changes and the consequential changes in the strategies and organizational structures. This paper aims to propose an alternative vision - called Situationist - of the processes of professionalization and dissemination of PM. Through this different lens new elements emerge – institutional processes and power dynamics – suggesting different considerations. With respect to them, the work shows the preliminary results of an ongoing larger qualitative research program about the structuration of an organizational field in Italy.

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1. Introduction

The background motivation of this paper is to provide an answer to the following question: understanding the dynamics of professionalization and dissemination of Project Management is completely related to technical factors or, rather, requires other and wider perspectives too? In this paper we'll try to answer by comparing two viewpoints

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on professionalization and dissemination of Project Management.

First, we present a brief literature review on professions and professionalism, highlighting the main streams of research in social sciences, particularly sociology of professions, economics and management. We then explain the two perspectives in comparison. The prevailing one qualifies the Project Management as a neutral and objective 'toolbox' to deal with complexity. We pay attention to the marketing strategy adopted by the main Project Management associations in the world. The alternative view, that we define as 'situationist' perspective [1, 2], is based on a micro-actionist epistemological framework, in particular: social phenomenology [3, 4, 5, 6]; symbolic interactionism [7]; ethnomethodology [8]. Finally, we present a model of understanding of the dynamics of professionalization and dissemination of Project Management, based on both political and neo-micro institutional processes: action and institutionalization. The aim of this paper is to propose, by sharing the debate within the social sciences framework, a re-reading of the concepts of *professionalization and dissemination of professional practices*, alternative to the widely dominant vision in the managerial theory and practice, both nationally and internationally.

2. Literature review

Professionalization and dissemination of specific 'bodies of knowledge' are the object of several streams of research within social sciences, mainly with reference to a few very influential professions, such as medicine and law [9, 10]. These researches, particularly in the *sociology of professions*, are characterized by a variety of purposes, including: a better definition of the concepts of profession and professional [11]; the analysis of the mechanisms of social stratification and of the differences of power and prestige related to professions [12, 13]. Since the 1970's, thank to Johnson's work [14], the topic of professionalism was framed as a peculiar type of occupational control, rather than a specific type of work. Traditionally, professionalization dynamics concern two scopes of control: the control of practices and the control of the practitioners. The first dimension refers to the regulation about how professional services are produced and sold. The second dimension refers to the regulation about how professionals themselves are qualified and admitted, then evaluated and, if necessary, sanctioned or expelled. Afterwards, many researches have begun to analyse the relationship among the professional knowledge, professional practices, individual aspirations and the creation of professional groups with a specific 'professional project' [15].

Through these works the theme of power emerges and the analysis of professional groups includes the dynamics of competition and inter-professional conflict. The 'jurisdictional dispute' [16, 17] is the main field of competition among professionals and the history of development of the professions is the result of a struggle over jurisdiction upon an exclusive scope of professional practices. In the economic perspective, professionalism is often qualified as an anti-competitive field [18] and professionals' claims and strategies, with their emphasis on jurisdictional closure, exclusive control over professional practices and professional fees and self-regulation are seen as anachronistic [19]. In management studies this subject is traditionally faced for its organizational impact within the 'personnel administration', then 'personnel management' and, finally, 'Human Resource Management'. The main areas of study concern: a better understanding of the models of work organization; the analysis of the processes of recruitment and professional socialization and their effects on performance evaluation and remuneration of professionals within the organizations [20, 21, 22]. More recently, the analysis of 'knowledge workers' [23, 24, 25, 26] and, more generally, the frameworks of knowledge management [27, 28] and learning organizations [29, 30] have provided a different perspective on the management of professional skills within the organizations [31], challenging the traditional logic of professionalism. Particularly, in recent years, a lot of researches investigated new dynamics of dissemination and professionalization of specific managerial professions, such as HR Management [32], business consulting [33], advertising [34] and Project Management [35], describing a new kind of 'corporate professionalism' which main characteristics are significantly different with respect to the traditional collegial professionalism [36, 37, 38]. The literature review shows the lack of research on the professionalization of Project Management in Italy. At the international level, even if some works take the neo-institutionalist perspective, we have not found its integration with the coalitional dynamics and power strategies (lobbying activities) of professional groups.

