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Beneath and Beyond Organizational Change Management: Exploring Alternatives

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Abstract. *This essay introduces contributions to a special issue exploring alternative accounts of organizational change management (OCM). It begins with identifying why such alternatives are needed by pointing to core assumptions within OCM, including a practical and ontological pro-change bias, managerialism and universalism. The alternatives to OCM are then framed in terms of the constructionism associated with various forms of discourse analysis. It is argued that the contributions show, both theoretically and empirically, the limitations of OCM as conventionally understood.* ***Key words.*** *critique; discourse; organizational change; stability*

'We live in a world of unprecedented stability. Technology continues to shape how we communicate, travel, work and live. Most of the world remains poor and dependent on those who control capital and governments. For the relatively well-off, consumerism is established as a core activity, and a lifetime with a small number of employers can be expected. In organizations, key decisions continue to be concentrated among a small cadre, and other activities are still largely formalized. Those organizations where change is attempted usually fail in their efforts (66% according to one estimate) or achieve only marginal effects. Some disappear altogether as competition ensures that such failures prove costly in time and effort. **It is therefore imperative that today's managers embrace stability and learn to manage continuity if they want to survive**.' (The Alternative Change Text)

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The extent to which this fictitious quotation seems amusing, paradoxical, ridiculous or simply wrong is a testament to the solidity of the power effects of discourses of change and change management in organization studies and related fields. Yet it is, in our view, no less sustainable than the mass of hyperbole arguing the opposite. It has been claimed that 'organizational change may well be the most oft-repeated and widely embraced term in all of corporate America' (Beer and Nohria, 2000a: cover). Despite this, there is little evidence of critique or genuinely alternative voices, perhaps because critics as much as protagonists describe and desire change, albeit in different forms and directions.[1] In this sense, notions of change are not so much contested between critics and managerial advocates as co-constructed by them. In the process, much of importance is left unsaid and rendered almost unsayable.

Certainly, there are always important whispers questioning the claimed extent of changes such as globalization, empowerment or technological advance. There are also critics pointing to practical/theoretical difficulties or the harmful consequences of change and its management methods (e.g. Collins, 1998). But these voices are muted or marginalized compared with those of the protagonists of change and change management. Moreover, no one, it seems, argues that stability or continuity is either possible or desirable. Instead, stability is configured as what happens when nothing happens. It is either a problem or a nullity.

An important initial point to make is that change and continuity are not alternative objective states: they are not alternatives because they are typically coexistent and coterminous; and they are not objective because what constitutes change or continuity is perspective dependent. We are not, then, arguing *against* change—its existence, desirability or, even, achievability—and *for* stability or continuity. Instead, we want to make out a case against organizational change management (OCM) discourses and their one-sided nature, which endorses change as an abstract ideal but is also highly restrictive about what sorts of change should be pursued. OCM is therefore silent about the possibility of stability and about many of the possibilities for change. In particular, then, the aim of this short and somewhat polemical introductory article is to begin to make the case for the construction and legitimacy of alternative voices to those that insist upon the inevitability and desirability of change management.

The article is organized in terms of an articulation of different problematic features of OCM: its reproduction of the familiar terrain of writings on management and organization generally; its growing boldness in articulating change as an ontological condition; and its unitarism. We then move towards offering some alternative directions for theorizing change, including approaches that draw on notions of translation and discourse. In this way, we open up a different kind of terrain, one that could be inhabited by the kinds of analyses offered by the other contributions to this special issue.

Everything Changes Except Change

Organizational change and its management have become a huge field of study and practice.[2] Readers of this journal will need little introduction to the dominant approaches or perspectives (e.g. rationalist, processual, humanist, political and contingency), or the various typologies of change (e.g. emergent, planned, first order, second order) or the seemingly endless models for organizational change (see Ford and Ford, 1994; Morgan and Sturdy, 2000; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). What holds together this variety is, within OCM, a core assumption that change can, should and must be managed. It is that assumption about controllability—an assumption shared, of course, by managerial discourses in general—that informs perhaps the most enduring of OCM metaphors, that of unfreeze–change–refreeze (Lewin, 1951; see Kanter et al., 1992). We believe that this fundamentally mechanistic understanding of change is ubiquitous in OCM, but we are also conscious of the danger that discussing such 'classics' is seen as constructing a 'straw person' by being insufficiently attentive to recent and, supposedly, more sophisticated writings. Therefore, in this section we will discuss two recent texts purporting to set out a number of issues and challenges to OCM.

