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ON THE LOST SPECIFICATION OF 'CHANGE'

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ABSTRACT *The notion of 'change' has become pervasive in contemporary organizational discourse. On the one hand, change is represented as an organizational imperative that increasingly appears to trump all other concerns: learning to live with and indeed thrive on change is represented as a prerequisite for organizational survival and success in the present and future. On the other, change is addressed as an abstract, generic entity that can be theorized, categorized, evaluated and acted upon without further specification. In the paper, we argue that this combination of absolutism and abstraction has some unfortunate consequences for the precise assessment and practical management of particular organizational changes. Based on re-readings of two classic, but partially forgotten contributions within organization theory – the work of Wilfred R. Bion on primary task and group assumptions, and the work of Elliott Jaques on managerial hierarchy– we suggest that contemporary discussion of organizational change could benefit considerably from regaining a lost specificity; an empirical grounding in the detailed description of content, purpose and elements of change as a prerequisite for any normative appraisal or critique.*

Change as an Increasingly Abstract Entity

Organizational change and change management have moved centre stage within the field of organization studies. No longer is 'change' conceived of or represented as a sub-specialty of organization theory, but rather as a given 'existential' premise. Because change is regarded both as omnipresent and omnipotent, the ability of organizations to adapt to its imperatives is deemed pivotal. Managing change is therefore seen as a, if not the, crucial feature of the business of organizing, and it is from this basic premise that organizational theory and practice must depart. Certainly, this call to arms has not been ignored by academics, consultants or practicing managers. No shortage of, often anti-thetical, theoretical and practical approaches to 'change' have emerged within the field of organization studies, broadly conceived. The 'planned change' approach has been opposed by the 'emergent change' approach. The tradition of 'organizational development' has gradually yielded to that of 'organizational innovation'. Across a range of different theoretical positions and schools, however, the notion of change has increasingly been conceptualized as an abstract entity and basic premise from which to theorize; and, indeed, as something that is in itself good or bad (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Morgan and Spicer,

2009). Cases of change are routinely introduced and analyzed as examples of abstract theoretical or historical axioms, rather than as specific instances of reorganization, or attempts to alter concrete phenomena or entities from situation A to situation B. In other words, change is typically conceived of and represented as a general phenomenon, which is more or less desirable and manageable depending on the point of view adopted.

In this article, we argue that the inclination to address change both as an existential absolute and in a highly abstract fashion has been accompanied by the growing oblivion of classic concerns in organization theory. As 'change', 'innovation', 'process' and 'flux' have taken over the theoretical vocabulary, concepts in organization theory such as 'core task', 'distribution of work' and 'exercise of authority' have correspondingly fallen out of favour. Such terms, are increasingly considered as at best anachronistic, and at worst, fundamentally misguided, being based, it is assumed, upon a nostalgic idea of the organizational world as in some sense stable, and upon an equally quaint, and untenable, view of the purpose of organization theory as a practical science of organizing that positively defines, describes and evaluates this world. In contrast to this, in much contemporary organization theory, the object of analysis is less the organization as some sort of distinctive entity than seemingly endless, multifarious and often ephemeral processes of organizing. Here, organizations are never fully established, but always in the process of 'becoming'; tasks are not given bundles of work to be undertaken, but the occasional result of interpretative processes; actors are not engaged in practical, recurrent work, but in making-sense of, experimenting with, and enacting an unstable environment. The idea of a core task, a basic *raison d'être* of an organization, is considered even more anachronistic, and those who hold onto such an idea are represented as fundamentally out of kilter with the reality of contemporary organizational existence, where nothing can be taken for granted because the omnipresence of' change' makes it impossible to establish stability except 'in passing', as a provisional accomplishment. Likewise, the notion of authority often appears unsuited to such norms of change, as 'authorisation' and 'authorising relationships' are represented as 'hierarchical and bureaucratic' and by implication old-fashioned and unworkable in a world dominated by the need for constant adaptation, flexibility, creativity, and so forth (Macdonald *et al*, 2006, p. 34). As change is pervasive and constant, the role of management is not to restrict it or to stifle adaption to its

demands through the application of rules, but to engage in an ongoing, distributed attempt to navigate in a moving landscape.

In contrast to this general argument that the contemporary condition of fast and unpredictable change requires new organization theories, we suggest that the phenomena gathered together under the contemporary heading of 'change' are not absent from the canon of organization theory, but that they are addressed there in rather different ways. In the tradition of organizational design, for instance, change was not viewed as a general norm (whether good or bad), but as a moment of caution. Nor was it represented as an abstract entity, but rather as a specific and practical modification of concrete elements. Change was simply not an issue to be posed in general, but a pertinent and relevant concern insofar as it designated a specific modification of an organization's key features: its core tasks, its work roles, its authority structure, or its allocation of resources, for example. However, the dominant trend within contemporary theories of organizational change and change management has been to move away from this classic pragmatism and to single out change as a generic entity. Despite disagreement among theorists about the key characteristics and typologies of change, there appears to be a high degree of unity concerning the overall ambition: to theorize change as a thing in itself in order to draw conclusions as to the way change should be understood, directed and managed.

In a key paper, Weick and Quinn draw a contrast between 'episodic' and 'continuous' change. They argue that while change might start with a specific instance of an organizational failure to adapt and a concrete attempt to improve this situation, this is in fact an elementary error as change "never starts because it never stops" and this (we would argue, metaphysical) assumption makes continuous change of general importance: "The challenge is to gain acceptance of continuous changes throughout the organization so that these isolated innovations will travel and be seen as relevant to a wider range of purposes at hand" (1999, p. 381). In fact, the authors conclude: "all of these insights are more likely to be kept in play if researchers focus on 'changing' rather than 'change'" (Ibid, p. 382). Weick and Quinn's general distinction between 'episodic and continuous' change is only one among many in the change literature and we refer to it simply to illustrate the typical way in which change is addressed as an umbrella term for events that form the basis for

the construction of a certain typology. Other such typologies proliferate in the literature, for instance: 'bottom-up versus top-down' (Collins, 1998); 'first-order, second-order and third-order' (Bartunek and Moch, 1987); 'gradual versus a punctuated equilibrium' (Gersick, 1991); and 'staged versus improvised' (Orlikowski, 1996). Likewise drivers of change are sorted into various types such as: 'coercive, mimetic and normative' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); and 'microevolutionary, macroevolutionary and political' (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992).

While we do not seek to contest the proposition that particular instances of change can in retrospect be sorted analytically into certain types of change and change drivers, we nonetheless question the usefulness of such typologies for change management as a practical endeavour. As change theory has thrived upon abstract adjectives, change is increasingly discussed as a generic entity, a thing in itself that can be perfectly theorized, categorized and commented upon without further specification. The key logic seems to be that a typology of change is a prerequisite to the choice of appropriate *modus operandi* by the change agent. As one axiomatic statement puts it: "The more we can differentiate between types of change, the more robust and universal will be our theories and the more practical our advice to practitioners" (DiBella, 2007, p. 232). However, there appear to be a number of problems associated with this urge to typologisation. First of all, changes may be of mixed types comprising simultaneously planned elements and unexpected, emergent dimensions, which in itself makes a clear-cut distinction rather artificial, if not pointless. Second, the argument that modes of intervention should follow on from the type of change surfaced is not at all obvious. Thirdly, and this is really the main bone of contention: the effort to categorize carries an inclination towards abstract and general accounts rather than a focus upon specific and precise descriptions of change. What we wish to suggest is that detailed specification of particular organizational arrangements is the best – the only possible, in fact – starting point for action. In other words, it is crucial for any intervention both to offer and to work from precise specification. Good solutions are based on detailed description. So is normativity. Such an assumption may be somewhat alien to contemporary theories of change and its management, but it constituted something of a rule of thumb for many classic organization theories, including those routinely characterized as unworldly and anachronistic by contemporary theorists. While it is not necessary to agree

with all the formulations advanced by classic organizational analysts, it is nonetheless the case that there is at least an attempt made to rigorously define concepts and operating procedures, and to do so on the basis of precise description. This attempt, it seems to us, substantially increases the resources available through which effective organizational action might be taken.