3. Professionalization and dissemination of Project Management as an objective, neutral and effective body of managerial knowledge

Project Management emerges as an area of specific managerial knowledge within management literature in the late 1950s [39]. Initially, it has a strong technical profile and the main field of application is the defense. In 1969, PMI (Project Management Institute, USA; the first-largest professional association for PM in the world); and in 1972 APM (Association for Project Management, UK; the second-largest one) are founded. The Project Management is defined as follows:

- “Project Management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements” (PMI);
- “Project Management is the application of processes, methods, knowledge, skills and experience to achieve the project objectives” (APM).

In the last two decades Project Management has shown a fast growth. Some data on the number of certified PM professionals will be useful to quantify the trend around its professionalization and dissemination. We will take into account two of the most popular certifications: the PMP® – Project Management Professional (by PMI) and PRINCE2® – PRojects IN Controlled Environments (by the Office of Government Commerce, UK). The number of PMP® has increased from 393,413 in 2010 to 548,213 in 2013 (+39%), corresponding to about 4,300 new professionals certified per month. Similarly, with regard to the PRINCE2®, the number of examinations per year increased from 102 in 1996 (the year of the foundation) to 18,054 in 2001, to 86,880 in 2006 to 144,885 in 2012. In 2012 the total number of examinations has reached one million globally. With regard to the qualitative trend, in recent years Project Management has overtaken its traditional scope of application: manufacturing, construction sectors, engineering and IT services. It is accredited as a standard of efficient and effective management of projects in many other fields: from education to health, from the organization of major sporting and cultural events (Olympic Games, World Cup and so on) to politics. What causes this growth? The most accepted answer in management literature (not only within Project Management one) is its technical fitness with respect to the growth of environmental and organizational complexity [40]. In other words, it's a matter of evolution of managerial knowledge: best suited methodologies, techniques and tools survive and spread while others die out. According to this perspective, the key points of the growing success of Project Management are the following. First, the high compliance with the project-based organization [41] that appears to be increasingly widespread as well as more powerful in terms of adaptability to environmental turbulence, innovative potential and, therefore, organization competitiveness. Second, the qualification that Project Management gives of itself as a scientific and politically neutral toolbox, universally relevant regardless to sector-specific and/or organization-specific [42]. Put another way, Project Management presents itself as a discipline, both managerial and technical, able to better manage the value creation processes characterized by a high intensity of knowledge workers. Third, unlike the traditional strategies of collegial professionalism, Project Management promotes the professional openness instead of closure, and internationalization of a specific ‘body of knowledge’ (BOK) instead of focusing on a single country of origin.

In the following paragraphs we try to provide a different model of understanding the dynamics of professionalization and dissemination of Project Management. It is a model that moves away from the hypothesis stating that Project Management would be nothing more than a ‘product of success’ thank to an objective technical advantage and an effective marketing strategy. Before closing this part, we would like to highlight some open questions. On one hand, despite the declared novelty, Project Management processes (i.e. initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, closing) – that are the ‘heart’ of the model – recall manifestly the classic Fayol’s Elements of Management (i.e. Planning, Organizing, Command, Coordination and Control) developed at the beginning of ‘900 as part of the Administrative Science movement [43], inspired by Taylor’s Scientific Management [44]. Some authoritative management scholars [45, 46] criticized Project Management qualifying it as a remake of the original bureaucratic model, supported by new ICT achievements and oriented to control knowledge workers instead of handworkers as it was for the well known ‘*times and motion studies*’. On the other hand, due to its high level of standardization and formalization – even terminological – in the conduct of the project activities Project Management, paradoxically, decreases power and autonomy of the professionals involved, challenging one of the key elements of professionalism: the freedom of action of the professional.

