

Surimi-gate – A lesson for social theory?

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Last November, following the Norwegian change of government, a scandal hit the media. The facts are still not exhaustive and the final outcome remains to be seen. The Surimigate label, then, is perhaps less than apt. But even the Watergate prototype bore that name well before definitive proofs or confessions.

The chain of events is long and complicated, and the list of characters involved worthy of a Tolstoy, a Mitchell – or a Lodge. We can offer only an outline, a sketch of main events or turning points¹. The point presently is not to take stands on the facts, nor on their consequences, be they legal or political. That's not the regular business of a professional periodical. What is, however, is lining out some implications for social theory, granted that the facts are reasonably tenable².

¹ For details, cf. Arne Eriksen: *Rosa japper i fiskefarse* (1992) and *Kan vi stole på forskerne?* (1994). Credits to Eriksen for his near Herculean efforts of muck-racking, and for facing threats and hush-up efforts with resilient courage. His work provides the factual base for this paper.

² A fresh support: Eriksen, it seems after years in semi-limbo, was recently awarded a prize for good work by his Tromsø journalist colleagues. And perhaps more important, from the

The events are not so interesting for involving the names of two prominent sociologist colleagues – Terje Rød Larsen as a board chairperson of some firms/quangos, and Gudmund Hernes as another leading co-actor in various positions, including possibly even that of Government minister of research. Their theoretical, not their personal models are what warrants a discussion.

A thumbnail sketch of events first: Following a crisis for the fisheries of Finnmark – north-easternmost Norway – a plan for establishing major scale production of surimi (fish paste) and related products was launched in 1984-5, involving both names mentioned along with a number of insiders (more or less) from the trade, as well as from local and central politics. The basic idea, the so-called Swanson process, promised to make possible the production of high-quality shellfish and meat analogues etc. from cheap, fatty, "industrial" fish as a raw material. Initially, a prospect of 700 new jobs was held out, a massive supply in a crisis-ridden county with a 70 000 plus total population. The long and short of it, after years of planning, organisation, the establishment of corporations, trans-actions with shares etc., production finally started – with some 30 new jobs only, and lasting for less than two years, with – it appears – not one single marketable product sold before, or after, the close-down in 1991. A major failure in sum, involving losses of some 80 million Norw. *kroner* or 8 mill. GBP approx. The Swanson process didn't hold its promises.

Nevertheless, all involved may have been in perfectly good faith throughout the events – seeing themselves e.g. as pioneers, enthusiasts

opponent side there have been allegations of chicanery, slander, and mention of a libel suit being considered but as yet no action whatsoever, excepting, it appears, counter-rumour: Eriksen's assiduity allegedly had personal motives. In the hope of thwarting further rumours, if there is a personal motive presently, it's nothing but plain disappointment with this outcome of a political platform which I once lent some support (cf. Otnes 1977).

for a major breakthrough in technology, profits, jobs, support, votes. And possibly, future breakthroughs may deliver what Swanson Ltd. did not. Still the fact remains that a number of actors were taken in. Fooled, fooling or not, they were mistaken and losers in the end, this time³.

Emery Swanson, US food technologist, and his broker, US professor Thor Dahl, merit brief special mention as key characters. The inventor above all should be in a position to suspect shortcomings, as did in fact several Norwegian trade insiders. All allegations aside, the figure of a crank genius making in the best of faith exaggerated claims for his invention, is well known. The theoretical point here, however, is another: that it may remain unclear, undecided, even to himself, whether or not he exaggerates. The action is *amphibious* (Østerberg 1993:101), its intention oblique, essentially shifting.

The theoretical model seemingly put to practice in the surimi events is very different indeed: Coleman-Hernes' (CH for short) power-through-exchange theory⁴, according to which power is controlling that which interests the powerful. Barter, explicit or implicit, emerges as a basic element of the exercise of power, "the production of desired results" (Russell). Thus viewed, we may sketch a Surimigate strategy whose main goal was, of course, creating jobs and improving the level of living of the local population, but next, winning their votes for Labour in a region which had proved strong but volatile. In addition, a great number of minor barterers proposed and implemented were involved with a view to securing this overriding issue.