In a review of academic literature, Pettigrew et al. argue that 'research and writing on organizational change is undergoing a metamorphosis' (2001: 697; see also Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999), which would be to say that OCM itself is changing. In particular, they point to a greater recognition of the importance of context–action connections, time, process ('changing' rather than 'change') and sequencing and, especially, the need to explore continuity (not stability) as well as change. Overall, they note and support a growing pluralism in approaches, including those arising from a stronger engagement between management and social science. Some of this may seem to echo what we said in the introduction to this article. However, what remains inviolate and apparently unnoticed in this 'new' formulation of OCM is that its efforts should be directed primarily towards a taken for granted (i.e. managerial) 'practical relevance' and that they are occurring in an 'ever-changing world of practice' (Pettigrew et al., 2001: 709). This is not to deny that there is some interesting nuance within the Pettigrew collection. For example, an attempt is made to incorporate understandings of economic and sociological institutionalism into accounts of change, thus moving the focus beyond the organization as an isolated entity. Closer attention is also given to the unintended consequences of OCM. In these respects, the review represents an improvement on the highly prescriptive 'how to' texts on organizational change. However, the core assumptions continue to give voice to managerial perspectives but neglect others, and to give voice to the ubiquity of change but neglect stability. The 'metamorphosis' of OCM goes so far, then, but no further. For us, that is not far enough.

The second text is an edited volume that brings together often high-profile academics and practitioners in an attempt to overcome the high project failure rate by 'breaking the code of [organizational] change' (Beer and Nohria, 2000a). The contributions are organized around a theme of contrasting dominant OCM approaches or objectives: economic value ('Theory E') and organizational capabilities ('Theory O'). The Theory E/O distinction may be read as yet another iteration of the distinction that has permeated so much management theory: for example, Theories X and Y; top–down and participative; structure and culture; programmatic and emergent change; hard and soft human resources management (HRM); rational and normative control; and so on. Some contributors to the volume argue for one side of the distinction at the expense of the other. Uniquely, Weick (2000) is critical of planned change programmes, favouring management through building on or amplifying continual emergent changes (see also Shaw, 2002). Overall, however, the editors and contributors seek synthesis through combining elements of E and O and/or variations of contingency theory. Pettigrew (2000), for instance, sees emergent and planned change as being associated with different periods or phases of change. But, whether the emphasis is either/or or both/and, debate remains captured within seemingly inviolable dualisms, a subject to which we will return.

If these contributions restate the familiar terrain of debate in organization behaviour, so too do they replicate that terrain in being framed unquestioningly in the interests of management. Admittedly, the editors conclude (Beer and Nohria, 2000b) by pointing to the importance of underlying values in shaping OCM approaches and to the need to make these more explicit, contrasting the primacy of shareholder value in Theory E with more humanist concerns in Theory O. This hardly challenges managerialism, given that it is well established within critical understandings of management that humanism represents a refinement of, rather than an alternative to, managerial control. In introducing values, it does mark a departure from claims of value-free science that remain common in OCM, but it hardly exhausts the full range of value possibilities. So, again, the new approaches to OCM go so far but no further.

If even the latest and most sophisticated contributions to OCM remain within some rather unchanging parameters, it is worth exploring a little more fully what these parameters are.

Pro-change Bias

A longstanding internal criticism in the study of technological innovation has been a tendency towards a 'pro-innovation bias' in the sense of assuming that innovating is desirable or inevitable, regardless of the costs and consequences (Rogers, 1995)—'new' is always good, 'old' is bad. It is unsurprising that such an accusation can also be made of OCM, although

there has been much less reflection on the issue within the latter literature. The fact that change is seen as necessarily desirable is illustrated in the demonization and pathologizing inherent in the commonly used OCM phrase 'irrational resistance to change'. Boudon (1986: 49) describes this as an 'appallingly prejudice-ridden and authoritarian expression', and certainly it sets some interesting markers around OCM discourse in terms of the desirability of change.