4. Professionalization and dissemination of Project Management through structuring of an organizational field

The idea that both individuals and organizations adapt their structures and behaviours with respect to external (or environmental) constraints and pressures is certainly not new in management studies. Many contributions highlight this trend towards coupling with the environment: the Organizational Institutionalism [47], the General Systems Theory [48], the Contingency Theory [49, 50], the Resource Dependence Theory [51], the Population Ecology [52], the Stakeholder Theory [53]. That being said, prior to present the ‘situationist’ view of the professionalization and dissemination of Project Management, it is appropriate to briefly introduce the situationist framework itself. First, let’s point out its clear distinction from the *Contingency Theory*, which is – in organizational studies – also called ‘situational’ approach and that is focused on the analysis of the influence of environmental contingencies on the structures and organizational processes. According to that, the environment is both a set of resources and a meta-constraint, pre-determined and independent with respect to the actors (individuals or organizations), who just have to analyse, interpret and understand environmental changes and adapt to them.

Compared to this setting, the situationist framework [54, 1] is focused on the processes of ‘action’ and ‘institutionalization’, based on the concrete contexts of human action in everyday life [55]. The continuous work of these two processes produces building, breaking and reconstruction of social reality [56]. According to this perspective, the environment is not a fact of nature; on the contrary, it’s a ‘*concrete field of action*’ built – even not wholly intentionally – by the strategic action of some actors, as a space of games, a place of different interests and different strategies, a place of interaction, negotiation and conflict among actors and their coalitions [57].

Two theoretical approaches, seemingly divergent, are linked to these roots [58, 59]: the political approach and the neo-micro-institutionalism in organizational studies. On one hand the political approach [60, 61, 62], deepening the concept of power, emphasizes the strategic action of the actors (individual or coalitional) oriented to protect their own specific interests, and highlights the complex coalitional dynamics that really orient both professionalization and dissemination processes of some professional practices. The concept of ‘power’ with respect to a specific ‘*field of concrete action*’ [63] is central to this approach. Power is defined as ‘exchange’ and not as ‘strength’ [64], a social work of construction of fields of strategic action and degrees of freedom with respect to the constraints of a specific local context and not just a struggle among opposing groups. Additional key concepts are: interest, conflict, coalition and coalitional games. On the other hand, the neo-micro-institutionalism [65, 66, 67] allows us to take distance from the settings of strong rationality, both individual and systemic, that populate the management literature, and to focus our attention on the institutional environment (beliefs, rules, constraints, pressures, practices and myths), in order to unravel the tangle of “*both the material and symbolic constraints that the institutions produce on human behavior*” [68]. The concepts of institutions, institutional entrepreneurs and institutional work, isomorphism, institutional framework, organizational field and rationalized myths are key issues.

Institutions (with lower case ‘i’) are to be understood neither as large and powerful organizations nor as subjects of public administration. Institutions are, instead, “*rules, norms and beliefs that describe reality for organizations, explaining what is and what is not, what can and what cannot be followed*” [69]. Institutions, however, are not natural entities: they appear as the non-deterministic result of strategic action of certain local actors – i.e. institutional entrepreneurs – who, even unintentionally, end up creating a *pro-tempore* coercive local order [70, 71]. DiMaggio, in particular, argued that “*new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly*” [72]. More specifically, institutional entrepreneurship refers to the “*activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones*” [73]. These actors – institutional entrepreneurs – “*create a whole new system of meaning that ties the functioning of disparate sets of institutions together*” [74]. Put another way, a certain ‘institutional work’ is needed to create, maintain, transform or disrupt institutions [75]. With their ‘root’, and their subsequent dissemination, institutions tend to become *taken for granted*, influencing behavior – individual and organizational – suggesting the conduct which is better in order to confer legitimacy to action. Institutions induce a habitus [76] inside the professional practices in the form of beliefs, terminology, rules, methodologies and techniques, paper templates, software tools and so on, established through processes of isomorphism which erect a normative and symbolic institutional framework. Individuals, organizations and professional groups read the influences of the being built institutional framework and, with the aim of achieving

