

# Introduction



As a social animal, man is a ritual animal. If ritual is suppressed in one form it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction.

—Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966

This book is an anthropological study of management consultancy. It is a study that aims to deal with a 'big' topic through the microscopic lens of ethnographic inquiry and qualitative sociocultural analysis. For more than a century, the ideas that management consultants trade in have proliferated across national borders in the capitalist world and beyond. Throughout this period, the changing natures of industrial production, business operations and public administration have been tied intimately to the application of such forms of expertise, and, increasingly, this has been the case in the course of the last three or four decades. Today, management consultancy is a global industry of gigantic proportions, with various manifestations in places across the world. It is an industry that affects many of us, in one way or another or, as the editors of a much cited volume on management consultancy note,

Few people, whether in their roles as employees or citizens will have avoided the effects of some kind of consultancy-led initiative. In the work place a steady stream of apparently attractive suggestions for remodelling businesses to meet the competitive requirements of the times have been developed, packaged, marketed and implemented by a host of consultants. . . . Each of these has had an impact on the developing character of modern organizations and has contributed to millions of people having to adjust to new ways of working. (Clarke and Fincham 2002: 1)

Management consultants assist their clients on a wide range of issues related to processes of value generation in organizations and in their environments. The fundamental assumption on which practices of management consultancy rest is that organizations and people are amenable to planned change, that they can be controlled and orches-

trated down to a level of minutiae. This assumption is brought to bear on questions of technical design of production processes in order to enhance the efficiency and profitability of organizations. It is applied as well to questions of how to mobilize social and cultural properties of organizations – conceived of in terms such as ‘corporate culture’, ‘team spirit’ and ‘identity’ – and the inner motivational and creative powers of individuals.

Management consultants can be seen as ‘technicians’ of forms of organization associated with capitalism in its present neoliberal configuration. At the same time, these actors exert a role as ‘apostles’ of this economic order, promulgating the imperative of change and readjustment to meet the requirements of the time and the values of flexibility and personal autonomy as sources of income generation, social progress and moral virtue. In the pages that follow, I will be concerned in particular with the enactment of these roles in seminar activities that management consultants facilitate for their clients. These seminar activities is a common way, if not *the* most common way, in which management consultancy is manifested as an experiential reality to the people it affects. In Norway and countries throughout the world, large numbers of managers, professionals and workers have been attending such seminars for a long time. If one is to grasp the significance of management consultancy as a phenomenon of contemporary work life and society, one must look closely into the institutional makeup of this seminar arena, the forms of practices that unfold here and the reasons people of various backgrounds have for entering into the arena. And this is what I intend to do in this book, on the basis of empirical material gathered through a long-term ethnographic exploration of such seminar activities in the Oslo region in Norway.

In grappling with this task, I have found it necessary to widen my analytical perspective beyond the readymade frames of understanding of management consultancy that are on offer in the social sciences. To understand what goes on at management consultancy seminars and why people are drawn to this arena, I will argue, it is necessary but not sufficient to view these practices as instruments of efficiency and productivity or as a social technology of control. While this perspective is indispensable to the study of management consultancy, it does not provide us with the full story of this subject matter, and some of the features it hides from view are essential to the understanding of its contemporary significance. My aim, therefore, is to produce a broader analytic account of management consultancy as a cultural arena of action and experience. To accomplish this task, I will explore the forms of materiality, morality and sociality that enter into the constitution of

this arena. Management consultancy seminars, I will show, are occasions where people step out of the continuous flow of everyday reality and enter into an alternative – *liminoid* – domain of experience. As such, these activities serve as an invitation to engage with analytical insights accumulated in the study of ritual and ritual performances.

## **The Emergence and Proliferation of Management Consultancy**

While one may point to national traditions of managerial thinking and management consultancy in many countries, it is widely recognized that these are at base an American phenomenon. It was in the United States that 'management' first came into being as a self-designated field of expert knowledge, along with the occupational category of management consultants, and to this day the United States remains the principal breeding ground for such ideas. It is commonly assumed also that the emergence of this form of expertise took place at the start of the previous century in conjunction with the developments Chandler (1977) describes as the 'managerial revolution' in US capitalism, whereby the 'invisible hand' of the market gave way to the 'visible hand' of management in industrial corporations. The second industrial revolution gave rise to the large-scale industrial enterprise, which posed novel challenges when it came to the coordination of production activities. This fostered a new understanding of 'management' as a function that is separable from industrial ownership and qualifications of trade, and as a set of skills that, in principle, can be acquired by anyone rather than a hereditary privilege or trait of personality. From the outset, managers from these corporations solicited advice from external actors, such as auditors and engineers, and this prompted the emergence of new forms of expertise, aspiring to the status of a scientific discipline, on the organization and management of industrial work processes (Kipping 2002; Kubr 2002).

In the years leading up to World War I, consultancy businesses were put up by a first generation of 'efficiency experts', spearheaded by Frederic W. Taylor and other proponents of the scientific management movement. Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management*, published in 1911, was widely received in the United States and abroad, and contributed to what has been termed an 'efficiency craze' at the time. Taylor and his followers had backgrounds from mechanical engineering, and were unshakable in the belief in the practical and moral superiority of science and the rational behavioural makeup of humans. Efficiency was to be promoted through economic incentives for workers and a

mechanistic ordering of labour processes. Consulting, as it emerged from the scientific management movement, was modelled on the role of the engineer and focused mainly on 'factory and shop floor productivity and efficiency, rational work organizations, time and motion study, elimination of waste and reduction of production costs' (Kubr 2002: 32). As has happened with successive generations of managerial programmes, scientific management spread almost instantaneously to European countries (including the Soviet Union) and prompted the establishment of consultancy firms and governmental and quasigovernmental bodies, which performed similar roles.

The interwar period saw the emergence of a new group of experts on 'motivation', emanating from the so-called human relations school of management, the starting point of which is the experiments Elton Mayo and associates from Harvard Business School carried out at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant near Chicago in the 1920s and '30s. Like the scientific management movement, the human relations school nurtured a technocratic vision of uninterrupted productivity in the industrial firm (Grint 1998). However, the visions of the two 'schools' differed considerably. The history of managerial discourse, Barley and Kunda (2000 [1992]) argue, shows alternating surges of interest in 'rational' and 'normative' ideologies of control.<sup>1</sup> Scientific management is a prototypical instantiation of the first type of ideology and human relations of the second. In accordance with the human relations philosophy, productivity was to be achieved through a fabrication of a harmonious community at the work place and through an alignment of interests between labour and capital (Bennet 2015), hence the labelling of this tradition of managerial thinking as 'corporatist' by some commentators (Waring 1994).<sup>2</sup> By the 1940s, consultancy firms with a human relations approach flourished in the United States and continued to do so in the decades after World War II (Barley and Kunda 2000 [1992]). The focus of these experts was on the social dynamics of the worker group, or team, and on the psychological needs of the worker, taking the group therapeutic interventions of experts of psychology and social science as a model for consulting.