Basic Assumptions on the Nature of Change

While there are, of course, a large number of classic organizational theorists whose work one might invoke to advance this argument concerning the importance of specificity to the conception and practical management of change, we begin by turning to certain formulations developed and deployed by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion. Bion has been an important source of inspiration for organization theory, influencing for instance, the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, and Edgar Schein's notion of organizational culture, though his ideas are seldom referred to in mainstream Organizational Theory today. A key interest of Bion's was to try and advance a method for sorting out phantasmagoric or 'magical thinking' from a realistic and practically focused understanding of the situation at hand. He argued that groups tend over time to develop certain unwarranted, 'psychotic' assumptions concerning, for example, their *raison d'être* and need of leadership. These basic assumptions, as he termed them, serve to comfort group members and reduce anxiety, however, they also prevent proper assessment of reality as it is. According to Bion, three types of basic group assumptions are often at play, all equally illusionary. The first he called 'the dependency group'; the second 'the pairing group'; and the third 'the fight-flight group', each nurturing certain fixated beliefs. Although they may appear both reasonable and recognizable, and we are all familiar with them, they tend to overshadow a practical assessment of a group's task and possibilities for action.

Now, let us for a moment experiment with the idea that basic assumptions may also be at play in contemporary theories of organizational change; recurring assumptions that lead to particular unwarranted concerns and engagements and types of ignorance and repudiation. Might the growing abstraction and absolutism of change theory be understood as pheno-

mena of basic assumptions, which have deflected scholarly interest from detailed description and evaluation of change situations and left the issue of change management peculiarly detached from any such specification? We will argue that there are indeed some types of selective attention and preferred topics in the change literature, which might be usefully explicated through Bion's classification, and the concerns motivating them. In the following, we will indicate how dependency assumptions, pairing assumptions and fight/flight assumptions pervade contemporary change theories.

'Change' as the Invocation of Dependency

According to Bion, the dependency group is focused on the assumption that it is basically an immature and vulnerable organism, which must seek out a leader to provide security for it. This means that one person in the group is always felt to supply this need and the rest of the group seeks shelter in a position in which their needs are supplied for them by this person (Bion, 1967, p. 74). The group concentrates on establishing a doctor-patient relationship between the leader and the group, and talk that doesn't support this relationship is ignored. The impulse of the group is to shy away from the hostile object, whereas the leader's is towards it, and this symbiotic relationship serves to protect the members from certain aspects of group life for which they do not feel prepared. The dependency group often chooses as its leader the most ill member (in the sense of being 'psychiatrically disordered'), as the group typically believes that it is possessed of a demon or is mad, and needs to be led by a 'deity' who can counter this insanity (Ibid, p. 122).

Even though the object is not the group but the organization, the dependency assumption with its key figures of vulnerable or immature clients and rescuing helpers, can be found in the change management literature too. It might reside in any client-consultant model, but here we will point to its presence in the intellectual stream of thought that emerged as the idea of 'organization development' became increasingly synonymous with psychological dimensions of organizational change and lost its focus on the organization as a 'total system'.

The tradition of 'organization development' arose in the period after the Second World War, when social science had become increasingly focused on the small group as a unit of

analysis, and on democratization and societal prosperity as two sides of the same coin. Informed by events like the Hawthorne experiments, the growth of industrial psychology and Kurt Lewin's Force Field Analysis, tools such as survey feedback and sensitivity training, the ideas of 'organizational structure' and 'strategy', and the open systems perspective on organizations, the notion of 'organization development' became an umbrella for diverse sets of ideas and approaches to planned organizational change with different foci and loci of intervention (Ganesh, 1978; Grieves, 2000). By and large, the field came to comprise two or three major streams, sometimes identified as the individual approach, the group approach, and the total systems approach to change (Burke, 1982).

A small book series from Addison-Wesley provides a good starting point to describe the total system approach as it was advanced at the end 1960's[1]. Here, organization development is presented as a general strategy aimed at increasing organizational "effectiveness and health through planned interventions in the organization's 'processes', using behavioral-science knowledge" (Beckhard, 1969, p. 9). The term 'total system' suggests that organizations should be examined as complex, human systems with a unique character, culture and value system, and Beckhard describes the combined examination and development effort embodied by this approach with the keywords: 'planned', 'organization-wide' and 'managed from the top'. In the same book series, Lawrence & Lorsch describe their particular version of organization development, which aimed to "change the organization from its current state to a better-developed state" (1969, p. 4) by emphasizing the interdependency between elements of the system and the ability of the system to change itself – its internal division of labour, its communication and authority

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[1] In the UK, another' total systems' approach to organization development was formulated by the Tavistock Institute with its point of departure in Emery and Trist's socio-technical system and in psychoanalytical approaches to the understanding of groups. This approach also defined the organization as a composite system with technical as well as social dimensions. However, they emphasized that a key challenge was to make organization more adaptable to change and that more democratic workplace arrangement would support this. Organizational development was sometimes even equated with industrial democracy (Miller, 1985). Action Research became the dominant method for the assessment of the effectiveness or balance of the organizational system, i.e. a collaborative exploration among external consultants, management and employees of the organizational situation and formulation of viable alternatives and interventions. Both within this approach and the American counterpart, the consultant would often enter a long-term relationship with the organization and in particular ensure entry into the top-level of management; focus on changes that affect the total organization and pattern of work, and aims towards building in capabilities within the system (Ganesh, 1978).

structure − and to compare desired results with actual outcomes. Departing from their contingency model of the organization, they position organization development as a systematic description and evaluation (diagnosing) of three equally important dimensions: the organization-environment relationship (e.g. fit between segments of the environment and the attributes of organizational units); the group-to-group relationships (e.g. collaboration between specialized units to obtain organizational goals); and individual-organization relationship (e.g. alignment of personal effort and organizational goals).

In both books, organization development is presented as a change effort that includes the role of a 'change agent', whose primary task is "to facilitate the improvement of organization effectiveness and health through providing interventions, development activities and programs for organization improvement" (Beckhard, 1969, p. 20). The change agent occupies a triple role of educator, diagnostician and consultant, someone who should focus on educating and enhancing the ability of top managers to identify organizational problems themselves and "more fully understand all the dimensions of the problems and not just the obtrusive symptoms which they observe" (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969, p. 96). External change agents may be preferred, because they are closely tied to top-management while also relating to other organization members. However, "constant reliance on a consultant by management should be a warning signal that something is missing in their own resources for maintaining the health of the organization" (Ibid, p. 98). Likewise, Beckhard indicates that organization development should not be confused with isolated training-programmes: "The difference between these and a genuine OD effort, in my opinion, is that they are not specifically related to the organization's mission: they are not action-oriented in the sense of providing a connecting link between the training activity and the action planning which follows it. They are not organizationally part of a larger effort" (Ibid, p. 21).