legitimacy, adapt their strategies to institutionalized rituals and behaviours, to common practices and procedures, reinforcing the “iron cage” of institutional isomorphism. Through this reiteration of replicated behaviours a new organizational field emerges and is institutionalized. “By *organizational field*, we mean those organizations that, in the aggregate, constituted a recognized area of institutional life” [77]. The organizational field, then, appears as a ‘significant’ group of actors (individual, groups, organizations) which, interacting, creates and gives meaning to the concept of intersubjective environment. Once institutionalized, a certain organizational field generates and endorses socially correct beliefs and practices, becoming a rationalized myth. A rationalized myth is a powerful taken-for-granted rule or belief system that embodies stories about cause and effect and successful solutions to problems. It appears rational because specifies what actors must do to be efficient, but it’s a myth because its effectiveness depends on the fact that it is widely shared rather than inherently correct [78]. A rationalized myth is expressed in various forms: rules, classifications, evaluation criteria, performance criteria, quality or environmental standards, product or process standards, contracts, models and theories, beliefs and practices, and so on. The isomorphic processes (coercive, mimetic and normative) spread and duplicate rationalized myths making them more and more rational and credible, just because of their widespread. The non-compliance with these prescriptions results in delegitimization of the actor [79]. Following a principle of similarity [80], both professionals and organizations reduce ambiguity and uncertainty by engaging in normal behaviours and following rules and patterns which refer to an institutionalized social knowledge [81]. Putting these different lenses on, PM no longer appears as an objective and politically neutral base of managerial knowledge. Its professionalization and dissemination no longer appears as the evolutionary result of its greater technical fitness with respect to the growth of environmental and organizational complexity. In a situationist framework, Project Management becomes an organizational field with a certain degree of institutionalization – analysed at global level, by continent or country-specific – depending on the duration and the effectiveness of institutional work and on the dynamics of isomorphic processes. On the other hand, focusing on its dogmatic terminology and its bundle of techniques and tools, PM can be viewed as a rationalized myth. The degree of professionalization and dissemination of professional practices increases with the increase of the degree of institutionalization of the organizational field. Macro-level (institutional framework) and micro-level (institutional entrepreneurs, professional project, institutional work) are inextricably intertwined (Fig. 1).

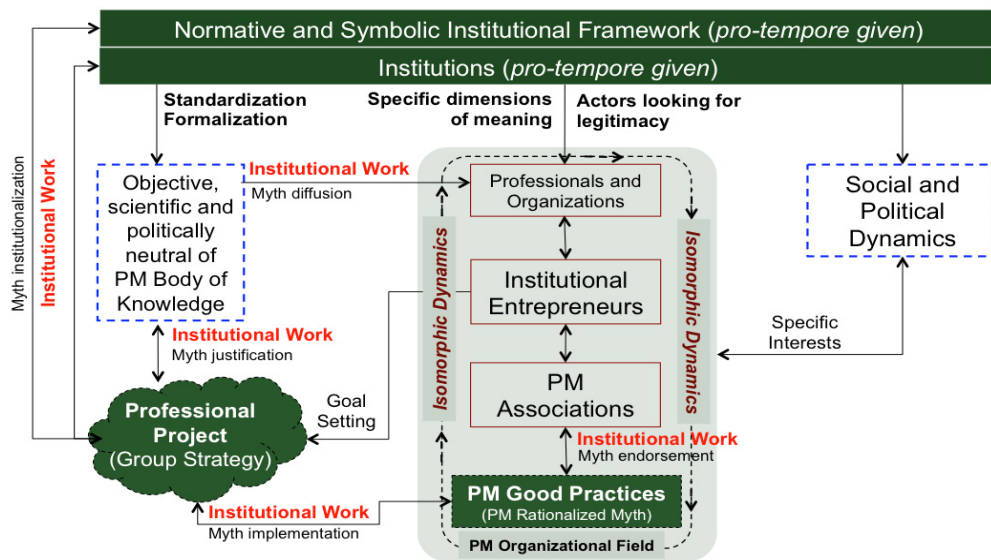


Fig. 1. The situationist paradigm in action.