After World War II, a new generation of management consultancy firms focusing on organization and strategy (rather than production processes at the shop floor) emerged in the United States, mirroring the growing size and complexity of industrial corporations, the increasingly decentralized nature of production processes and the growth of the service production sector. In the 1960s, several of these firms expanded their operations to European countries and in some

cases – such as McKinsey – they have continued to expand globally. These firms were to be surpassed in revenue, however, by yet another generation of management consultancy firms that entered the market in the late 1970s. In this period, several large American and British multinational accountancy firms turned to management consultancy as an alternate source of revenue. This development coincided in time with the political economic restructuring of the capitalist world, which is referred to variously as post-Fordism or neoliberalism (Amin 1994; Castells 1999; Harvey 1990). The deregulation of finance markets and globalization of the world economy created an impetus for leaner and more flexible structures of production. The multinational accountancy firms were among the first to develop consultancy services that specifically targeted the management of ‘value chains’ that cut across organizational and national boundaries, usually in combination with the implementation of information technology (IT).

The management consultancy industry thus contributed to the emergence and solidification of a ‘flexible capitalism’ (Beck 2000; Sennett 2006) characterized by temporary forms of employment, individualization of remuneration, outsourcing of production tasks and the replacement of hierarchical forms of organization with networks and team organization. At the same time, the management consultancy industry has profited immensely from these developments. In the 1980s and 1990s, management consultancy became one of the fastest-growing sectors of advanced economies, with global growth rates in the 20–25 per cent range, reaching estimated global revenue in excess of US\$100 billion at the turn of the century (Kubr 2002).<sup>3</sup> After the turn of the century, the industry has continued to grow, but at a slower pace and with temporary setbacks in connection with the global economic recessions in 2001 and 2008 (O’Mahoney 2010). These developments have been accompanied by a massive concentration of market power, as the multinational accountancy firms have taken on a dominant presence in domestic markets for management consultancy throughout the world. At the turn of the century, a group of five giants and fifteen other multinational management consultancy companies accounted for 60 per cent of the world market (Kubr 2002).

The history of the management consultancy industry in Norway appears to conform to this account, with the qualification that it is embroiled in the history of institutionalization and restructuring of social democracy. Management consultancy firms that emerged in Norway from the 1950s onwards were enrolled in the social democratic government’s programmes of industrial rationalization and later in pro-

grammes of workplace democracy.<sup>4</sup> Several commentators note how the 1980s, when the country's transition into a postindustrial service economy was accelerated, marks a watershed when it comes to the proliferation of management programmes and management consultancy in Norway (Byrkjefot 2002; Falkum 2008; Røvik 1998; Sørhaug 2004). From this time onward, there was a strong growth in the management consultancy industry. A study indicates that there were about three hundred and fifty management consultancy firms in Norway at the end of the 1980s and that most of these had been established in the same decade (Røvik 1991). The growth of the industry continued through the next decade, and after the turn of the century the number of firms had doubled, as indicated by statistics from the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations (FEACO 2004). At the same time, the Norwegian management consultancy market was for a large part conquered by multinational firms. Thus, while a list of the twenty largest management consultancy firms in Norway at the start of the 1990s was dominated by Norwegian or Scandinavian firms, most of these had been replaced by multinational giants at the end of the decade (Gammelsæter 1999).

However, the growth of the market for management consultancy services over the past decades has not only fed into the multinational corporations; it has also facilitated a flourishing of small and independent management consultancy firms, often of an ephemeral nature. In European countries, Kipping and Armbröster (1999) note, these smaller actors make up a large segment of the management consultancy industry. Management consultants fit the profile of the contemporary multi- or transdisciplinary and user-driven (i.e. commercial) 'knowledge worker' (Delanty 2001) better than most other occupational groupings. While they typically (but not exclusively) have high formal skills, there is no single educational track leading into the occupation and there are few formal restrictions on acquiring the title 'management consultant'.<sup>5</sup> By implication, it is relatively easy for people of various backgrounds to set up management consultancy businesses. In the past decades, this has been an attractive option to many people in countries throughout the world, including Norway. Studies from the 1990s indicate that it is common for Norwegian management consultants to have educational backgrounds from business schools, psychology and pedagogy, engineering and social science, and that management consultants also have backgrounds as military officers, social workers, lawyers and theologians (Askvik 1992). This conforms well to the impressions I gathered through my study in the 2000s.

## The Object of Study: Process Consultancy

From this brief historical introduction, it should be apparent that hidden under the terms 'management consultants' and 'management consultancy' is a plethora of actors and practices of varying scale and nature. The complexity of the phenomenon of management consultancy is due not only to the enormous size, geographical extension and organizational segmentation of the management consultancy industry; it extends as well to the methodologies management consultants subscribe to and the service products they offer to their clients. The list of named and ostensibly discrete service products on offer by the management consultancy industry is extensive and virtually impossible to complete, as the product line of the industry is constantly and rapidly evolving (Clarke and Fincham 2002). At the one extreme, these services may approximate engineering or the implementation of information technology (IT) systems; at the other extreme, they are more in the nature of psychotherapy or even spiritual counselling. Adding to this complexity are, on the one hand, the blurred definitional boundaries between management consultancy and a host of related forms of expertise, and, on the other hand, management consultancy's character as a 'global culture' (Held and Moore 2006) or 'global form' (Ong and Collier Ong 2005). While these terms are no doubt appropriate in view of the geographical extension of the management consultancy industry, there are reasons to assume that management consultancy, or a specific consultancy product such as 'coaching', may have rather different significance in places such as New York, Delhi and Oslo.

In an anthropological study that for a large part relies on personal experience as a source of information gathering, it is virtually impossible to gain a comprehensive overview of a vast field of expert activity such as the management consultancy industry, even when the empirical focus is restricted to a single country and region. This necessitates some strategic choices regarding the kinds of actors, ideas and practices within this terrain that are to be singled out as an object of study. One way of sorting actors, practices and ideas in management consultancy, which will I rely on in this study, is to distinguish between 'expert consulting' and 'process consulting'. The introduction of these concepts in the context of management consultancy is usually credited to the writings of Edgar Schein (1969; 1999). Today, expert consulting and process consulting have become generic concepts ingrained in the vernacular of management consultants. In accordance with this distinction, the activities of expert consultants is centred on their exclusive command

of specialized knowledge and the provision of authoritative instructions to clients on such issues. Management consultants who fit into this slot can thus be seen as heirs to the 'rational control' tradition of managerial thinking, which has been informed by the technical professions and which models the role of the consultant on the engineer. Consultants from large multinational firms typically conform to this image. By contrast, many consultants who subscribe to the process approach operate from small and independent firms. These actors are often oriented rather within the 'normative control' current of managerial thinking, which has drawn inspiration from psychology, the humanities and the social sciences. The notion of 'process' they rely on is closely related to notions of 'empowerment' that are put to play – for example, in the fields of pedagogy, social work or international development aid – and point generally to forms of social interchanges that aim to uncover and activate hidden resources of participants. Accordingly, the role of the process consultant is to act as a facilitator or 'broker of meaning' (Alvesson and Johansson 2002) in such interchanges.