A third book in the series by W.G. Bennis sketches, however, a slightly different total-system approach that was to become indicative of future tendencies within OD. Bennis presents three basic propositions: 1) unparalleled changes are taking place which make it necessary to rebuild organizations; 2) the only viable way to change organizations is to change their 'culture'; 3) a new type of social awareness is required by people in organi-

zations along with "its spiritual ancestor, personal awareness" (Bennis, 1969, p. v). Organization development is a response to change: "a complex educational strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values and structure of organizations so that they can better adapt to new technologies, markets and challenges, and the dizzying rate of change itself" (Ibid, p. 2). The change agent is often an external professional behavioural scientist who works with the 'client system' on the "exigency or demand the organization is trying to cope with" (Ibid, p. 11). An outside change agent is better able to affect the power structure in organizations, Bennis argues, because of 'the aura' created by such an external (often highly paid) consultant, but also related to this person's ability "to 'see' with more innocence and clarity the problems which insiders have long learned to avoid or overlook and most certainly regard with anxiety" (Ibid, p. 13). Organization development consultants work on the basis of a social philosophy that governs their responses to the client system and which they believe will ultimately lead to not only more humane and democratic, but also more efficient systems. The key challenge is to transgress the dominant bureaucratic values: "These values, basically impersonal, task-oriented, and denying humanistic and democratic values, lead to poor, shallow, and mistrustful relation-ships. […]. Without interpersonal competence or a 'psychologically safe' environment, the organization is a breeding ground for mistrust, intergroup conflict, rigidity and so on" (Ibid). Through various types of interventions the consultant will challenge the behaviour, assumptions and traditions that hinder the organization to see alternative possibilities and to bring its culture under 'deliberate management'.

By coupling organizational development to change as an epochal characteristic and by defining the purpose and locus of intervention as the change of organizational culture, Bennis's approach departs from the more classic one put forward by Lawrence & Lorsch. It is also representative of the wealth of 'people approaches' to organizational change that proliferated in the 1950-60's and, in particular, of what Leavitt calls the 'power-equalization approach': "Besides the belief that one changes people first, these power-equalization approaches also place major emphasis on other aspects of the human phenomena of organizations. They are, for example, centrally concerned with affect; with morale sensitivity, psychological security. […] Thirdly, they place much value on human growth and fulfilment as well as upon task accomplishment; and they have often stretched

the degree of causal connection between the two." (Leavitt, 1965, p. 1154). As such ideas began to gain ground, the classic focal points of organization theory (task, structure, technology etc.) receded into the background. The topic of change became pivotal and organizational consultancy was increasingly seen as a matter of change facilitation; helping members of organizations to become more reflexive and flexible, and, thus, able to cope and thrive on change as a permanent condition. Organizations were increasingly viewed as cultures (Handy, 1976; Schein, 1985), learning systems (Argyris and Schön, 1978), sense-making systems (Weick, 1979), images or metaphors (Morgan, 1986), or, for example, as cognitive systems, (Bartunek *et al*, 1987). Interest in the 'production side' was by and large left to researchers within operations management and the emerging tradition of quality improvement, who with inspiration from the Japanese Kaizen system and the spread of IT, launched change programmes such as the Total Quality Movement and Business Process Reengineering[2].

As change theory became preoccupied with the 'people side', the role of the external change agent shifted in a subtle way. Grieves (2000, p. 429), for instance, depicts the history of organization development as a "movement from centralization to decentralization, a focus on the flexible firm by disaggregation or outsourcing, a movement from long term strategic planning to short-term tactical planning, the emergence of down-sizing and restructuring with teams as the central mechanism for innovation and change [and] the movement from training (typifying the division of labour) to organizational learning, personal growth and development" . Whereas the organizational consultant was previously seen as a specialist in describing and analyzing the organization as a totality of variables, organizational development consultants were increasingly depicted as "process consultants" (Burke, 1982) or "change facilitators" (Bennis, 1969), who focused on the cultural or psychological mindset of the organization. Through their competency as skilled 'interpreters', they could probe 'the readiness to change' of the organization and where possible, help to confront and sort out dominating assumptions in the organization so these could be reassessed, 'search for alternative ones', 'mobilize energy' and 'release human potentiality'. Although relying on certain sophisticated techniques, the role of this new

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[2] Interestingly, however, a shared characteristic of both the 'people' and the 'production' approaches, was the focus on change as an epochal condition and on the assumed superiority of 'flexible', 'reflexive' and 'organic' organizational systems.

type of change expert is ambiguous: "The role of the change agent is protean, changing, difficult to grasp and practically impossible to generalize", however, "in short, the change agent should be sensitive and mature" (Bennis, 1969, p. 49). Likewise, the transformation process they bring about is one of "grace, magic and miracles" (Lichtenstein, 1997).

The potted history of organization development we have presented, charts a movement away from a focus on the efficiency of an organization as a totality of specific elements to a focus on the general change readiness and degree of self-reflexivity of an organization. Simultaneously, the organizational development consultant changes status from what might be termed a 'problem solver and educator' to a 'healing visionary'. Focus shifts from collaborative research and assessment of the effectiveness of a total organizational system, to an emphasis on the consultant as a gifted facilitator and saviour of immature, anxious and inhibited organizations. Returning to Bion's characteristic of the dependency assumption, it is striking how the language of organization development gradually became one of rescue and salvation by an esteemed figure. Tools and methods no longer aimed to make organizations specify their particular challenges and solutions in a precise and comprehensive manner, but on the contrary, to make them transgress the current situation: to free their eyes and minds from narrow present-day conditions and considerations – from 'the hostile object' in Bion's terminology – to the promise of a democratic, flexible and loving culture to which the change facilitator will guide them. It is perhaps no coincidence that the image of organization development consultants as inspired interpreters and facilitators spread alongside a growing discourse of 'uncertainty' and 'ambiguity'. Both seem to rouse feelings of perplexity and helplessness in organizations, and to nurture the assumption that organizations depend for their future upon the courage and comfort of a change consultant, rather than on collaborative description and authoritative analysis of the here-and-now situation.

Change as a Call for Pairing
Bion also describes how a group can develop the assumption that it meets for the purpose of allowing a 'Messiah' – i.e. an omnipotent creature or a magnificent idea – to be born. This type of group will seek to nurture an atmosphere of hope and is occupied with finding the pairing that will be able to produce such a miracle. The peculiar air of hopeful

expectation may, for example, find expression in the idea that group therapy will revolutionize society when it has spread sufficiently, or that some new kind of community – an improved group – should be developed. These expressions tend to divert attention to some supposedly future events, but the crux of the matter is not the latter but rather the immediate present – the feeling of hope itself, which rescues the group from feelings of hatred, destructiveness and despair directed at itself or at another group. In order to sustain this feeling of hope, Bion argues, it is crucial that the 'leader' of the group should be unborn. It is a person or idea that will save the group, but in order to perform this role, the Messianic hope must never be fulfilled: "Only in remaining a hope does hope persist" (Bion, 1961, p.151). The danger is, on the one hand, that such a group will either "suffer through excess of zeal" and thereby interfere with genuine creative work-group functioning or, on the other, that it will allow itself to be forestalled – e.g. by allowing somebody to realize a vision or idea – and then "put to the troublesome necessity of liquidating the Messiah" and recreating the Messianic hope (Ibid, p. 152).

We will suggest that the hopeful, yet peculiarly aimless optimism of the pairing group can also be found in key texts within the literature on change management. In particular, the discourse of 'emergent change' appears to nurture the assumption that change offers the prospect of generating bright new ideas and amazing innovations if only organizations could manage to create the right spirit and atmosphere, which it is then argued is almost impossible to attain. By simultaneously depicting change as instituting a promising yet slippery supreme moment, an intangible *Kairos*, this literature works to divert the attention of scholars and practitioners from the specific and practical to the abstract and ethereal dimensions of organizational life.

