

Organizing revolution?

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Figure 1 Editors on the Beach.

On June 2nd 2006 we hosted the *Organizing Revolution* seminar on the sun-drenched campus (and beach) of Swansea University, attracting an eclectic range of papers. The aim of the seminar was to open up the discussion as to what form ‘revolution’ might take in the 21st century, and in what direction our theorizing about ‘organizing revolution’ could/should develop. On the back of the Swansea event we also launched a call for papers for this special issue, inviting papers with a historical slant on the

phenomenon of 'revolution'. During this seminar people such as Andrea Brighenti, Oleg Koefoed, Natasha Slutskaya, Stephanie Schreven, and Alexandra Bristow all presented insightful papers that for various reasons didn't end up in this special issue. We would like to acknowledge the input of their thought, and express our thanks for making the seminar a success. And before introducing the four papers that make up this issue we would like to outline briefly our own interest in the topic.

Revolution seems a constant in the world of business. Textbooks talk about Taylorism and Fordism as revolutions. Hammer and Champy's influential book *Reengineering the Corporation* had as a subtitle *A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. Guy Kawasaki wrote '*Rules for Revolutionaries*', and Gary Hamel is '*Leading the Revolution*'. TQM, brands, hair-care products, part-time work and just about every single invention in the field of information technology have been described as revolutionary. All this would come as no great surprise to Marx. To quote (one more time) a famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and with them the relations of production... Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones... All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men (Marx and Engels 1972, 577–8).

Capitalism, Marx reminds us, is an inherently transgressive force, perpetually agitating, disrupting, and dissolving; it is a system which can survive only by constantly revolutionizing its own conditions. Capitalism is not just a historical epoch among others: the properly capitalist mode of production 'reprograms and utterly restructures the values, life rhythms, cultural habits and temporal sense of its subjects' (Jameson 2005, 284). What is important to point out here is the enthusiastic tone in Marx's writing; he considers the dynamism of capitalism a crucial force in the dialectical process. Berman (1983, 94) summarized Marx's thinking thus:

The revolutionary activity... that overthrows bourgeois rule will be an expression of the active and activist energies that the bourgeoisie itself has set free. Marx began by praising the bourgeoisie, not by burying it; but if his dialectic works out, it will be the virtues for which he praised the bourgeoisie that will bury it in the end.

Yet, the dialectic hasn't quite worked out the way Marx expected. In our 21st century capitalist society the notion of revolution has become linked to a uniquely pressing need for stability, thus creating a most peculiar fusion of dynamism and stasis (cf. De Cock et al. 2005, 48–9). As Eagleton (2005, 59) remarks: 'Revolution is still with us,

and its name is the status quo. This social order must square its drive for stability with the fact that, uniquely among historical regimes, its revolution never ends.'

Since the dynamics of capitalism undermine every stable frame of representation, a crucial task that is normally performed by critico-political activity – undermining the representational frame of the dominant ideological form – is already performed by capitalism itself. This poses various problems for scholars of a critical persuasion, succinctly captured by Žižek's (2004, 213) question: 'How, then are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing?' It should come as no great surprise then that the concept of 'revolution' has become less and less fashionable in these times of 'ludic' postmodern radicalism in academe. If 'Emancipation almost always means enslavement for something or someone' (WOBS 2001, xxxiv), is the closest we can approach revolutionary passion a carnivalesque explosion or strategies of resistance? Can a range of forms of resistance based on micro-strategies take the place of a concerted attempt at 'overthrow' or a violent act of revolt? Has resistance (e.g. against globalization) become a viable alternative to revolution, or does it merely create regulatory instances that control the worst excesses of capitalism, thus in effect becoming a 'less important sideshow' which acts as a safety valve for late-capitalism? Perhaps cynicism about the whole notion of 'revolution' is the appropriate response after all? Radical theorists and activists may enjoy a great deal of freedom to do their work – to read, write, speak, meet, organize. But they may find themselves cast in the paradoxical role of merchants and promoters of revolution, which then becomes a commodity like everything else.

The notion of revolution thus seems to throw up quite a few questions and contradictions. Of course the four papers contained in this special issue cannot offer an easy way out of these contradictions, but perhaps they can point to a surer and deeper way into them. The first two papers engage with recent management history, and in particular the rhetorical moves management and organization theory has witnessed. In their own particular ways the authors pick up on the curious fusion of dynamism and stasis we outlined earlier. Fairhead draws on the work of political philosopher Eric Voegelin to analyse contemporary management discourse, paying particular attention to the concept of fantasy. From a Lacanian perspective fantasy can be seen to mediate between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality: 'it provides a "scheme" according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure' (Žižek 2006, 40). What Fairhead finds new is not so much the fantasy of 'the escape from the old into a redemptive realm that is new and less corrupt', but 'the confidence and overtness with which totalising managerialist fantasies are nowadays proclaimed'. He makes particular reference to Gary Hamel who predicts a new and glorious third age: the 'age of revolution' (superseding the tedious 'age of progress'). We will not spoil a good story by revealing the 'star' case study of the first edition of the book; it suffices to say that all references to this company were expunged from later editions of Hamel's book. Fairhead goes on to provide an intelligent analysis, using many examples, of how fantasy knowledge-systems employ the

device of emptying the organizational world of content, thus making them unassailable. Their position thus becomes more invulnerable in direct proportion to their irrationality, which in turn enables modern management discourse to become 'ever more overtly narcissistic and grandiose in its practices and claims'.