This perspective allows to discover a process of social construction of professional knowledge which generates not only an ontology and a technical language, but also rituals and ceremonies, professional anecdotes, success

stories and failure ones and, even, gestures, expressions and jokes. Similar analysis of the processes of professionalization as institutionalization of a certain organizational field has been conducted in relation to other corporate professions: Total Quality Management [82], Quality Management Systems ex ISO 9000 [83], Environmental ISO 14001 [84], International Accounting Standards ex IFRS [85]. As Fournier pointed out, “*being a professional is not merely about absorbing a body of scientific knowledge but is also about conducting and constituting oneself in an appropriate manner*” [86]. Therefore, the opinions and behaviours that don’t duplicate the accepted and taken-for-granted ones are qualified as unprofessional, lacking expertise and delegitimized. The growth of the professionalization of PM is, then, interpreted as the growth of institutional pressures, as a material and symbolic constraint that induces beliefs, practices and patterns of behaviour in the project managers. In this light, professionalization and dissemination of a certain professional practice doesn’t run out its effects improving the technical side of the profession, but creates a ‘world of meanings’ which are really relevant within the organizational field and unreadable and insignificant outside. In the following paragraph we present main dynamics of professionalization and dissemination of PM in Italy as institutionalization of an organizational field.

5. Professionalization and dissemination of Project Management: institutionalization of an organizational field in Italy

The process of professionalization of Project Management in Italy can be dated in 1996, when the PMI NIC (Northern Italy Chapter) was founded. In 1997 the PMI Rome Italy Chapter was established. The first two certified project managers, both PMP®, date back to 1998. The PMI chapters are autonomous national associations, recognized and certified by PMI, which main activities are: raising the Project Management awareness and spreading its principles and techniques to companies, universities and other professional associations; promoting research and conferences that strengthen the professional skills of project managers and contributing to programs of PM certification; contributing to the professional development in Project Management. Until 2001, all Italian project managers (69 in total) are PMP®. Since 2001, also IPMA (International Project Management Association) begins to operate in Italy. The activities carried out by these early actors (in 2004 the PMI SIC, Southern Italy Chapter, was founded) fail to generate a significant institutional work. In 2005 there are only 761 certified project managers in Italy. In 2005 ISIPM (Italian Institute of Project Management), a non-profit association, was established in Rome with the aim to create a new entity in project management area with specific reference to ICT and Project Management within Public Administration. ISIPM promotes the growth of Project Management culture among all the stakeholders, in their different roles: customers, suppliers, sponsors, consultants and participants in projects.

ISIPM represents an element of innovation for the institutionalization of the organizational field as: a) it is an independent association which promotes all professional practices already recognized worldwide (PMP, IPMA, Prince2); b) in order to sponsor an entry level approach to Project Management, in 2008 ISIPM introduced a basic certificate, with a formal examination and passing test. In 2009, a year after its launch, ISIPM has certified 445 professionals as ISIPM-BASE. The total number of certified project managers in 2010 is about 5.300 (Fig. 2).

	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015
PMI	2	69	328	1.095	2.598	4.015	5.050	5.804	5.856
IPMA	-	8	144	371	712	1.047	1.216	1.385	1.385
PRINCE2	-	-	-	214	1.100	2.526	3.713	3.713	3.713
ISIPM	-	-	-	-	869	2.397	3.414	4.371	4.432
TOTAL	2	77	472	1.680	5.279	9.985	13.393	15.273	15.386

Table. 1. Cumulated certified Project Managers in Italy.