Within organization theory, a large body of literature became preoccupied with what was depicted as a mismatch between the 'rigidities' of (mainly bureaucratic) organizations, which were stifling initiative and continuous readjustment and the "acute need for change" (Beer & Nohria, 2000, p. 2). The dominant trope became one of a hyper-turbulent environment and the imperative for organizations to align with and exploit the possibilities of changing markets, fast-growing globalization and rapidly developing information technologies. A discourse of survivability and inventiveness argued for a shifting locus of

control in organizations; from managerial hierarchies to spontaneously forming (organic) centres of innovation across formal boundaries and competencies. Under these new conditions, it was argued, the key to survival was the ability to seize opportunities, sense and cultivate streams of creative initiative, and disentangle barriers that keep people from meeting and getting ideas. On a conceptual level, a key intervention was the argument that organizations should leave the classic preoccupation with design parameters, organizational structure and control mechanisms. Instead the focus should be on 'processes' of organizing – on the continuous flow of action and knowledge as carrying the seeds of new organizational tomorrows. "Stamp out nouns…stamp in verbs" became a catch-phrase in the work of Karl E. Weick (Weick, 1995, p. 187) and under the rubric of 'emergent change' he argued against the view that organizations are fundamentally struggling with 'inertia' and that the appropriate solution is a 'planned change' approach:

> "In this alternative portrait, more attention is paid to processes of organizing than to structures of organization. Coordination is viewed as a dynamic process that tends to unravel and therefore has to be reaccomplished continuously…When people reaccomplish the coordination that ties activities together, they tend to alter it slightly so that it fits better with changing demands from internal and external sources. This continuous updating tends to produce units that change just as rapidly as their environment. Hence inertia is no longer a problem" (Weick, 2000, p. 230).

In this new understanding, the key to 'effective emergent change' is not controlled intervention, but 'sensemaking': "It makes no difference what program they choose to implement, because any old program will do – as long as that program (1) *animates people* and gets them moving and generating experiments that uncover opportunities; (2) *provides a direction*; (3) *encourages updating* through improved situational awareness…; and (4) *facilitates respectful interaction*" (Ibid, p. 233, original emphasis).

The work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter presented a similar approach to change. Departing from a pessimistic assessment of the US economy, Kanter argued that there was a pressing need for innovation: "We face social and economic changes of unprecedented magnitude

and variety, which past practices cannot accommodate and which instead requires innovative responses" (Kanter, 1983, p. 19). The key to success was to trust the creative capacities of people in organizations and allow 'idea power' to thrive. Small-scale innovations initiated by individuals could eventually add up to 'macro-changes' – the organization's capability to be responsive and adaptive as circumstances demanded. If organizations dared to give up the assumption that all change was a threat and that the appropriate response was to 'segment' and 'control', they could discover that loss of control and increased turbulence might lead to new innovations: "Change can be exhilarating, refreshing – a chance to meet challenges, a chance to clean house" (Ibid, p. 63). Control is not the key to success, flexibility is: react quickly, combine people across categories, and create a climate that encourages new procedures and possibilities, responses to external pressures, and an enhanced capacity to receive new ideas.

Whereas the classic interest of managers was system imbalances and break-downs, lack of fit between organizational elements, and quality of output, Weick and Kanter sketched rather different roles for successful leaders of change. In a fast-moving world, old virtues such as 'control' and 'administration' stifled the creative forces on which the organization's future depended. Managers must now be visionary facilitators that inspire and bring together people thereby unleashing their potential. When talent and inspiration is allowed to meet in the proper way, ideas and initiative will flourish. Change agents are first and foremost fertilizers of a creative and open climate, where experimentation is naturally encouraged and the human spirit allowed to unfold without having rigid criteria imposed in the vulnerable moment when ideas are conceived. This is not to be confused with 'revolutionary change' or with change as a 'planned process': "The hyperbole of transformation has led people to overestimate the liabilities of inertia, the centrality of managerial planning, and the promise of fresh starts, and to underestimate the value of innovative sensemaking on the front line, the ability of small experiments to travel, and the extent to which change is continuous" (Weick, 2000, p. 223).

The influence of Weick, Kanter and cognate scholars on the theorization of organizational change and innovation can hardly be overstated. The tropes of creativity, experimentation and engagement are dominant in current change literature (and in much social theory as

well). Judging from the number of papers in the *Journal of Change Management* addressing, for example, 'building capabilities for change' and 'organizing change', the call to replace nouns with verbs seems to have indeed been heard very clearly. In line with this, the diminished vocabulary of nouns appears to cluster around a small set of generic entities such as 'actors', 'contexts' and 'processes' – and their theoretical interrelations – rather than rich case studies of specific changes, ideas, or relationships between ideas and changes. The salience of verbs may, however, also reflect the fact that the literature on 'continuous change' is not simply praising processes of change for their own sake, but is also remarkably vague, even pessimistic when it comes to describing the actual practices or competencies needed for turning 'change' into a moment of opportunity: "The danger lurking in many discussions of organizational change is that the whole thing starts to sound much simpler than it is" (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992, p. 4). For Kanter and colleagues the problem is not simply that there are few descriptions in the academic literature of the complex ways in which organizations and change agents have managed to seize the occasion presented by change. Rather, the art of becoming a flexible and innovative organization is a rare miracle. It is "difficult to find practical examples of organizations not born that way that have fully transformed themselves to attain this ideal" (Ibid.). Weick also points to key obstacles for 'effective emergent change': "All four of these activities – animation, direction, attention, respectful interaction – are crucial for adaptation, learning, and change in a turbulent world. But they are also the four activities most likely to be curbed severely in a hierarchical command-and-control system. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that highly touted planned change programs will necessarily recognize, restore, or legitimize animation, direction, attention and respectful interaction" (Weick, 2000, p. 234). Although the potentials of change might lie right below the surface, organizations are often trapped in rigid thinking and tight couplings that don't allow them to emerge. Furthermore, it takes special abilities to sort out the right and potent type of changes in the swarm of change cues: "Our ability to recognize changes may be largely limited to the immediately obvious and therefore superficial ones, while ultimately more powerful factors are hidden from out view" (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992, p. 5).

In this way, the message of emergent change as an opportunity is also replete with reservations – an ambivalent promise, indeed. On the one hand, the seeds of new tomorrows

blow in the wind of change. On the other, the impulses to flesh out and 'segment' these seeds must be curbed in order to stay animated and attentive, and to 'break the code of change'. Rather than thinking in terms of the classic Lewinian "unfreeze-change-refreeze", successful emergent change is a matter of "freeze-rebalance-unfreeze" Weick argues (Weick, 2000, p. 236). On closer inspection, however, the key difference between the two sequences seems primarily to be that the first entails a movement – small or lengthy – from one specific situation to another; whereas the second – the continuous change approach – suggests a leap into abstract hope through a process of critical reflection, reflexive cleansing of the mind, and a resilient aspiration towards unknown potentialities. The basic dynamic of this advice, and of the conceptual framework underpinning it, seems remarkably close to Bion's characterization of the paring group. In order to avoid feelings of disaster and hatred, the group engages in a collective cultivation of hope. A type of hope, however, whose nature is not to find the specific way in which hope can be fulfilled, but rather to sustain itself as an abstract refuge, or metaphysical ideal.

Change as a Call for Fight or Flight

The fight-flight group is the third of Bion's three basic group assumptions. Whereas the dependency and the pairing group form around the belief that their purpose is, respectively, to be protected or to produce a wonder, the fight-flight group acts on the assumption that it must either fight or flee from an enemy. Accordingly, the group seeks to build the notion of a hostile force or menace, or it chooses as its leader a person who is able to single one out. This leader is, Bion says: "Usually a man or a woman with marked paranoid trends; perhaps if the presence of an enemy is not immediately obvious to the group, the next best thing is for the group to choose a leader to whom it is" (Bion, 1961, p. 67). The leader of the fight-flight group will be a person, who asks the group to provide itself with adequate opportunity for flight or aggression, i.e. prompts the group to find ways to avoid, escape, combat or beat an imagined danger. "If he makes demands that do not do so, he is ignored" (Ibid, p. 152). Attempts to question the fight or flight assumption are obstructed by, for example, eliciting strong emotional support for the hatred of all psychological interpretation or by finding ways to evade interpretation. Whereas the group provides security for its members to the extent that individuals demonstrate courage and self-sacrifice, the cost is that a realistic assessment of the group situation is difficult.

Likewise the group cares little for the individuals that constitute it: "The fight-flight group expresses a sense of incapacity for understanding and love, without which understanding cannot exist" (Ibid, p. 160).