The expert versus process consultant dichotomy is a principal means by which management consultants classify themselves and others as professionals, or at least this is the case among consultants who identify as process consultants. In this study, my empirical focus is limited to that particular category of management consultants. Thus, when I speak of management consultants in the pages to come, it is in reference to a group of actors who define themselves as the independent and creative counterparts to the expert consultants of the multinational companies. Process consultants probably account for a small part only of the global revenue generated by the management consultancy industry. However, in the media and in the popular imagination, the process consultant figures as prominently, or more, as the expert consultant, and it is this category of management consultants that people are most likely to have direct dealings with as members of organizations. Process consultants are among the actors that have been on the forefront in promoting a 'cultural turn' in capitalism, or a turn to 'soft capitalism', in the course of the past decades (Olds and Thrift 2005; Ray and Sayer 1999; Thrift 1999). Since the 1980s, members of private and public organizations have increasingly grown accustomed to speak of themselves, the organizations they belong to and the world of the economy and production as matters of creativity, culture and identity. Process consultancy has had a crucial role in this regard, as a channel for the dissemination of these ideas to places across the world and as an arena where such ideas are converted into practice.<sup>6</sup>



The process consultants who feature in this study differed considerably in style as well as in their preferred methodological approaches. However, they united in a never tiring display of their oppositional stance towards 'the experts' and corporate actors within the management consultancy industry. Another essential characteristic these actors have in common is that the products they deal in consist predominately of the staging of 'live' human interactions in face-to-face situations. As a form of knowledge workers, process consultants may engage in the production of reports and other written documents, but this is not their principal professional preoccupation. For most practical purposes, the job of these actors is to facilitate various kinds of seminar activities with clients, activities that aim to realize ideas and ideals invested in the notion of process. At this level of interrogation, the diversity of the phenomenon under study appears less overwhelming. In making this assertion, I am inspired by Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) observation regarding the innumerable 'new' and 'unique' approaches that appear in the management literature. On closer inspection, they note, these ideas always turn out to be minor variations of a homogenous message about the need to foster autonomous subjects adjusted to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>7</sup> A similar situation reveals itself in the seminars of process consultants. While these seminars comes in various guises and with many different names, they are nevertheless recognisable to most participants as instances of a particular type of social setting, one which calls for a particular register of action and expressiveness and which is entrusted therefore with a particular 'atmosphere' (Stewart 2011). The study of process consultancy directs us, in other words, to an institutionalized arena within the work life domain.<sup>8</sup> It is this arena, which I will refer to more specifically as a 'cultural arena', that I take as my object of study in this book.

I will have more to say about the entailments of the concept of cultural arena below. For now it suffices to say that I use 'arena' in this context to underline the sense in which process consultancy is a bounded space of action and experience, which people may step into and out of. In most places today, people have access to a variety of cultural arenas and enter into these with varying frequency and degrees of enthusiasm. The concept is akin therefore to the concept of 'situation' as a temporary matrix of human interaction made up of social conventions and negotiated roles (Goffman 1959). It is akin also to the concept of 'world' invoked in classical urban ethnographic studies to describe emergent institutions of city life as distinct moral universes.<sup>9</sup> To do justice to its subject matter, this study cannot therefore be confined to a study of discourses on process consultancy, nor can it be re-

stricted to a study of the role and activity of management consultants who subscribe to the process approach alone. It must be a study that takes all actors who appear in this arena into account, a study of the forms of human interaction that unfold here and a study of the social and cultural processes that enter into the constitution of the arena.

Anthropology's distinctive contribution to the production of knowledge in the social sciences has always been to analyse reality from the 'ground up' by developing accounts of the situated practices of people in particular places, and this remains true today, even when tackling global phenomena that traverse the distinction between 'lifeworld' and 'system' (Marcus 1995), such as management consultancy. While globalization means that anthropology can no longer entertain the notion of studying bounded conceptual worlds, Aiwaha Ong (2006: 12–13) points out that 'our approach may still be characterized as low-flying, an analytical angle that stays close to discursive and non-discursive practices. Our goal is to engage in midrange theorising about observable contemporary human phenomena in a variety of mutating situations.' What possible contributions can a study of process consultancy committed to the low-flying anthropological analytical programme bring to the social scientific understanding of management consultancy and related forms of expertise. How can it contribute to the understanding of broader social and cultural processes? And from what theoretical angle should this study approach its subject matter?

### **Management Consultancy as Social Technologies of Control**

The readymade answer to these questions is that management consultancy, in its various instantiations, should be studied as an instrument of efficiency, productivity and control. This, of course, is what management consultants themselves will point to when asked to explain the purpose of their interventions. The promises that are attached to the services of management consultants are many, but rarely if ever is the part about efficiency and profitability left out of the advertisement. In the case of process consultants, the services in question are typically marketed as tools of individual and collective learning, growth and development that will make for more competent exercise of leadership, motivation of employees, improved team performances, creativity etc., and which will translate in turn into enhanced organizational efficiency and profitability. While social scientific accounts of management discourse and management expertise are typically framed in more critical terms, the answers to the aforementioned questions that

are found here are nevertheless congruent with those of management consultants. In the eyes of most social scientific observers, management discourse and management expertise have a self-explanatory character as social technologies of control. From the time of Taylor's formulation of the principles of scientific management onwards, the social sciences have seized on managerial discourse as an exemplary illustration of the processes whereby ever more domains of social and individual existence are brought under the sway of calculative reason and the machineries of power particular to modernity. In managerial programmes, the processes of alienation, rationalization and discipline described by classical analysts of modernity such as Marx, Weber and Foucault can be seen to present themselves to the observer in distilled form.

Thus, to point to a much-cited Marxist analysis, Braverman's (1974) study of processes of exploitation and alienation involved in industrial capitalism is for a large part a study of Taylor's principles of scientific management as they are spelled out in the book by the same name. It is from his reading of Taylor that Braverman derives most of his observations concerning the domination of labour by capital in Fordist industrial production, and in particular the 'deskilling' of the manual workforce entailed in this, which facilitates a dehumanization of work and a solidification of management's control of labour. Numerous other contributions deal rather with managerial programmes of the 'normative control' variety. Some of these can be said to follow in the footsteps of Braverman, in the sense of highlighting the exploitative and alienating effects of these programmes as sources of 'emotional dissonance', 'colonization of the affective' or the 'corrosion of character' (Bennet 2015; Crowley et al. 2010; Hochschild 2003 [1983]; Sennett 1998; Wilmott 1993). However, in recent years, critical studies of managerial discourse and management expertise have been inspired in particular by Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality.<sup>10</sup>

Exponents of the governmentality approach reject the view of management programmes as a source of alienation and encroachment of the subjectivity of employees. It is in and through their willing participation in such forms of regulation that people are 'made up' as subjects, it is argued, not in opposition to them (Miller and Rose 2008). This is exemplified by Rose's (1999) influential study, where he traces the genealogy of the modern 'subject of work' as manifested in forms of managerial thinking emerging within the human relations tradition in the United Kingdom. The introduction of such programmes in work life in the postwar period, Rose (1999: 73) argues, allowed management to reconcile the apparently opposing realities of "'bosses" imperative

of efficiency with the intelligibility of workers' resistance to it, and to claim the capacity to transform the subjectivity of the worker from an obstacle to an ally in quest for productivity and profit'. In more recent managerial programmes emerging from the same tradition, the subject of work takes on the character of an autonomous 'entrepreneurial self' attuned to the requirements of flexible capitalism and bent on achieving psychological rewards and self-fulfilment through work. Rose (1999: 119) concludes his study with the observation that 'the government of work now passes through the psychological strivings of each and every one of us for what we want'.