Of course, it can be (and usually is) argued that it is not so much that planned change is *good*, but that it is *necessary* in (i.e. determined by) the current period of 'unprecedented' competition and market change. Yet the two arguments are not distinct, for if change is necessary then it is also considered good when compared with the alternative of 'no change'. Indeed, that alternative is rarely if ever voiced within OCM. Even contingency models of change management (which include contexts of organization–environment fit) do not include a 'no change' option (see Dunphy and Stace, 1988). OCM seems, like the early Henry Ford, to have a peculiar notion of choice: you can do whatever you like except stay as you are.

Although OCM literature has long promoted change in this prescriptive sense, more recently its bias for change has taken on an *ontological* nature. Earlier versions of OCM—including the freeze/unfreeze metaphor—envisaged change as an *intervention* in systems that were kept stable through various tensions or forces of equilibrium (e.g. Nadler, 1981: 197). More recent formulations have a much more ebullient feel. OCM has begun to posit that it is not that everything changes but that *everything is change*: people, organizations, ideas, etc. are abstractions or fixings of movement, temporary, identifiable 'resting points' (Ford and Ford, 1994). Similarly, but in a more populist manner, Kanter et al. (1992) suggest that *stability is unnoticed change*. In this sense, being is change and change has no outside. This is not so much a bias for change as a totalitarianism of change.

Naturally, OCM writings do not trade in explicit claims about ontology. Instead, just as strategy writers invoke Clausewitz or Sun-Tzu, the OCM favourite is Heraclitus. Thus:

> As Heraclitus noted 2,500 years ago: 'All is flux, nothing stays still.' Sadly, this is as true today as it was then. (Beer and Nohria, 2000b: 476)

Such an invocation further extends the notion that change has no outside. For not only is it seen as inappropriate in post-industrial times to value periods or forms of stability, but change is, in fact, the only reality. Yet, of course, this notion has a peculiar paradox: if everything changes, how can it be that thinking that is almost 3000 years old captures an unchanging truth? And note, too, the word 'sadly' in this quotation. The ineluctable nature of change takes on an almost tragic note. It explains why some (misguided) individuals might resist change but it also configures the change manager as a heroic figure, facing the

tragedy of the changing world armed with only the techniques of OCM. In keeping with Jacques' (1996) Procrustean analogy, ontological claims about change do not typically preclude the possibility or desirability of managing change (see Weick, 2000), nor do they extend to favouring or observing chaos in the economic system. In short, they are deployed in a managerialist and/or modernist way (see also Willmott, 1992)—'everything is change' except, it seems, the ability to control it and the structure of power and inequality. How is this control and structure envisaged in OCM?

Managerialism and Universalism

> The demands of an ever competitive and changing environment are increasing the need for knowledge about how to lead and manage organizational change rapidly, efficiently and effectively. The management mantra . . . is 'lead change.' (Beer and Nohria, 2000c: ix)

To criticize OCM for being managerialist is hardly a profound contribution—indeed it is almost a tautology—and so this section will be brief. Nevertheless, as with stability, it is important to give voice to such views, especially because the ethos in much of the literature is of OCM being a science of universal laws for the benefit of all. Admittedly, as noted earlier, there has been some softening of this positivist version of OCM. Nevertheless, there is scant suggestion that, even if managerial values are, precisely, values, these should not form the prevailing logic of change initiatives. Indeed, although recognizing the 'fears' and 'irrationality' of employees, the task of 'leading change' entails leading those employees to an eventual acceptance of that which they initially resisted.

That irreconcilable conflicts of interest or inevitable uncertainties or paradoxes inhibit (and induce) change programmes is not simply obscured through unitary or pluralist assumptions or pragmatism, it is written out—radical prescriptions are hardly likely to get published in management journals or generate consultancy income. OCM is also blinkered by its organizational, as well as its managerial, focus. In common with management discourses more generally, studies and models rarely look to the broader social consequences of change models, programmes and their methods. These consequences are explored outside of OCM, in general accounts of social change and (un)employment for example (e.g. Bourdieu, 1999; Sennett, 2000), where reference is made to the part played by OC aims and methods. However, the reverse does not apply to OCM, which resolutely ignores wider social consequences in favour of a narrow calculus of organizational advantage.