As we have already indicated in relation to the previous two assumptions, the fight/flight dynamic with its focus upon a real or imagined enemy can also be detected in contemporary theories of change. In one form, it can be detected in the 'best practice' literature. In another, it appears in the critical management studies literature. Although neither of the two forms operate with explicit notions of an enemy or menace, they revolve around the idea that change is a situation which calls either for the mobilisation of strength and acumen against counterforces; or is an event that is pervaded with attempts to rule, control, or direct the life of others. We will exemplify both assumptions and argue that they pave the way for accounts in which change is viewed as a thing or situation that can be treated with unquestioned normativity or with unquestioned suspiciousness.

Within the field of strategic change management, the work of John P. Kotter occupies an influential position. In the book *Leading Change,* Kotter argues – in line with the dominant trope – that change is a crucial necessity in contemporary business life because of macroeconomic forces pushing organizations to reduce costs, improve quality, increase productivity and locate new opportunities for growth (1996). However, many change efforts suffer from lack of competent execution, which has resulted in a vast number of failed change programmes with disappointing results and frustrated employees. The reasons for the poor results are, on the one hand, that "pain is always involved" whenever people have to adjust to shifting conditions; on the other, that 'leaders of change' typically make a number of basic errors when trying to transform organizations. Kotter outlines the eight most common types of errors and suggests how they can be avoided: 1) allowing too much complacency; 2) failing to create a sufficiently powerful coalition; 3) underestimating the power of vision; 4) undercommunicating the vision; 5) permitting obstacles to block the new vision; 6) failing to create short-term wins; 7) declaring victory too soon; and 8) neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the corporate culture. As the phrasing of these eight errors suggest, Kotter adopts a war-like perspective: to take a lead on change means to start a battle against complacency by invoking an atmosphere of urgency and

offering strong ideals. It also means the building of alliances with powerful players, the removal of obstacles and the securing of both short and long term wins.

The right leader for such a struggle may not necessarily be the most charismatic or 'leader-like' person, but the one who sustains a 'competitive drive and life-long learning': "When hit with an unexpected downturn, he (*sic*)would often become angry or morose, but he would never give up or let defensiveness paralyze him…he watched more closely and listened more carefully than did most others…he relentlessly tested new ideas, even if that meant pushing himself out of his zone of comfort or taking some personal risks" (Ibid, p. 180). In order to direct the battle for change, persons with the appropriate understanding of 'leadership' rather than 'management' are needed. Change does not happen through classic managerial virtues such as planning budgeting, organizing, controlling etc., but through 'attacks' that enable organizations to 'break out of the morass' and gain the 'victory'. Such ventures require an ability to define the future, align people with that vision and make it happen despite obstacles. Bureaucracies are one of the generic obstacles to change, Kotter argues, and leadership is rarely found in them. However, "only leadership can blast through the many sources of corporate inertia. Only leadership can motivate the actions needed to alter behaviour in any significant way" (Ibid, p. 30). Drawing a picture of organizations as caught between, on the one hand, the deadlock of bureaucracy and, on the other, a widespread complacency, Kotter depicts change as simultaneously an unquestionable necessity and a matter of perspicacious instigation and unremitting struggle. The content and direction of change is of less importance than the persistent fight for the organization's freedom and capability to change. Change is a call to fight against red tape and indolence.

Where Kotter promotes the idea of change as an occasion for fight and persistent endeavour, the literature on change within the field of critical management studies advances the opposite idea: change is an occasion for deep scepticism and flight from dominant belief. Critical management studies is a term which works as an umbrella for a diverse set of ideas and approaches united around the contestation of the "traditional imperatives of mainstream management research and practice" (Tadajwksi, Maclaran, Parsons and Parker, 2011, p. 1). Drawing upon a potent an eclectic brew of Marxism, critical theory,

post-structuralism, feminism and other traditions of critique, critical management scholars seek to question the assumptions and 'taken-for-granteds', detect the dynamics of power and ideology hidden in institutional structures and practices, confront the claims of rationality and objectivity and reveal the interests that these conceal, and work towards an emancipatory ideal (Reynolds, 1999). The issue of change and change management is consistently viewed from these vantage points by critical management scholars. For instance, Morgan & Spicer depict the notion of change as something that needs to be 'denaturalized', i.e. disclosed as belonging to certain discourses or theoretical assumptions about reality: "Change only becomes a socially meaningful and political efficacious phenomena when it is 'fixed' and explicated through a set of ideas and theories about change" (Morgan & Spicer, 2009, p. 254). Their next step is to unravel how change theories are never neutral representations of reality, but: "partial and 'interested' representation[s] of reality" that "construct the change processes they claim to describe" (Ibid.). Here, 'change' is never something that can simply be explored and described, since the descriptive vocabulary and the selection of details are always theoretically, hence politically, loaded. Instead of such description, critical management studies seek to 'politically engage' with change processes by juxtaposing actors' accounts and views of change against each other and showing how groups and actors struggle around the direction of change processes: "They open up the study of change to considering how the models of change which are propagated by business schools, consultants and other carriers of ideas do not just describe change processes, but actually play a central role in directing these processes" (Ibid: 259). Thus, by employing a methodological repertoire drawn from ideology criticism, discourse analysis and semiotics, for example, critical management studies depict 'change' as an occasion for alertness, unmasking and problematization. Change is invariably political, and the proper response is political as well, although it is of a different kind than that undertaken by change agents who are enmeshed in the processes of change themselves. The critical management theorist takes a step back from direct implication and monitors from a distance the movements and rhetorical tactics of the involved parties. Through 'reflexivity' and 'critique', critical management studies scholars seek to displace attention from specific change situations – and its own potential part in these – to an abstract multiplicity of powers at play behind the immediately real. This strategy can, depending on the critical theoretical point of view adopted, be seen as either a flight away

from description and practical engagement with specific change situations, or as a sophisticated fight against attempts to define and direct such instances.

Whereas Kotter sketches 'change' as a demand for fighting against complacency, critical management studies represents 'change' as a battle to reveal hidden politics and simultaneously as a flight from direct involvement. In both approaches, however, the basic figure of change remains remarkably underspecified, either because change is seen as a self-evident necessity, or because it is regarded as an empty signifier, that cannot be described without politicizing.

Managing on the Basis of Unwarranted Change Assumptions

By employing the analytical framework of Bion, we have demonstrated how major components of the change literature rest upon and nurture a set of basic assumptions, which work to preclude detailed description and assessment of organizational reality, and to invoke a number of normative and rather absolutist change recipes and research strategies. We will now point to the practical consequences of this normative and theoretical closure by examining the way certain change tropes serve both to inspire and legitimize organizational reforms, and to do so in a manner which is at best quite problematic and, at worst potentially damaging in their lack of precision, care and contextual specificity.

Change, Epochalism and Organizational Reform

> For when I began to speak of 'the world' (and not of this tree or table), what did I wish if not to conjur something of the higher order in to my words? ....of course, here the elimination of magic itself has the character of magic. (Wittgenstein, 1998, p. 49)

As we have argued, contemporary discourses of organizational change tend towards being both absolutist (change is undeniable, it is everywhere and you can't escape it) and highly abstract (its imperatives require flexibility, innovation, creativity, enterprise: the list is as

endless as the practical operationalisation of its imperatives remains remarkably under-specified). While it is clear that such discourses have some intuitive rhetorical appeal – offering, for instance, a powerful set of generalizations that can act as a catalyst for 'transformation' – it is not at all obvious what some of their favoured tropes might practically mean in a specific organizational context. The phrases may generate a general sense of meaning and significance, but how are such abstract injunctions to be acted upon, practically, and does their lack of precision and specificity have some serious implications for the appropriateness of particular changes in different organizational settings? After all, as Peter Drucker (quoted in MacDonald *et al*., 2006, p. 271) once argued: "the function of management in a church is to make it more church-like, not more business-like", thus begging the question as to the appropriateness of applicability of generic change 'recipes' to the 'core tasks' of different sorts of organizations.