Critical studies of management expertise may thus direct us to different conclusions when it comes to its nature as a form of exercise of power and its experiential effects. However, the aforementioned studies are in fundamental agreement when it comes to the view of management expertise as a social technology of control. To Marxists and Foucaultians alike, management programmes represents first and foremost a push on the part of owners and managers of modern organizations to extend their powers of regulation into the very soul of employees. The aforementioned studies converge also in a tendency to assume that these programmes of management work 'according to the book' – that is, that these discourses are descriptive of the reality of work life at various times and places. Both Braverman and Rose present us with a bleak picture of work life, wherein management expertise emerges as an all-pervasive force of ordering the productive activity and subjectivity of workers, and on this count both authors have run up against objections that they overstate the role and importance of these forms of expertise. Just as Braverman has been criticised for overestimating the impact of scientific management on industrial organizations (Grint 2000), Rose's analysis has been dismissed on the grounds that the empirical reality of contemporary work life does not correspond to the discourses he is describing (Thompson and Finlay 1999).

These objections have a particular relevance when it comes to the study of practices of management consultancy (as opposed to management expertise or management discourse in general). In the widespread popular cynicism directed at management consultants and in the critical reporting on management consultants in the media, these actors are seldom portrayed as a Kafkaesque force of rationalization, but emerge rather as a contemporary version of the snake oil salesman. It is a criticism that highlights the erroneous character of the knowledge these actors promote, the superficiality of their interventions in organizations and the lack of impact these interventions have on in-

dividuals and organizations (see for instance Ehrenreich 2009; Ween 2004). This criticism finds resonance in another main strand of social scientific understanding of managerial discourse and management expertise. These studies also view management expertise as a form of social technology of control, but in this case, the emphasis is on its ritualistic nature and futility as an instrument of controlling people and organizations. Exponents of this perspective are indebted often to DiMaggio and Powell's (2004 [1983]) observation that the processes of bureaucratic rationalization Max Weber described and prophesized a century ago have run their course in the life of modern organizations and that the evolution of organizations is now more a matter of processes of symbolic legitimation than of technical improvement.<sup>11</sup> Such processes have been documented in a large body of studies that focus on the 'packaging', marketing and dissemination of management ideas as fads and fashions (Abrahamson 1991; Abrahamsson and Eisenman 2008; Green 2004; Hegele and Kieser 2002; Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Czarniawska and Panozza 2008; Kieser 1997). What is suggested by these studies, in different ways, is that the impact of management ideas on organizations tends to be superficial and transitory, and that it is often a matter of rhetorical window dressing. In this view, the proliferation of management programmes is more a matter of the processes Weber referred to as re-enchantment than of rationalization.

While these studies have the merit of accounting for a widespread experience-based criticism of management consultancy, they rely on a rather narrow perspective, restricted thematically to processes of dissemination and proliferation of management ideas. Apart from probing their ritualistic and symbolic nature, they have little to say about social and cultural processes involved in management consultancy, as if these practices were *merely* ritualistic or *merely* symbolic – that is, devoid of meaning or purpose. As such, this perspective may generate more questions than it answers. Or, at least, this must be so in a study of process consultancy committed to the aforementioned low-flying analytical approach. Here, the aim is not to arrive at a yes or no answer to the question of whether these practices deliver what they promise in productivity and efficiency. Rather, the aim is to illuminate how and in what ways these practices work in actuality and to explore the various forms of sociocultural mechanisms that may be operative in these contexts. That there is a fashion dynamic and a ritualistic element to the proliferation and uses of management consultancy is highly plausible, but this can hardly be all there is to say about this subject. If the practices involved in management consultancy are merely a rhetorical smokescreen, how is it that so many organizations devoted to the re-

quirements of the 'bottom line' and so many highly educated people continue to solicit these services at a high cost over time – why haven't they called the bluff? Much as in the case of Marxist or Foucaultian interpretations, the view of management programmes as vessels of symbolic legitimation has important shortcomings when it comes to the study of management consultancy. In both cases, these shortcomings stem from a too-narrow view of management consultancy as a social technology of control.

### Process Consultancy as a Cultural Arena

I do not thereby want to suggest that the view of management programmes and management expertise as a social technology of control should be abandoned; clearly, this is indispensable to any study of this class of phenomena. What I am getting at rather, is that the technology figure leaves important sides of practices of management consultancy out of view and, in particular, this is the case when it comes to practices of process consultancy. As a fieldworker immersed in seminar activities where 'process' was to be realized, it soon became apparent to me that more was at stake here than the acquisition of leadership skills, the inculcation of cooperative work habits or the formulation of vision statements. The notion of process that is put to play in this setting is more open ended than what appears in official presentations. Apart from specific goals of learning and development, it can refer to forms of democratic deliberation, to therapeutic dialogues, to self-development or simply to the heightened experience of taking part in a 'happening'. Seldom is process talked about with a level of precision that rules out any of these possibilities. When pushed to explain what makes for a successful process, consultants and clients would typically frame this as a matter of 'making something happen to people'. As we shall see, usually something *does* happen to people on these occasions, leaving them with a sense of having taken part in an event out of the ordinary. And when seminars take on this character, there is usually a sense among the participants that the process was successful and rewarding, even though it may be unclear how they should profit from this after the event. This is not to say, of course, that these activities do not function as instruments of learning and growth, or as instruments of control. It is to say rather that there are also other processes unfolding in this arena and that there are other reasons that people are drawn to the arena; it can yield more immediate forms of rewards.

In order to grasp fully the entailments of process consultancy at this level of 'operative efficacy', to use a term from the study of ritual (Moore and Myerhoff 1977), I propose that we must look closely at how this phenomenon is constituted as a cultural arena of action and experience. I use the term 'culture' here in the anthropological sense of meaning and world making and in accordance with the 'distributive' view of culture advocated by Hannertz (1992). In my understanding, this concept is congenial to, but not reducible to, the concept of discourse. To study managerial discourse is to engage with the production and dissemination of 'serious speech acts' within this sphere of expertise; it is a study of a linguistic production of reality, as manifested in official documents and statements.<sup>12</sup> The anthropological concept of culture refers to a wider lived reality of ideas, beliefs, values and symbolic practices. It takes the social activities and experiences of people under study – including informal and unofficial activities and experiences – as its reference point, and serves as an invitation for holistic understanding of their social cum conceptual worlds. When applied more specifically to the study of contemporary knowledge workers, the concept serves as an invitation to interrogate these actors at the vernacular level (Boyer 2008; Holmes and Marcus 2005).<sup>13</sup> To gain understanding of a culture espoused by such actors, one must acquaint oneself with their informal day-to-day activities and the forms of skills, ideas and interests that are put to play in these activities, not just those that enter into official representations. And this is what I intend to do in this book. In the chapters that follow, I will pay more attention to words and expressions that are recurring features of the informal communication that goes on between consultants and clients at seminars and to the notion of process that emerges from this, than to its formal definitions in books and articles on management subjects.