Sheard's paper connects with Fairhead's in that he also focuses on this 'emptying out' process. He too provides a sharp analysis of Gary Hamel's writings, starting from how Hamel reproduces the three Estates or discrete classes as they existed in France at the end of the 18th century, contrasting creative workers with the executive aristocracy and an intermediary group of business executives. However, the purpose here is to reabsorb the revolutionary urge 'within the policy objectives of Capital', thus creating a mere illusion (or fantasy in Fairhead's vocabulary). As Sheard suggests: 'Hamel champions the would-be or future aristocracy (the middle) of the firm, rather than the present nobility (the high tier executives); but what he really celebrates is the status quo relative to which their aspirations are located.' This brings him to the conundrum of the two 'registers' of revolution: a metaphorical one associated with the commonplace rhetorical deployment of 'revolution', and a literal, politically charged one, associated with significant events. Indeed, lest we forget, a number of important 'revolutions' have taken place throughout history. The French Revolution, and the October Revolution in Russia probably stand out in the collective memory. Is it not so that these revolutionary explosions unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential? This is the history of revolution '...as a history of revolutionary crowds: groups of anonymous and ordinary people, of people full of weaknesses and vulnerabilities, torn by fear and self-doubt and ambivalence, but willing at crucial moments to go out into the streets and risk their necks to fight for their rights' (Berman 1983, 235). But how to find 'a metric for the deployment of the term revolution which establishes which uses are significant as opposed to trivial?' Sheard asks himself. The pursuit of the answer leads him to consider 'its earlier pre-Marxist deployment, in which case it was associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie; in cases like the French and especially the American revolutions'. This provides the basis for a Republican notion of revolution, one close to 'the present neo-liberal ideology of western democracies'. It is a significant broadening of the concept, underscored by a recent comment from an American sociology professor:

For Americans, the word revolution conjures not visions of bomb-throwing anarchists so much as the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, or the sexual revolution – all widely viewed as part of our history of progress. Advertisers would not promise that their cleanser offers 'revolutionary new cleaning power' if they thought that the R-word would frighten consumers (Best 2006, 35).

The last two papers go even further back in time. Land takes the reader on an exhilarating ride through the golden age of piracy, and Ripplin and Fleming travel, albeit briefly, to the end of the Roman Empire. What they find there is Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, introducing the resigned wisdom about revolution in the astronomic sense in

the circular movement which brings us back to the starting point. This work underpinned what they call 'the medieval equivalent of modern business manuals', with the *Speculum* (Mirrors for Princes) being the best known example. The authors then go on to test the teachings of medieval conduct texts using the same 'star' case study Fairhead alluded to in his article. Based on a close reading of key books and articles documenting the case, they follow the stories of the three main players. After the fall, the main protagonist is seen to retreat 'into another fantasy world in which he refuses to confront the facts and himself, and refuses to learn from his fate. Although [he] rose particularly high on the wheel, to some extent it was always a fantasy'. In a challenging interpretive move Rippin and Fleming then explore how their case analysis can inform the curricula of business schools: a 'manifesto for a revolution in management education' as they put it. They advocate that we should prepare our students to deal with failure in creative and reflective fashion, and we can do this by turning to the 'older tradition' they outlined in the first part of their paper. Put into the context of revolution, this highlights a particular element of revolutions, namely their failure and decay, as well as the peculiar elitist dimension present in most such. In a way reminiscent of how the revolution of 1917 treated the Mensheviks, business revolutions tend to mean great things for very few, whereas the majority of people find themselves at best slightly better off. This group of 'failed' revolutionaries, the mundane masses, also exist in our business schools, and the paper by Rippin and Fleming suggests that this innate necessity of failure might be worked into management education in order to serve up the kind of *consolatione* referred to by Boethius. Fortune's wheel stops for no man, no company, no time. The very nature of economy is one of ups and downs, yet we still describe the ups as either natural or signs of virtue, and the downs as pathologies or the wages of sin. And Rippin and Fleming, like a pair of latter-day augurs, want to remind us that even when we proclaim a case of business ethics as cut and dry, we are speaking from a very limited and temporally local space; believing our fortune to be 'right' is a revolution in thought. And all the while the wheel turns. *In omni adversitate fortunae, infelicissimum genus est infortunii fuisse felicem.*