It is a key maxim in classic organization theory, that the nature of the management task, and the appropriateness of the management methods deployed, can be defined only in relationship to the particular purposes, or 'core tasks' of the organization to be managed, the values to be upheld by its managers as determined by its constitution, business plan, or mission, and the status of its relationship with its users, whether they be citizens, clients, parishioners, or customers. When it comes to 'change', the differences between organizations – their distinctive core tasks, their varying obligations to differing constituencies, and their typical ways of specifying and addressing ethical questions, for instance - are as vital as their similarities. It is unlikely that they will experience 'change' in an identical manner – as an abstract phenomenon – but rather as a particular matter of concern, with distinctive characteristics and practical implications related to the conduct of concrete aspects of their activities. If this is indeed the case, then it is unlikely that a generalised set of 'change' injunctions or recipes would be appropriate to them all. Indeed, without a clear sense of what an organization's core tasks are, and equally precise concepts through which to formulate the conditions of their attainment, generalizations about and injunctions to 'change' are at best somewhat gestural or gratuitous, and at worst potentially quite destructive. Conversely, the more explicit and detailed the description of an organization's purposes are, then the more precise it is possible to be in specifying the operational activi-

ties that follow directly from the functions the organization is employed to undertake in pursuance of these purposes.

In order to elaborate our point, we turn briefly to a specific case. In their highly influential public management tract, *Re-Inventing Government*, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) posited the need for a complete transformation in the ways in which the US federal government conducted itself, and in the ways in which people conducted themselves within government departments and agencies. They did so on the basis of a loose agglomeration of abstract imperatives of 'change'. Amongst the latter were cited: a generalised crisis in governmental authority, the dislocatory effects of an increased deployment of new information and communication technologies, and the logics of 'globalization'. These and other imperatives were then lumped together to constitute what the authors termed 'an environment characterised by uncertainty'. It was this uncertain environment which was deemed to problematise the established 'values' and operating procedures characterising the workings of the Federal government and thus to demand their radical transformation. Failure to respond could only lead to disaster:

> Today's environment demands institutions that are extremely flexible and adaptable. It demands institutions that deliver high-quality goods and services, squeezing every more bang out of every buck. It demands institutions that are responsive to the needs of their customers, offering choices of non-standardized services; that lead by persuasion and incentives rather than commands; that give their employees a sense of meaning and control, even ownership. It demands institutions that empower citizens rather than simply serving them (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p.15).

If uncertainty was the problem, making established practices untenable, then 'entrepreneurial government' was the solution. It was held to offer the only viable means through which a 'broken' public administration could be effectively 're-invented' and the core tasks of government thus continue to be fulfilled. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the key tenets of this 'new entrepreneurialism' were represented as the very antithesis of those held to have got government into such trouble in the first place. The latter were similarly lumped

together under one heading: 'the 'bureaucratic paradigm'. In contrast to this slow, ineffi-
cient, morale sapping monster, signally lacking in the capacity to respond to the impera-
tives of change, entrepreneurial government was represented as efficient, flexible, fast and
responsive:

> Entrepreneurial governments promote *competition* between service providers.
> They *empower* citizens by pushing control out of the bureaucracy, into the
> community. They measure the performance of their agencies, focusing not on
> inputs but on *outcomes*. They are driven by their goals – their *missions* – not
> by their rules and regulations. They redefine their clients as *customers* and
> offer them choices – between schools, between training programs, between
> housing options. They *prevent* problems before they emerge, rather than
> simply offering services afterward. They put their energies into *earning*
> money, not simply spending it. They *decentralize* authority, embracing
> participatory management. They prefer *market* mechanisms to bureaucratic
> mechanisms. And they focus not simply on providing public services but on
> *catalysing* all sectors – public, private and voluntary – into action to solve
> their community's problems (Ibid, p. 19–20, original emphasis).

While such, what we term 'epochalist', narratives and oppositions provide a simple and
easily digestible set of slogans through which to catalyse the demand for 'change',
problems invariably arise when it comes to the specification of actually effecting practical
changes within governmental institutions based on such general categories. After all, we
would suggest, judgements about the wisdom of certain forms of organizational change,
arrived at in the concrete circumstances of a practical case, can no more be abstracted
from their detailed circumstances than can medical judgements about the present condition
of individual patients. As Amélie Rorty (1988, p. 8) has argued in this regard: judgements
are given their sense and direction by the particular context within which they arise. Yet, it
is precisely the specificity of circumstances that epochal approaches render insignificant
or invisible, and herein lies their practical danger. In so far as they neglect the specificity
of circumstances, attempts, such as Osborne and Gaebler's, to generalize 'entrepreneurial
principles' to all forms of public organizational conduct may well end up serving to inca-

pacitate a particular organization's ability to pursue its specific purposes or 'core task' by redefining its identity and hence what its purposes are. A brief examination of the Clinton administration's National Performance Review in the USA and subsequent report – *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less* gives a flavour of just how such a slippage can occur when absolutist diagnoses form the basis of practical organizational 'change' interventions in the area of public administration.

Re-Inventing Government: The National Performance Review

The centre-piece of public administrative reform under the Clinton presidency in the USA was the National Performance Review (NPR) chaired by then Vice-President Al Gore. In launching the NPR in April, 1993, Gore indicated that 'our long term goal is to change the very culture of the federal government'. This was to be achieved through a process coined 'Re-Inventing'. The origins of this phrase are not hard to trace. It is Osborne and Gaebler's bestseller, and their epochal pronouncements and diagnoses that clearly inform the value premises and practical goals of the NPR. Indeed, David Osborne played a major part in drafting the NPR's final report *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less* (1993).

Osborne and Gaebler's text picks and mixes ideas from a number of different locales - from the voluminous privatization literature of the 1970s and 1980s, to the populist business motivation literature of the 1980s and early 1990s. The result is a heady brew that could appear acceptable to liberals and democrats who wanted to save government from the worst excesses of the New Right but who also wanted a more 'responsive' government that catalysed all sectors of society and, importantly, cost less to run. Such a government was realisable, Osborne and Gaebler argued, if there was a 'cultural' shift away from the 'bureaucratic paradigm' towards 'entrepreneurial government'. This epochal designation was taken up by the NPR and constituted something like its basic organizing framework.

According to the NPR, 'Re-Inventing Government' rested upon 'four bedrock principles' of entrepreneurial management (1993, p. 6–7). These were remarkably similar (indeed, pretty much a distillation of) to Osborne and Gaebler's 'ten principle's of entrepreneurial government' quoted above. So, first, effective entrepreneurial managements cast aside red

tape and moved away from systems where people were accountable for following rules to ones where people were accountable for achieving results. Second, entrepreneurial managements were customer-focused and insisted on customer satisfaction. Third, entrepreneurial managements transformed their cultures by decentralizing authority. They empowered those working on the frontline to make more of their own decisions and to take responsibility for solving their own problems. Finally, entrepreneurial managements constantly sought to do more for less, through 'reengineering' their work systems and processes.