Some may object to such a characterization of OCM and point to long and established, if in practice marginal, humanist traditions of participation in organizational development and socio-technical systems for example, or to more recent pluralist concerns with stakeholders, ethics

and corporate social responsibility—giving voice to those who are 'changed'. Where such concerns are raised, they might resonate with Parker's (2002) recent call for alternative or non-managerial ways of organizing (coordination, cooperation, citizenship, etc.). However, these possibilities cannot occur in a vacuum and are intimately linked with challenges to hierarchies of reward, skill and status as well as, crucially, alternative market forms (Parker, 2002). Moreover, it is a question not simply of political assumptions and awareness, but of epistemological concerns as well. OCM (and other managerial disciplines) tend to seek out universal approaches and patterns and these reinforce the view that change is manageable (see Stacey, 1993).

In his broad study of theories of social change, Boudon (1986) points to their longstanding appeal in terms of the prospect of being able to predict the future. He is highly critical of this, showing how theories have consistently been contradicted by 'facts' and underestimated the complexity, randomness and variability of the world and change. A similar sentiment can be found in MacIntyre's (1981) contention that the social sciences have completely failed to develop predictive generalities, and, moreover, that they will never do so. OCM has no such inhibitions. For example, in Pettigrew et al., although there is a familiar recognition of a 'complex, dynamic and internationally conscious world', a 'search for general patterns of change' remains (2001: 697). If OCM is, as we have suggested, both managerialist and universalist, what might be done to articulate a different kind of understanding of change?

Towards Alternatives

The articles contained within this special issue draw upon and extend some emerging alternatives to mainstream OCM thinking. Despite their variety, they have as their shared core a concern with understanding the socially constructed nature of OCM. For readers of this journal, this will hardly seem like a bold move. Yet such an understanding corrodes the assumptions upon which OCM is built, whether about ubiquity, ontological status, the primacy of managerial interests or the universalism of OCM prescriptions. This is crucial because, if change is not inevitable and desirable but contingent and contested, then the organizational and political consequences are potentially profound.

A key term within such an analysis is 'discourse'. Discourse analysis in organizational studies has grown in popularity and coverage in recent years, and in many senses, but not all, it can be seen as a re-emergence of social constructionism (see Grant et al., 1998). This is not the place to address all the variations and nuances (see Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Chia, 1999; Reed, 1998). Rather, the aim is to point to possibilities for studying change through discourse analysis as a way of providing a different voice in OCM. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) attempt such a task. They map out three established types of discourse analysis (as

meaning, power/knowledge and a communicative tool), attributing a dominant theory of change to each one. They then present an alternative 'structurational' approach to discourse (see Giddens, 1984). Here, deep structures are not as conventionally defined (see Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd in this volume), but linguistic features such as metaphors and rhetorical strategies. Their approach to change is presented as being descriptive, rather than critical, and focuses on seemingly discrete change episodes, such as an IT implementation, rather than on the emergence and transformation of broader 'meta-discourses' such as strategy and the customer (see Morgan and Sturdy, 2000).

Another important example of a 'different voice' is Czarniawska and Sevón's (1996) analysis of change as translation (see Callon, 1986) or the materialization of ideas into objects and practices. Drawing on what they describe as Scandinavian institutionalism, their explicit aim is to transcend the conventional oppositions between stability and change; planned and emergent (adaptive) change; or imitation (old) and innovation (new). Rather, change is seen as the result of intentions, random events *and* institutional norms. Attention is focused on the construction (or translation) of meaning, as in the translation of ideas to fit problems, regardless of their form. For example, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) develop the theme of translation (of people and objects as well as ideas) in presenting organizational change in terms of the 'travels of ideas' into disembedded 'quasi-objects' (e.g. graphical representations) and then more embedded institutions and identities and, from there, 'new' ideas.