As transdisciplinary knowledge workers, I have indicated, management consultants appropriate and emulate ideas from various sources more intensely and with less friction than many other comparable categories of actors. To say that process consultancy is a cultural arena is not to suggest therefore that it is a 'bounded whole' or in other ways sealed off from external influences. On the contrary, as I will show in this book, none of the features that enter into the constitution of this cultural arena are unique to process consultancy. However, as I will also show, there is nevertheless a distinctiveness and permanency to this arena that makes it recognisable to people and discernible from other cultural arenas they frequent. To explain this matter, I find guidance in Massey's (1994; 2005) discussions of the specificity of places: what accounts for the specificity of process consultancy as a cultural

arena is not some historical essence of ideas and practices, but rather the particular way in which its various defining features are assembled at a particular time and place. To participate in process consultancy seminars usually means to enter into a physical environment with certain place like qualities; it means to enter into a social environment where certain forms of conventions of behaviour are recognized by participants and shape their interactions, and it means to enter into a symbolic-expressive environment that invites certain forms of emotion and affect. In accordance with these observations, my aim in this book is to explore ethnographically the makeup of process consultancy as a cultural arena along the dimensions of *materiality*, *sociality* and *moral-ity*. When I say that my ambition is to analyse how process consultancy is constituted as a cultural arena, it means that I aim to explicate how the various features that accrue along these dimensions assemble and intertwine to make up an arena of action and experience.

What this exercise will reveal is that process consultancy is a liminoid (or 'liminal-like') space, in Turner's (1974) sense, one of the various arenas modern people seek out to escape the existential friction and complexities of everyday living. It is a space where people, as Turner says, are let off the normative hooks and where they can engage in forms of play and experimentation. In the continuation of these points, my inquiry into process consultancy as a cultural arena will show that it is an arena for the articulation of a cluster of moralities, some of which evade by far what one would expect to be the concerns of a category of experts on organization and management. By moralities, I refer not so much to conceptions of right and wrong as to frameworks in which to talk about the 'good' and the 'good life'. In accordance with Taylor (1989; 2007), this concerns the various answers Western modernity have provided and continue to provide to questions of what it means to be a person and how to lead a dignified life. One such form of morality, which is at the heart of process consultants' professional identities, I refer to as 'processualism'. It consists, on the one hand, of a rejection of the knowledge and authority of 'experts' and, on the other hand, of an optimistic affirmation of the hidden resources of the inner self of people in general, as a key to development. Another form of morality that is brought to the fore in process consultancy I term 'micro-utopianism'. Much like other forms of utopianisms, it is a longing for a future state of perfection, where the conflicting forces of modernity are harmonized. However, this is not a grand vision about collective systems that will bring history to an end, but a more restricted vision of a situation of living and of individual happiness, a vision about a win-win situation where forces of eco-



conomic development are aligned to needs for personal development. A third form of morality that defines process consultancy as a cultural arena I refer to as 'vitalism'. It is an orientation to the world that gives precedence to notions of 'life' as an inexplicable power of creativity and never-resting movement, to experiences of intensity and vitality, and that views these as threatened everywhere by mechanistic structures of thought and action. Therefore, it is assumed, there is an urgent need to liberate people from structures that inhibit or block the release of vital energies and experiences of vitality.

These forms of morality are widespread cultural currents in contemporary Western modernity that inform the self-understandings of numerous people. In process consultancy seminars, these moralities emerge in condensed form and take on a forceful coherence and reality to participants. This, I will show, is due not only to the rhetorical enunciation of these ideas on these occasions, but to their enactment by seminar participants. The form of sociality that characterizes process consultancy as a cultural arena is that of a secular ritual (Moore and Myerhoff 1977). As understood here, ritual is a form of action that is centred on performance, or the 'self-conscious "doing" of highly symbolic actions in public' (Bell 1997: 160), and that is constituted through a dialectic of individual agency and pre-existing scripts of action (Hobart and Kapferer 2006). In accordance with Collins's (2012 [2004]) writing on 'interaction ritual', I further assume that ritual works by way of emotional entrainment. The driving force behind the emergence in society of ever new forms of rituals, Collins argues, is not a built-in tendency of society for integration – as is assumed on the Durkheimian view – but individuals' need for experiences of ritual intensity, experiences of being immersed in an enhanced 'now' and in the solidarity of a bounded group. As we shall see, the seminar activities of process consultants is an arena that caters to such needs. More specifically, this takes the form of interchanges that revolve around acts of self-revelation, where speakers confess their troubles, testify to their enthusiasm or declare their belonging to others. The form of acts that define process consultancy above all as an arena of action and experience are demonstrations in front of others of nontrivial truths about the speaker's subjectivity. For this reason, I refer to these activities as 'rituals of disclosure'.

It should be clear from what I have said thus far that, when I describe the seminar activities of process consultants in the terminology of the anthropology of rituals, my intention is not simply to highlight a ritualistic aspect of these activities or their lack of efficaciousness, as 'mere rituals'. My intention rather is to acquire a richer analytical

language in which to speak about how these activities work and by what mechanisms, about the kinds of rewards participants can reap from the activities and about their wider cultural significance. By the same token, we can acquire a richer understanding of what 'process' means in these contexts. 'Process', as it emerges in this arena, is a *liminoid* space – a space of intensity, where people become absorbed in emotionally engaging interaction rituals; it is a space of utopia, where people express and enact their dreams and longings for future states of perfection; and it is a moral space, where people seek recognition for the dreams and desires of their inner selves and affirm those of others.

### **The Setting of the Study and Fieldwork**

Norway can be described as a European periphery in geographical terms, but also on account of its demography, history of state formation and international relations. The country is located in the subarctic and arctic Nordic region on the northern fringe of Europe. The population of about 5.3 million is distributed on a relatively large territory, which consists for the most part of mountain and forest areas, and, even though centralization has been a longstanding demographic trend, a large part of the population still resides in smaller settlements outside the cities. Unlike neighbouring Denmark and Sweden, Norway has not played a role as a regional empire in recent history. The modern Norwegian nation-state was established in 1814, prior to which the country had been a province under the Danish kingdom, and gained formal independence in 1905, when a state union with Sweden was dissolved. The history of political and cultural domination by the neighbouring countries provides an explanation for Norway's reluctance towards formal political integration with Europe. Norway is a part of the European Economic Area (EEA) and hence part of the free movement of goods, capital, services and people in Europe, but the country is not a member of the European Union, as the population has rejected proposed bids for membership in referendums in 1972 and 1994. While the struggle to gain and uphold national independence has been central to political life in Norway over the past two centuries, the country has simultaneously been characterized by an extensive international trade and receptiveness to cultural currents from abroad.