These 'principles' were never presented as propositions subject to empirical disproof but simply asserted. Objections and questions concerning the wisdom of these assertions – was being against red tape (e.g. bureaucratic regulation) really a useful organizing principle for the administration of government given its sovereign politico-legal role? (Kaufman, 1977) – are suppressed in advance through the continuous invocation of the impossibility of the status quo. 'Change' is the given. It is simply not able to be challenged within the terms of reference of the Gore report. In this sense, it expresses, as Moe has indicated, a "theological aura" (1994, p. 113),

> The traditional language of administrative discourse which attempts, not always with success, to employ terms with *precise* meanings. Instead, a new highly value-laden lexicon is employed by entrepreneurial management enthusiasts to disarm would-be questioners. Thus, the term "customer" largely replaces "citizen" and there is heavy reliance upon active verbs – reinventing, reengineering, empowering – to maximise the emotive content of what otherwise has been a largely none motive subject matter (Ibid, p. 114, our italics)

This epochal schema in which 'bureaucracy' or 'administration' is reduced to a simple and abstract set of negativities contrasted with an equally simple and abstracted, but positively coded, set of 'entrepreneurial' principles, systematically evacuates the field of public administration of any of its characteristic, we might say 'positive', content. How could anyone be for bureaucracy if it is defined simply as a dysfunctional, outdated and inefficient organizational form? Who could not be supportive of a form of organization that

shares none of those deficiencies and guarantees a better future? However, when attention is focused on the specific purposes of public administration and the particular political and constitutional constraints framing its activities (Wilson, 1994), the generalised articulation of bureaucracy with the outmoded and dysfunctional is less obvious and the generalized superiority of 'entrepreneurial principles' much more problematic. As a number of commentators in the US have argued, the implementation of the NPR's proposals raised a host of constitutional problems and yet the Gore report is characterised by an almost complete absence of the language of constitutionalism (Moe, 1994; Rohr, 1998). At one level, this seems shocking, given the role of the public bureaucracy as an institution of government, yet it is not that surprising when one remembers the epochalist terms in which the NPR is framed, and that, as a result, it never describes the field of public administration in any specific or detailed sense.

The NPR sought to institute a highly pluralistic organizational and management structure upon the executive branch of government in keeping with its model of best 'entrepreneurial' practice. Congress was represented here as a relatively unimportant and indeed, largely, negative, factor in this new paradigm. The President, in turn, was seen more as a catalytic policy entrepreneur than as the legal agent of sovereign power. Thus the entrepreneurial management paradigm sought to reverse the thrust of prior constitutionally based organizational management initiatives in government, in which the institutional presidency was considered central to the management of the executive branch of government, and to devolve management responsibility to the lowest practicable levels (Moe, 1994, p.117). As a consequence, primary accountability was no longer to the President through departmental lines and central management agencies, but to the customer. This was a shift of remarkable constitutional importance and yet its merit was taken for granted simply because it conformed to 'good' entrepreneurial management, and not 'bad' bureaucratic practice.

> Working toward a quality government means reducing the power of headquarters vis-à-vis field operations. As our reinvented government begins to liberate agencies from over-regulation...all federal agencies will delegate, decentralise, and empower employees to make decisions. This will let front-

line and front-office workers use their creative judgement as they offer service

to customers to solve problems (1993:70-71).

The NPR, and the ideas informing it derived from Osborne and Gaebler's *cri de coeur* for radical 'change' in governmental administration, operated at a highly abstract level. As Moe (1994) has suggested, their epochalist assumptions, the use of argument by faith and assertion rather than through precise formulations and the rigorous definition of operating procedures, or indeed any recourse to the 'empirical stance' (Van Fraassen, 2002), lends their prescriptions a metaphysical or phantasmagoric 'aura'. In Wittgenstein's terms, by failing to go beyond the form of substantive assertion, and operating at the heights of abstraction, the NPR, and Osborne and Gaebler's tract, conjure 'something of the higher order' into their dreams and schemes. In the process, specificity is lost or made to disappear.

Jaques, Bureaucracy, and 'Change'

As we have suggested throughout this article, contemporary discourses of organizational change exhibit a pronounced tendency to approach their object in a highly abstract and often existentially absolutist fashion and this inclination has been accompanied by a growing occlusion of the substantive concerns animating much classic work in Organization Theory. Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions concerning that organizational form we know as 'bureaucracy'. As the discussion of Osborne and Gaebler's text above suggests, and as is evident from our engagement with the work of Weick and Kotter, for instance, bureaucracy is no longer approached as a specific form of organizing work (as an evolving, diversified organizational device) whose effectivity is to be analysed and assessed in relationship to the achievement of its 'core tasks', but is rather conceived of as an inherently problematic entity essentially unsuited to the organizational demands of the present and future. Bureaucracy here functions as a portmanteau term for all that is wrong with organizational life, and thus as a barrier to change, to empowerment, to flexibility, creativity and to any number of presumed positivities deemed necessary to

organizational survival and flourishing in an inherently dynamic and unstable environment.

As we have noted, such an epochalist designation only achieves whatever rhetorical power it is presumed to possess by virtue of under-describing that which it seeks to excoriate. Indeed, despite the widespread view that bureaucratic forms of organization kill initiative, undermine enterprise, and crush creativity, and are no more than anachronisms in the contemporary organizational landscape, bureaucracy nonetheless appears practically, remarkably resilient (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005). This in turn suggests that approaching any existing bureaucracy *a priori* as bad or useless, as many contemporary advocates of 'change' have a tendency so to do, is neither practically useful nor in accordance with the dictates of an empirical as opposed to a metaphysical 'stance' (Van Fraassen, 2002). Discussion of change in regard to bureaucracy and its presumed characteristics could, we suggest, benefit from regaining a lost specificity – that empirical grounding in detailed description – as a prerequisite to normative assessment and prescription for effective action. And, once again, insights from classic organization theory can provide some useful rules of thumb in how such an endeavour might be undertaken. In what follows, we briefly explore the classic, but now largely ignored work of Elliott Jaques and Wilfred Brown to elaborate this point.

The first major research project undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was an investigation into joint consultation in industry in the UK. It involved work in one enterprise, the Glacier Metal Company, for two and half years between 1948 and 1950, and deliberately ranged more widely than reference to 'joint consultation' might suggest. Indeed, over three decades from the beginning of the study its director, Elliott Jaques, and the Managing Director of the company, Wilfred Brown, both individually and collectively, developed a distinctive programme that became recognized in its time as having as significant an impact on organizational and management thinking as the Hawthorne experiments, but which is now largely relegated to a footnote in the history of organization theory.

One of Jaques's main tasks was to investigate what would be generally accepted as the right level of pay for a given role. From this evolved a key concept in his repertoire: the notion of 'the time-span of discretion' – the idea that the main criterion by which the importance of a job is implicitly judged is the length of time which expires before decisions taken by an person are reviewed and evaluated (Jaques, 1956). He also found that differentials in what he termed 'felt fair-pay' – what people in an organization felt they and others should earn – were very highly correlated with objective measurement of differences in time-span, so that if a payment system was based on discretion differences between jobs/roles it would generally be seen as 'equitable' (Jaques, 1957). The third conceptual strand in his programme related to bureaucratic hierarchy (Jaques, 1976; 1990), where his research led him to argue that bureaucracy was neither inherently pathological nor dysfunctional but rather, in contrast, a form that could potentially enable an organization to employ large numbers of people and yet preserve both unambiguous work role boundaries and accountability for work conducted by those occupying those roles. A properly functioning bureaucracy, he argued, could allow equitable payment based on measurement of responsibility through time span capacity to operate economic competition, for example, without the exploitation of labour (Jaques, 1976; 1990). Despite subtle changes since its inception in the early Glacier studies (1951; 1956; 1961; 1965), Jaques's programme exhibited a remarkable consistency over time. This led to some serious criticisms of it, not least from theorists of organizational change, for whom its focus on 'the organization' as the object of analysis, and on managerial accountability hierarchies or 'bureaucracies' as potentially subtle and supple organizational forms, was indicative of both rigid and anachronistic thinking. Indeed, Jaques was accused of being a 'managerial fascist', a Taylorite, and a mechanistic rationalist (Kleiner, 2001). Gareth Morgan, summed up the mood when he was quoted in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* describing Jaques's programme as an irrelevance in the contemporary organizational 'epoch': " he had a very powerful idea, but it's old economy stuff" (quoted in Kleiner, 2001, p.1).