3 Should an outsider ask "Where's the scandal so far?" the answer is that additional allegations, of tax evasions, possibly corrupt or illegitimate decisions by the named and others have been focussed in the press coverage. Police etc. investigations are yet not finished.

4 Coleman (1990), Hernes (1978), a theory known to be poorly if at all founded in the empirical testing of data (Otnes 1987), cf. Durkheim's dismissal of Economics as *des simples possibles*, or merely conjecture, not based in facts.

Our named actors' main asset, or value controlled in terms of this model was the Swanson process. Their interest or preferred outcome was a political scoop, revitalising a Norwegian tradition of coalitions between urban radicals and regional populists, in a period where the Labour vote was record low. Other required co-actors were finance, technology and industry investors, having profit and turnover as their main model interests. Reluctance and opposition from certain segments were dismissed as unfounded pessimism, even jealousy, so confident were our focused actors' belief in the value of their hand. Their bet would seem to be on winning all acclaim for their own team.

Now in terms of theory, what went wrong? Were they just overrating their model control, or is it the model itself which is inaccurate or mistaken?

Hernes (1978) deals at length with the interaction of three systems, Market, Democracy, and Bureaucracy, which, he claims, may both reinforce and pervert each other. A number of so-called internal and external perversions are listed (1978:36-48), none of which include deluding or being deluded, or not knowing which. Whereas the CH power model ignores amphibiousness and open gaming, real power games, it seems, are never clear, never closed. The entire game and all of its environment is at stake. Everything – rules, interests, controls, values, actors, referees, coaches, random events, are at stake, not just outcomes or pay-offs (cf. Otnes 1988). For once, this 'local Habermasianism' is found mirrored in Bourdieu though in superior form, e.g. his idea that "the entire field determines the value" (1977). In consequence, the entire CH model may somersault, its "perversions" becoming the normal and the "normal" deviant or marginal. Almost approaching the much misunderstood "post-modern" here: We're all "perverts", all amphibious,

all "tribalists" (Mafessoli 1996) now. Regular market rationality in contrast is a great rarity, an atavism.

Talleyrand is quoted as saying "Language was given to Man to enable him to hide his thoughts". Now if that goes not only for language but for reality, the world of facts as well? "The world of fact is fact and factitiousness indistinguishably blended" (Or in Norwegian: *Virkeligheten er gitt menneskene for at de skal kunne både vise og skjule sine verk*).

Secondly the theories of Mr. Rød Larsen, as ventured in his master's (*magister artium*) thesis (1976), an erudite prolegomenon to a pro-posed study of Norwegian bank fusions. A blend of satisficing and selected power theories, its crucial foundation is Husserlian phenomenology, notably its distinction between *noesis* and *noema*, *cogitans* and *cogitatum*, or in straight language, the mind and what it minds.

Now, does not the test of Surimigate warrant us to surmise omissions right here, on the part of Rød Larsen or Husserl or both? Certainly the amphibious, the (self-)deluded is not allowed much of a place in this model either. What is conspicuously missing is another classic idea, *eironeia*, from *eiro*, *eiron*, "one who says less than he thinks or means". To find irony missing in German (and its subsidiary, North American) philosophy is hardly surprising, typical e.g. of Heidegger as well. On their ardent road to truth, conceived as *aletheia* or a mystery partly uncovered, "that which does not elude", irony has no place. Philosophy is perhaps no joke, but yet Economics does play occasional jokes on us. Yes, the amphibious half-jokes of irony may even be more typical, more frequent than spontaneous, unreflected, seriousness – open-hearted or "dead" (Socrates, Kierkegaard). Or paraphrasing Sartre and Austin – *perlocution preceeds (il-)locution*.

In sum, then, a chain of mundane events cannot but throw serious doubt on two theoretical models, both much in vogue a decade ago, though somewhat receding later. We can leave them to wither away quietly, or revive what was once a heated polemic of the sociologists' profession. Future *Yearbook* issues will remain open for the latter course. With a new generation of colleagues on stage, the time for a reminder of Østerberg (1979)'s onslaught on Hernes et al.'s Power Survey has perhaps come. A great number of contributions bear review, culminating in Hernes (1982) "Back to society", now that its sequel is – coming to grief.

We leave the Surimi events to themselves here, however, whether they end in a –gate or in redress.

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