Historians of political, economic and cultural modernization in Norway note how these processes have been deeply influenced by ideas and impulses from Europe and the United States (Slagstad 1998; Sørensen and Stråth 1997).<sup>14</sup> In the course of the twentieth century,

Norway was transformed from a backward region that relied predominantly on agriculture and fishery into a modern industrial economy, and the population's standard of living was elevated to a European level. In all of the Nordic countries, the brokering of strategic alliances between the labour parties and the farmers' parties in the 1930s laid the foundation for the emergence of a social democratic welfare capitalism, which Esping-Andersen (1990) describes as a peculiar blend of liberalism (universal citizen rights) and socialism (state redistribution of resources). From the end of World War II to the 1970s – a period Slagstad (1998) refers to as the 'Labour Party State' with reference to the social democratic party's hegemonic role – these arrangements provided a framework for economic growth and political stability in which material betterment and social mobility was extended to large sections of the population.

In the ensuing decades, the Labour Party lost its hegemony, and the welfare state has been subject to a continuous restructuring in ways that reflect processes of individualization and growing cultural diversity in the population and of neoliberal globalization in the political sphere. In spite of this, support for what is commonly referred to as the 'Norwegian model' appears to have solidified. As used in public debates, this expression may refer generally to a culture of egalitarianism, which is assumed to be prevalent in social life, a topic that has been central in anthropological studies of Norway.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the expression points to a social democratic model of cooperation and compromise between the state, labour and employers, wherein the state takes on extensive responsibilities for providing the population with welfare services. Today, political parties from across the political spectrum embrace the idea that Norway should have a generous welfare state as a matter of course. This reflects in turn the circumstance that Norway in recent decades has become one of the most wealthy countries in the world. Contributing to this wealth is income from oil and gas resources that were discovered in Norway's territory in the North Sea in the 1970s, which now account for about a quarter of the country's GDP and half of its export revenues.

The capitol city of Oslo is located in the southeastern part of Norway at the inner shore of the Oslo fjord. The city is the dominant centre of government and business in Norway, and, with a fast-growing population of about 670 thousand and one million in the greater Oslo region (in 2018), it is a dominant demographic centre as well. Much like other European cities, Oslo has undergone a deindustrialization process since the 1970s, and factories and shipyards in the inner city area have been remade into office spaces, shopping malls and residen-

tial housing complexes. The postindustrial Oslo is heavily dependent on the service economy, with state agencies and the municipal government among its largest employers. Large sections of the country's media and culture industries and several institutions of higher education are located here, along with national head offices of business companies. The city is home as well to many of the actors who make up the management consultancy industry in Norway, and it is here I carried out most of my ethnographic fieldwork. As indicated above, the management consultancy industry in Norway can be divided into several segments of firms. One such segment is the multinational consultancy firms that have offices in Norway, some of which have a staff more than one thousand employees, while others have a few employees only. Another segment is made up of well-established domestic management consultancy firms, like Habberstad and Hartmark, which may have staffs of about fifty or fewer consultants. A third segment consists of a multitude of independent firms in the form of single-person ventures and partnerships between handfuls of consultants.

My initial plan for the fieldwork was to gain access to a multinational management consultancy firm and to trace a particular management consultancy concept between sites at various locations. As matters fell, I ended up doing what in Marcus's (1995) words can be described as 'strategically situated (single-site) ethnography' on independent consultancy firms in Oslo that were committed to the process approach.<sup>16</sup> This was for practical as well as theoretical reasons. While I found it difficult to gain access for research (or to elicit any kind of response for that matter) from the multinational firms I contacted, independent process consultants proved to be more welcoming. In the early phase of the fieldwork, as I was waiting for replies to formal requests for research made to multinational firms, I started attending seminars on managerial concepts that were open to the public. Here, I got in touch with independent process consultants who invited me to follow their activities. I also got positive responses from several independent consultancy firms I contacted directly by phone or email, and this led me to reconsider my fieldwork strategy.

The logic of discovery involved in anthropological research can be described as a continuous dialectic between theory and empirical observations (Sanjek 2014). This applies not only to a moment of ethnographic writing, but to the ethnographic process in its entirety, including the delineation of the ethnographic case. As I got acquainted with several independent consultancy firms and their clients, I was struck by the similarity of their variously named seminar activities as instances of 'process consultancy'. I was struck also by the pregnancy of these

seminar activities as a potential object of sociocultural analysis, and by how the existing analytical literature evaded important aspects of these activities. From then onwards, I narrowed the focus of my fieldwork to an exploration of process consultancy seminars as a cultural arena, following the activities of several independent consultancy firms.<sup>17</sup>

The fieldwork was carried out from 2002 to 2004 and revolved around the activities of four management consultancy firms in particular. Throughout this period, I followed the firm Human Dynamics, which was a small network of consultants that provided clients with services such as leadership development, team role analysis and coaching.<sup>18</sup> I had regular meetings with Anna Pedersen, the consultant in charge of the firm, and her associates and participated in several coaching training and leadership development seminars they carried out for their clients. At the same time, I followed the firm TeamXperience, which was a single person venture operated by Leif Olsen. This firm specialized in leadership development and teambuilding seminars in the form of physical outdoor activities. I participated in several seminars at the firms' forest site. Another single person firm I followed, Leadership Competency, was operated by Geir Larsen and specialized in services related to coaching. In this case, the fieldwork engagement was limited to my participation in a coaching training programme with a group of clients. TeamXperience and Leadership Competency did not have permanent offices, and, while Human Dynamics had a small office in the city centre, this was for the most part empty, as Anna Pedersen was off on assignments or working from home. With these firms, in other words, there were no physical arenas where I could hang out on a daily basis; thus my fieldwork engagements were for a large part limited to interviews and participation in meetings and seminars at the consultants' invitation. For this reason, it felt like a breakthrough when I was granted access to a fourth consultancy firm, Vision, which specialized in corporate strategy planning. This was a bigger firm with a staff of ten to twelve persons. It had an office with constant activity that I could visit at my own will, which meant that I now had much greater freedom to develop my inquiry in accordance with my own priorities and that I could devote myself to fieldwork as a full-time occupation for long periods of time. Initially, Petter Berg, a senior partner of the firm, acted as my patron and let me in on a strategy project he was heading. Through my participation in the project and by hanging out at the office, I learned to know his other colleagues, which eventually led to my inclusion in two other strategy projects.

As Holmes and Marcus (2005) point out, the ethnographic study of experts (or knowledge workers) differs from classic anthropological

studies in the sense that it usually takes place in worlds where the private and public spheres are strictly demarcated, and where research is confined mainly to the latter sphere. This is not to say that I did not interact with consultants in private or semiprivate settings, for example by joining them for a drink at a restaurant after work hours or meeting them at home. However, for the most part, the fieldwork was confined to professional settings at seminars or at consultants' or clients' offices. These fieldwork settings are not without challenges, some of which are of a practical nature. The consultants I followed all had a busy work schedule, and at times it was clearly a nuisance to them to have me hanging on their heels asking questions. While I tried to make myself useful by offering my assistance with practical tasks at seminars or by offering consultants a lift in my car to seminars, they obviously could have functioned just as easily without me. This adds weight to the question of why these consultants bothered to have a person who asked questions about everything – from the theoretical foundation of their professional practice to the serving of fruits at seminars – hanging around them for long periods of time.