Turning to more swashbuckling matters, Land offers several interpretive gems in his detailed exploration of the social organization of piracy at the turn of the 17th century, and connects the pirates' legacy to 21st century digital pirates and anti-capitalist protestors. The pirates' story can ultimately be seen as one of failure (once they were seen to pose too much of a threat to mercantile capitalism and the cultural order of colonial Europe they were crushed within a few short years) as their revolt 'did little to realize the utopian dream of their protagonists'. Yet, Land suggests that the legacy of the pirates, living on in their lasting influence on the revolutionary imagination, should not be dismissed so easily. Even where we see a Disneyfication (viz. the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise) of revolutionary drives, this process is parasitic on the 'desire and the social imaginary that the pirates set free when they banded together in their transgressive communities'. This 'imaginary' dimension is crucial and we should be indeed wary of simply trying to distinguish the 'reality' of piracy from its mythology. If we simply focus on the fact that 'each successful revolution [French, American,

Russian] ended up betraying the principles upon which it was founded,' we miss out on a crucial dimension (or 'register' to use Sheard's terminology) of 'revolution', Land argues. If Walter Benjamin (1999) was right in his notion of revolution as redemption-through-repetition of the past (he famously remarked that what drove men and women to revolt was not dreams of liberated grandchildren but memories of oppressed ancestors) then the unearthing of utopian emancipatory potentials which were betrayed in the actuality of revolution becomes a crucial activity. As Žižek (2006, 78) puts it, the point is not to make fun of the wild hopes of, in this case, the Jacobins' revolutionary enthusiasm and to reveal

how their high emancipatory rhetoric was just a means used... to establish vulgar commercial capitalist reality; it is to explain how these betrayed radical-emancipatory potentials continue to 'insist' as historical specters and to haunt the revolutionary memory, demanding their enactment, so that the later proletarian revolution should also redeem (lay to rest) all these past ghosts.

Indeed, we should be even wary to privilege 'real' history over counterfactuals such as, for example, Captain Mission's pirate community on Madagascar. It is precisely these counterfactuals which may actualize desires for large scale social change by 'experimenting and creating new possibilities for life and organization' and lodging themselves in our collective memory. Histories of revolutions, be they real or counterfactual, can help us build a constellation of experiences within which the ultimate revolutionary act appears as inevitable; or to quote Martin Luther's famous claim when he posted his theses against the Pope: 'Here I stand. I can do no other.'

This brings us to our final, and probably most difficult, issue which concerns the 'authenticity' of revolution (or the 'metric' Sheard alludes to). Can we really organize for revolution? Not in any active sense. Revolution should not be turned into a moral obligation, into something we ought to do while we fight the inertia of the present; the latter being a position that is shared by both peddlers of management fantasies and earnest 'lefties'. In the terms of Bernard Williams's distinction between 'ought' and 'must', an authentic revolution is by definition something that emerges as a 'must' or an urge, an 'I can do no other' (cf. Žižek 2006). In this respect it is worth quoting Sartre (1976) at some length from his magisterial analysis of the French revolution (in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, especially pages 306–445). Examining a pivotal moment in the revolution, the storming of the Bastille, he suggests:

This revolutionary response to a constantly deteriorating situation has of course the historical significance of an organized common action. But that is just what it was not. It was a collective action: everyone was forced to arm himself by others' attempts to find arms, and everyone tried to get there before the Others because, in the context of this new scarcity, everyone's attempt to get a rifle became for the Others the risk of remaining unarmed... Here again, their unity was elsewhere, that is, it was both past and future. It was past in that *the group had performed an action* and that the collective had recognized this action with

surprise as a moment of its own passive activity: it *had been a group* – and this group defined itself by a revolutionary action which made the process irreversible. And it was future in that the weapons themselves, in so far as they had been taken for the sake of opposing concerted action by soldiers, suggested in their very materiality the possibility of concerted resistance (354–5).

Thus revolution always contains a peculiar mixture of contingency and inevitability. Sartre also alludes in the above quote to the fact that the danger of death and violence are integral to the explosion of revolt; or to quote Fairhead out of context: ‘it is just such violence that is the ultimate guarantor of all types of revolt against reality.’ Every authentic revolutionary explosion has to contain an element of ‘pure’ violence. A ‘velvet’ revolution is always-already a contradiction in terms. We are reminded here of Robespierre’s chilling question, ‘destined to reverberate down the centuries after him: “Citizens, do you want a revolution without a revolution”?’ (Scurr 2006, 216). Robespierre believed violence indispensable for advancing the political experiment on which he had staked his life. The very same rights sought and promised by the revolution could also be suspended, if necessary, in the revolution’s cause. To quote Sartre (1976) one last time:

The only contradiction between the characteristics which are so often opposed to one another by reactionary writers – Hope and Terror, sovereign Freedom in everyone and Violence against the Other, both outside and inside the group is a dialectical one. And indeed, these are the essential structures of a revolutionary group... And it will be easy to show that these supposedly incompatible characteristics are indissolubly and synthetically united in every action and declaration of the revolutionary demonstrators (406–7)

Perhaps software maker Oracle got it right after all when they ran a commercial during the 1998 American Super Bowl comparing themselves to the Khmer Rouge, who were shown herding refugees before them and firing their AK47s as they ushered in the (business) revolution (cf. Frank 2001, 173)?

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