Since 2008, the combined action of these institutional entrepreneurs (PMI, IPMA, ISIPM), even more competitive than cooperative, accelerates the institutionalization of an organizational field of Project Management in Italy. An articulate pattern of institutional work comes in evidence, aiming at protecting the interests of a specific professional group. In order to strengthen the degree of institutionalization, institutional entrepreneurs work at defining and implementing a specific professional project through a set of actions including: lobbying activities at the

legislative level, constitution of associations or other organizations such as universities and other professional associations, production of technical and/or informative publications (books and magazines), signing of agreements with other organizations, creation of a professional register for certified project managers and/or qualified teachers, organization of workshop, training, conferences on Project Management, production of an official ethical code, and so on. This institutional work produces effects at the level of normative institutional framework. In 2005 ISO 10006:2003 “Quality management systems - Guidelines for quality management in projects” is applied in Italy by UNI as “Standard for Projects Management Systems. ICT goods and services quality guidelines for definition and control of the Public Administration contracts”. This standard is adopted by the Public Administration National Digitalization Organism (DIGITPA). Later on, the professional profile of Project Manager is recognized in the D.P.R. 207/2010 that is the implementing regulation of Italian law on public and private procurement (D.LGS. 163/2006). 2013 is a breakthrough year. First, the standard ISO 21500:2012 “Guidance on Project Management” is adopted in Italy as UNI ISO 21500:2013 “Guida al Project Management”. Second, the Law n. 4/2013 approved, a general normative framework that applies to all non collegial professions. Based on this law ASSIREP (Italian Association of Experts and Project Management) is created. ASSIREP is currently the first and the only Italian Professional Association of Project Managers, recognized by the Ministry of Economic Development (MISE) due to compliance with the professional qualification system provided by Art. 7 Law n. 4/2013. The institutional work by some institutional entrepreneurs is evident: the current president of ASSIREP is the past president of ISIPM and 9 out of 17 members of the governance of ASSIREP are among the ISIPM founders. ASSIREP has the following main purposes: 1) representing requests of its members even through union functions; 2) qualifying professional activities performed by its members and their professional quality even through lifelong learning; 3) promoting and enforcing an ethical code for its members; 4) developing agreements with universities, associations, organizations and institutions, nationally and internationally, interested in professionalism in Project Management; 5) managing lists of professional project managers.

6. Discussion and future steps

The aim of this paper has been twofold. On one hand, to present an alternative perspective – the situationist view – to analyze and understand the processes of professionalization and dissemination of Project Management. On the other hand, to use the situationist perspective to ‘tell the story’ about the concrete political dynamics and institutional work behind the professionalization and dissemination of Project Management in Italy during the past 20 years. Research is ongoing, so we will be able to draw a final balance later on. However, some interesting proceedings can be presented. First of all, the situationist view puts in evidence that, apart from the body of professional knowledge, the process of professionalization and dissemination does not accelerate until some institutional entrepreneurs do not start a certain institutional work, structuring an organizational field. Further researches will focus on how and how much an effective institutional work can generate professionalization, even in a situation of a weak body of professional knowledge. On the other hand, a strong body of professional knowledge does not generate professionalization due to the lack of an institutional work, as happened in Italy for the first 10 years. Secondly, from an epistemological point of view, the situationist view gives up the ‘pretence of knowledge’ [87] characterizing the epistemological framework of the prevailing paradigm, referring to the understanding of professionalization and dissemination of professional practices. On the contrary, our effort is oriented towards a weaker vision, less desirous of getting – sooner or later – to general laws of professionalism (as how it should be or as we would like it to be) and oriented to understand, case by case, the complex institutional work and power dynamics that produced certain results in terms of professionalization and dissemination. The upcoming step is a qualitative survey involving representatives of the three levels identified in the organizational field of Project Management in Italy: project managers (both freelance and internal), institutional entrepreneurs and representatives of the main associations of Project Management. Our goal is, first of all, to share with these actors the situationist perspective, collecting their opinions, their perspectives and their stories about the process of professionalization and dissemination of Project Management in Italy. Moreover, a focus group made of some key players will allow to structure and test a questionnaire to be used in the next step of our research program. This survey will expand to a broader sample of project managers in Italy working in different fields of industry, services and trade. Our purpose is to understand the perceptions of the project managers with respect to the set of constraints and lack of autonomy

that the institutionalization of the organizational field of Project Management generates on their everyday work and, on the other side, the opportunities and the benefits gained by them.

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