In my experience, there are several reasons that consultants may find it worthwhile to nurture a relation with a fieldworker in spite of such inconveniences. One of these is that there may be a form of prestige attached to the role of research object. As will be explained in the chapters that follow, the firm Vision nurtured an image as a dynamic meeting place for ideas and people. To have an anthropologist associated with the firm could be seen to complement this image. From the ways other consultants presented me to clients at seminars, I also got the sense that they too felt that this added status to the activities. A second reason that consultants may have found it useful to be associated with me as a fieldworker was as a source of new ideas and theories. This was most clearly pronounced in my relation with Anna Pedersen and her associates from Human Dynamics. The consultants I followed were, on their own accord, always on the lookout for concepts and words that they could potentially use in their dealings with clients. In conversations I had with Anna Pedersen, she was often questioning me as much as I was questioning her, wanting to hear about concepts and theories I knew of. A third reason that consultants could find the fieldworker relation rewarding is that it offers opportunities for evaluation of their own professional practices in a confidential dialogue with another person. To be a management consultant can be a lonely business, and even consultants from Vision could complain about the lack of opportunities for collegiate interchanges. Conversations with me could therefore be a welcomed op-

portunity to reflect on and assess their professional performance in seminar activities I had attended.

Another set of challenges I had to deal with as a fieldworker relates to the pragmatics involved in doing participant observation in the process consultancy seminar setting. Much of the fieldwork was spent hanging out at the offices of the firms I followed, on interview appointments or more casual encounters with consultants and clients, but the principal focus of my research was on forms of interaction and communicative interchanges that unfolded between participants at seminars. As will become clearer in the chapters to come, these activities are often of an intimate and intense nature. The explicit and implicit premise for my inclusion in these settings was that I should not disturb the activities or interfere in them in ways that might detract from the seminars for the clients. At the same time, it was in my interest as an observer that participants should behave as they would have if I were not present. This called for some sensitivity on my part about the degree of my involvement in these situations. On some occasions, it appeared unproblematic that I took on a role as a situated listener – for example, by sitting in with a group of seminar participants, listening to their discussions without making contributions on my own. On other occasions it appeared that the only sensible thing I could do was to participate in the activities – and hence, to enter into forms of personal ‘sharing’ or ‘reciprocal revelation’ as I term this – on a par with the other seminar participants. However, my presence in the seminar setting was less of a source of intimidation of participants than I feared in advance. One reason for this is the intense reflexivity that characterizes these activities in general, a topic I expand on in chapter 3. What one finds here is an attitude of self-observation that is closely attuned to the ethnographer’s interest in dissecting the minutia of social interaction and shared meanings.

## Overview of Chapters

As indicated above, the account I present in the chapters to come is structured as an exploration of the materiality, morality and sociality of process consultancy as a cultural arena. In chapter 1, the reader is familiarized with the management consultants and management consultancy firms I got to know. I describe similarities and differences between these actors with regard to their professional biographies, methodological orientations and style, and highlight the insecurities and precarious nature of the occupation. A shared feature of these ac-

tors is their oppositional stance 'against the experts' and their positive embrace of the process approach. This commitment, which I term 'processualism', is premised on a pragmatist belief that if knowledge is to be useful and operative, it has to be engaging to people and motivate action. Among process consultants, I argue, this takes the form of a vocational calling.

In chapter 2, I move on to a preliminary characterization of process consultancy as a cultural arena. Here, I show how 'process' emerges as a liminoid space in the informal vocabulary of consultants and clients and I highlight the acts of framing that brings this about on these occasions. Here, I point to the acts of physical relocation that are involved in process consultancy seminars and the material environment of the conference hotel as a form of secluded space. I describe the codes of informality and of anonymity that apply in these seminars. I note also how interchanges between participants typically unfold in accordance with an 'attitude of affirmation', which gives credence to displays of empathy and recognition of others, and how this attitude ties in with the use of presentation media and the bullet-point form as vehicles of communication.

In chapter 3, I explicate the dynamics of process consultancy seminars as a form of rituals of disclosure. The speech genre that characterizes interchanges between participants in this arena revolve around acts of self-revelation (described more specifically as acts of confession, acts of bearing witness, declarations of belonging and as acts of self-observation), where participants make nontrivial truths about their subjectivity known to their interlocutors. The experience of ritual intensity that ensue from these interchanges, I argue, is a reward of the activities of considerable importance to participants. In addition to acts of framing, one important mechanism explains why process consultancy seminars take on this ritual dynamic. This I refer to as a dynamic of 'reciprocal revelation'.

Chapter 4 looks into a particular strategy project the firm Vision carried out for a small-town local community as a means of stimulating economic regeneration and population growth. Here, I highlight the utopianism that is brought to the fore in process consultancy seminars and, more specifically, the 'micro-utopian' form in which this is cast. To understand the appeal these ideas have among people of various backgrounds, I argue, it is not enough to inspect the visions of the future that are put forward in process consultancy seminars and their rhetorical framing. One must take into consideration also that these visions are enacted by participants on these occasions. In the seminar setting, abstract ideas and images about the future are called into being by the



participants and thereby take on a heightened sense of coherence and reality to them.

In chapter 5, I highlight a conspicuous feature of the informal vocabulary consultants and clients employ as a means of assessing process consultancy seminars. This vocabulary is very much a vocabulary about the release and flow of 'energy'. The notion of energy it relies on differs from the mechanistic conception of human energy expenditure that has informed scientific management and other forms of human engineering. Rather, it is descriptive of a widespread cultural tendency of contemporary Western modernity, the proliferation of vitalism or a culture of intensity. This elucidation of the vitalist morality provides a framework of understanding how 'process', as the activation of hidden potentials of individuals, takes on moral significance as a form of personal emancipation. Vitalism is a framework also for understanding moral reactions to persons who refuse or are unable to abide with the attitudinal requirements of 'process'. In the seminar setting, displays of personal detachment – for example, in the forms of irony, arrogance or argumentativeness – are typically seen as instances of 'negativity'. Displays of such qualities are not only perceived as practical obstacles in the facilitation of 'process', but also take on connotations of a moral danger.

## NOTES

1. The ideas, beliefs and practices that inform the managerial community, Barley and Kunda (2000 [1992]: 333) say, 'cluster around two broad themes: organic solidarity and rational control versus mechanical solidarity and normative control'. Rather than a linear progression of theories and methods, Barley and Kunda argue, the history of managerial discourse has taken the form of a cyclical alteration between these two ideological currents. Management ideas that belong on the 'rational control' side of Barley and Kunda's scheme are founded on a belief in the superiority of science and the rationalistic makeup of humans on the model of the *homo economicus*. The role ascribed to management in such theories is accordingly to contribute to, and oversee the implementation of, rationally planned schemes to enhance efficiency of production. Management ideas that belong on the 'normative control' side of the scheme focus rather on the social, psychological and moral dynamics of productive life. In this case, the role ascribed to management is to elicit and activate the psychological, social and cultural sources of efficiency and productivity in the workforce.
2. Mayo, a follower of Durkheim, was concerned mainly with restoring a sense of belonging to social collectives among workers. In the writings of later human relations thinkers, such as Kurt Lewin, Abraham Maslow and Douglas

McGregor, there is a shift of perspective from *homo gregarious* to *homo actualis*, as attention is turned to the self-actualization of workers (Grint 1998).