Although we are not suggesting that they provide a definitive answer to the analysis of change, these kinds of invocations of the discursive frame that alternative in two ways. First, they refuse the standard OCM device of focusing on the organizational domain without recourse to the wider social patternings and effects associated with organizational change. Secondly, they refuse what discourse analysis has sometimes been accused of, namely focusing purely on the textual or linguistic. Whether inspired by Giddens, Foucault, Fairclough or Callon, there is an emerging understanding of discourse that sees text and practice as indivisible. Thus, the practices of OCM both instantiate and reproduce writings, theories and ideologies of change.

The Special Issue Contributions

Du Gay's contribution exemplifies these linkages. For him, the reshaping of public administration is inseparable from a discursive arena of 'epochalism'—a feature quite as much of 'high theory' as of OCM—the significance of which is to close off alternatives in advance by silencing other discursive possibilities. Here we see the political possibilities of, in broad terms, constructionism. What is presented as natural or inevitable is recast as a contested terrain of interpretation and, as such, our attention is drawn to the power effects of change discourse.

This theme runs through all of the contributions. Francis and Sinclair locate their analysis of HRM-based change within Fairclough's notion of a 'discursive event'—the imbrication of text and practice—linked to hegemonic struggles over meaning. This analysis is pursued through case studies of manufacturing organizations, which illustrate the shifts, contestations and ambiguities that characterize the instantiation of OCM.

Badham et al.'s account of cultural change in an Australian manufacturing company reveals similar complexities with change practice. They too proceed from a broadly discursive perspective informed in part by post-structuralism. However, they draw in particular on a reworking of Becker's classic contribution to the sociology of deviance to show how organizational development interventions create a complex political landscape in which conduct and motivation and identity become the site of a power struggle.

Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd also draw on established theoretical traditions—the sociology of the professions—as well as more recent critical theory. In contrast to the other contributors, they adopt a critical realist perspective, drawing on the work of Archer and her 'morphogenic' approach. However, in challenging functionalism, unitarism and universalism and pointing to the necessarily constrained and contested nature of organizational change and broader issues of power, they share many of the concerns outlined above. In particular, they focus on the limitations of the neo-institutionalist theory of organizational archetypes, which has become dominant in accounts of attempted transitions from 'professional' to 'managerial' organization of professional services.

Finally, Doolin describes just such an initiative in the context of health care in New Zealand and points to similar issues of occupational power and resistance. However, his approach is explicitly constructionist. Following the work of Law and others, the concept of 'ordering narratives' is deployed to draw together the (mutually implicated) social, discursive and, in particular, material dimensions of organization and change. The emphasis on materiality is discussed partly in terms of how discourses, such as that of 'clinical leadership' in hospitals, are embedded and contested through IT systems, and points to an otherwise neglected area of organizational change.

Concluding Comments

This special issue arises from our concern about the dominance of the view that organizational change is inevitable, desirable and/or manageable and that this view seems to be taken for granted, receiving relatively little critical attention. The aim was to argue a case, not against change, but for research that provides alternative (additional) voices and, therefore, choices. We briefly reviewed some of the core, and problematic, assumptions of OCM before suggesting that alternatives are to be found

in the broadly constructionist approaches associated with discourse analysis.

The contributions to the issue illustrate the potential, and the variety, of this form of analysis, as well as other critical concerns arising out of realist perspectives. One thing they show along the way is just how widespread and pervasive the discourse of OCM has become. Whether in the British Civil Service, in manufacturing plants around the world or in professional services such as health care, a common repertoire emerges, which, as we have suggested, incorporates a practical and ontological pro-change bias, unitarism, dualism and managerialism. In the face of this, the articles, taken together, contribute in two important ways. First, they explore alternatives to the OCM repertoire, whether by undermining the bias for change or by introducing non-managerial voices into the discussion of change programmes. Secondly, they call into question the conceit of manageability, which, on any account, is central to the claims of OCM. The articles reveal the shifting, ambiguous and inherently political arena lying beneath and beyond the bland clichés, pious nostrums and simplistic recipes that are the stock in trade of organizational change management.

Notes

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1 Contrast this lack of critique with the growth of critical accounting and, more recently, marketing and strategy.
2 Van de Ven and Poole (1995) found around 1 million articles on change and development from many different academic disciplines.

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