3. Because of, among other things, unclear definitional boundaries of the industry, such estimates are uncertain and vary considerably among observers.
4. Historical studies suggest that management ideas from the United States found their way into Norwegian organizations from the start of the twentieth century (Amdam 1993). However, it was not until the second half of the century that the 'managerialization' of productive life gained momentum in Norway, as a part of the ruling Labour Party's programme for economic modernization of the country. This programme, Slagstad (2012) notes, was one of rationalization of industrial production on the model 'Big is good', along with a shift to production for export purposes. With the aid of experts from the United States, a productivity drive was initiated in the economic sector through collaboration between unions, industrial capitalists and the government (Amdam and Bjarnar 1998). In the 1950s, with funding from the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) (which administered the Marshall Plan aid for postwar reconstruction in Europe), several organizations devoted to the cause of industrial rationalization were set up within the government, in employer's associations and in the labour movement or as independent/quasi-independent agencies. By the late 1950s, Røvik (1998) argues, various organized initiatives to promote rationalization had attained the character of a distinct 'organizational field', where information passed smoothly between advisory bodies, government agencies and business interests within the country and abroad. Included in this field were several domestic management consulting firms that were established around this time. The expert actors that came to make up this organizational field were committed mainly to the methodological arsenal of the scientific management movement. Later, these forms of expertise were complemented by the emergence of the tradition for applied research on work-life relations, which became a channel for the influx of management ideas from the human relations school in Norwegian work-life (Byrkjefot 2002; Falkum 2008). In the 1960s, experiments of industrial collaboration with a focus on workplace democratization and worker participation, which is very much in line with the social democratic model of work-life relations, were carried out with sponsorship from the confederations of the trade unions and of the employer's organizations. This appears to be a clear case of a process of 'translation' of management ideas into a particular sociopolitical environment (Røvik 2009). When the research programme on collaboration and industrial democracy faded out in the 1980s, this tradition of management thinking was carried forward by Norwegian management consultancy firms (Byrkjefot 2002).
5. A probable reason that management consultancy has never developed into a profession based on an educational monopoly and adherence to formalized ethical standards (even though professional associations exist at a national and European level) is that the multinational management consultancy firms have subverted such initiatives, preferring instead to school their employees in their own methodologies and to preserve these methodologies as business secrets (Kipping and Armbrøster 1999).

6. Along with management consultants, Olds and Thrift (2005) highlight management gurus and business schools as the principal channels through which these ideas disseminate, or as the 'cultural circuit of capital'.
7. On the basis of a reading of comprehensive samples of French management literature from the 1960s and 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 60) conclude that 'these texts disclose a high degree of homogeneity in the discourse and . . . its general organization around a limited number of themes'. In each period, they note, a set of core ideas 'pass numbly from one relay to another' and is repeated across texts to the extent that it is 'extremely difficult to attribute paternity to these bodies of rhetoric'.
8. Here, I understand 'institutionalized' as 'a grouping of acts and ideas already instituted which individuals find before them and which more or less imposes itself upon them' (Mauss and Fauconnet 2005 [1901]: 10).
9. Thus, to take a famous example, Paul G. Cressey (1969: 31, quoted in Han-nertz 1980: 51) described the taxi-dance hall of Chicago in the 1920s as 'a distinct world, with its own way of acting, talking, and thinking. It has its own vocabulary, its own activities and interests, its own conception of what is significant in life, and – to a certain extent – its own schemes of life'.
10. As Miller and Rose (2008) explain, governmentality consists, on the one hand, of 'rationalities or programmes of government', forms of morality and psychological, sociological or economic theories that render people intelligible and manageable as objects of calculation. On the other hand, governmentality consists of 'technologies', the instruments and forms of intervention through which these forms of thinking are made operational in the institutions of work, education, the family and so on.
11. More specifically, DiMaggio and Powell (2004 [1983]) point to processes of isomorphism, whereby modern organizations come to resemble each other in their striving to gain legitimacy as 'modern' and future-oriented enterprises, as drivers of development in modern organizations.
12. In the tradition of Foucault, discourse refers to constellations of statements that regulate what legitimately can be said about a topic of knowledge at a given time, and as such discourses are assumed to create their own objects, i.e. to produce the reality or truth they describe (Foucault 1972). Discourse, in this sense, does not refer to any kind of statements, but to 'serious speech acts', statements made by actors who are recognized as authorities on the subjects in question and of a kind that is typically recorded in writing and put into public circulation (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982).
13. In their discussion of the practices of US central bankers, Holmes and Marcus (2005) draw attention to the discrepancy between the official representations produced by these institutions, which are couched in a technocratic language of statistics, and the informal procedures of information gathering and experience-based reasoning that play a crucial part in the decision-making processes that unfold within them, and which is revealed only in personal anecdotal accounts.
14. An exception to this picture is the northern part of Norway, which has a long history of transnational migration and trade with Russia. One of the pillars of Norwegian foreign policy since the end of World War II has been its commit-

ment to the NATO alliance, and, during the Cold War, these relations to the East were severed. Since the end of the Cold War, transnational relations in the Barents Region have again flourished.

15. As Gullestad (1992) point out, the Norwegian word for equality (*likhet*) refers as much to sameness or similarity as it points to 'of equal value' or 'equal rights'. The emphasis on equality as sameness in Norwegian social life, she argues, should not be mistaken for actual homogeneity or a lack of differences in class, status and culture. Rather, it is manifested in an 'interactional style whereby sameness of the participants of an encounter is emphasized, and differences are, as much as possible, tactfully concealed. The Norwegian egalitarian tradition is therefore not necessarily actual sameness, but a way of *emphasizing* sameness and under-communicating difference' (Gullestad 1992: 104). The shifting roles of equality as a central yet paradoxical value in Norwegian social life have been explored more recently in ethnographic studies of social arenas ranging from informal relations of local communities to high-level politics (Henningsen and Vike 1999; Liden et al. 2001) and in the context of growing cultural diversity resulting from immigration (Gullestad 2006).
16. This is one of the several specific forms of multi-sited ethnography Marcus (1995: 110) mentions in his much-cited article, noting that strategically situated (single-site) ethnography 'may not move around literally but may nonetheless embed itself in a multi-sited context . . . what goes on within a particular locale in which research is conducted is often calibrated with its implications for what goes on in another related locale, or other locales, even though the other locales may not be within the frame of the research design or resulting ethnography'.
17. A more detailed account of the ethnographic fieldwork is provided in my doctoral dissertation (Henningsen 2016).
18. In accordance with the promise of confidentiality I gave informants, all names of persons and management consultancy firms and client organizations used in this text are fictive, and some false characteristics have been added to hide their identity.