The continuing empirical presence and significance of bureaucracy alone should be reason enough to approach such epochalist claims with a degree of caution (du Gay, 2005; Thompson and Alvesson, 2005). For Jaques (1990), though, the empirical persistence of bureaucracy wasn't a matter of chance, nor could it be seen as evidence of an organiza-

tional residue, a 'zombie' phenomenon, in Beck's (2005) loaded term, something giving the appearance of life while actually being dead. Rather, as Jaques (1990, p. 3) put it '[T]he hierarchical kind of organization we call bureaucracy did not emerge accidentally. It is the only form of organization that can enable a company to employ large numbers of people and yet preserve unambiguous accountability for the work they do. And this is why, despite its problems, it has so doggedly persisted'. For Jaques and Brown, this is the case because bureaucracy can be seen to express two fundamental aspects of 'real work'. First that work tasks occur in lower and higher degrees of complexity, and second that there are sharp discontinuities in complexity that separate tasks into a series of steps or categories. Not only this, the same discontinuities occur with respect to mental (or 'knowledge') work and to the breadth and duration of accountability. These two characteristics of work, they conclude, enable bureaucracy to meet four of an organization's core needs: to add real value to work as it moves through the organization, to identify and nail down accountability at each stage of the value-adding process, to place people with the requisite competence in each of the organizational layers, and to build a general consensus and acceptance of the managerial structure that achieves these ends' (Ibid, p. 4). But how exactly do they do so? For Jaques and Brown, the answer lay in specifying the nature of managerial accountability and authority, on the one hand, and with the means of measuring levels of work on the other. Hence their preoccupation with describing, clarifying and precisely delineating roles and role relationships, and the attendant allocation of responsibility and accountability, in an organization's 'executive' or 'work role' system. It is in this connection that the two other key elements of Jaques programme mentioned earlier come to the fore - the notions of the time-span of discretion and equitable payment.

The starting point for Jaques's analysis was an observed distinction between the 'prescribed' and 'discretionary' demands of specific tasks. Prescribed demands could be precisely and specifically stated, and it was almost unambiguously clear whether or not they had been met. The discretionary elements were those aspects of the work task that involved the exercise of judgment and where a decision as to the adequacy of performance, as to whether it has achieved an adequate balance of pace of work and quality, could only be made by a superior. Both Jaques and Brown argued that the level of

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discretion or responsibility in a work role could only be measured in terms of its time-span of discretion, the maximum period of time during which marginally sub-standard exercises of discretion could pass without review by a superior (Brown & Jaques, 1965; Jaques, 1967). This measurement was seen as providing a basis both for organizing work roles hierarchically into a number of definite strata, distinguished by qualitative breaks in the nature of the discretion which is required for their satisfactory performance, and for determining payment at an equitable level for the time-span of work involved. Indeed, Jaques and Brown went one step further indicating an empirical association between payment determined by the time-span of discretion and feelings of equity among employees. In other words, the wage or salary determined by time-span of discretion was viewed by those subject to it as not unreasonable (Jaques, 1976, p. 231–2).

This argument was developed via a set of relational distinctions concerning organizational 'modes' or 'states'. The first of these relates to 'manifest' organization: the structure of the organization as it appears in official organograms or charts. The second relates to 'assumed organization': the organizational structure as different categories of person within the organization assume it 'really works'. Both manifest and assumed organization may differ from the 'extant' organization, the situation revealed by systematic empirical exploration and analysis (though it can never be 'completely' known). Finally, 'requisite organization' is "the situation as it would have to be to accord with the real properties of the field in which it exists"' (Brown, 1965, p. 47–8). The work of Jaques and Brown entailed both detailed empirical description of extant organization and, elaborating from this 'empirical stance', a precise set of prescriptions for the attainment of 'requisite' organization. As Eric Trist (1965, p. 20–21) noted in his original introduction to Wilfred Brown's book *Exploration in Management*: the main focus of interest of Brown and Jaques's work is with the organization as a discrete object, with its internal processes and structures, and with the sources of change which may arise therein. The analysis of the executive system, based as it is on empirical observation and detailed description, remains resolutely concrete, referring to sets of work roles and role relationships, though there is some elaboration in terms of rather more abstractly defined activities at various points. It is this attention to detail though, and the rigorous definition of concepts and operating procedures that follows from it, that grabs his attention and leads him to conclude that the

programme Brown and Jaques elaborate 'is one which substantially increases the resources available through which managers in an enterprise can take effective action'. He concludes that while managers may not agree with all their formulations or conclusions, nonetheless "a tool-making job has been done, and the tools must be made before the people can avail themselves of them".

In Jaques and Brown's analyses bureaucracy emerged not as an inherently pathological or dysfunctional organizational form, but potentially at least as a supple, multifaceted, diversified organizational device in which people and tasks were able to be deployed at complementary levels, where individuals could perform the tasks assigned to them, and where employees in any given layer could add value to the work of those in the layer directly below them (Jaques, 1990, p. 8). The result, then, would be a largely 'self-sufficient executive system made up of a succession of unambiguously accountable and internally serviced managerial domains' (Trist, 1965, p. 22). Here, everyone would know their place. To contemporary theorists of change who demand that employees 'drop your tools' in the pursuit of poetic improvisation and bricolage (Weick, 1996), or 'develop a public and passionate hatred of bureaucracy' in the quest for liberation and empowerment (Peters, 1992), nothing could be less appealing or, indeed, more dysfunctional. And yet, as Wilfred Brown suggests, the advantage of knowing your place is that it provides the security required by the individual employee before they can become free fully to develop the discretionary component in their own role. In other words, rigidity and flexibility were not here seen as inevitably antithetical to one another. Rather the former could be seen as the condition of the latter. It was the relation between the two that was important.

The generalised *a priori* disdain of bureaucracy (and the equation of bureaucratic rules with the inhibition of individual liberty, creativity and so forth) to be found in contemporary discourses or organizational change has its counterpart in the practical world of organizations too. Indeed, it may not be too ingenuous to suggest that the former might conceivably be connected in some 'performative' manner with the latter. The cases of Enron, Anderson, and Worldcom at the beginning of the millennium, and those of Lehmann Brothers and other financial institutions more recently, indicate precisely what can happen if bureaucratic formalities and procedures are viewed simply and irrevocably

as tiresome and unnecessary constraints on executive freedom to act'. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised at the prevalence of such wanton and culpable conduct given the regularity with which practicing managers have been warned of the inherent evils of bureaucracy (Jaques, 2003; du Gay, 2005). It is salutary then, to return to the work of Brown and Jaques for a more nuanced and subtle formulation of what precisely and specifically involved in 'executive freedom to act', once the latter is subject to a pragmatic empirical stance, and not simply to the dictates of *a priori* metaphysical and normative criticism . In words that echo our own assessment of many theories of change, Brown (1965, p. 118) indicates that close empirical examination and detailed description of executive freedom to act, or "the environment which gives a manger freedom to make decisions" can lead to conclusions the very opposite of those assumed by more normative and metaphysical assessments.

> Many mangers feel that 'freedom' lies in the sort of situation where their superior says to them: 'There are not many regulations in this place. You will understand the job in a month or two and make your own decisions. No red tape – you are expected to take command; make the decisions off your own bat as they arise. I am against a lot of rules or regulations, and we do not commit too much to paper'. In my experience a manager in such a situation has virtually no 'freedom to act' at all. […]
>
> It is much more efficient to delineate as precisely as possible to a new subordinate all of the regulations he must observe and then say: 'You must take all of the decisions that seem to you to be required, so long as you keep within the bounds of that policy. If, keeping within those bounds, you take decisions which I think you should have referred to me, then I cannot criticize; for such a happening implies that some part of the policy which I wish you to operate has not been disclosed to you. I must, then, formulate that policy and add it to the prescribed content of your job'. If, in addition, the manager can give his subordinate a rounded idea of the discretionary component of his job by stating the types of decision he must make, then that subordinate is in a real position to act on his own initiative in the prescribed area…In fact, it is only by delineating the area of freedom in this way that a subordinate knows when

he can take decisions. The absence of written policy leaves him in a position where any decision he takes, however apparently trivial, may infringe an unstated policy and produce a reprimand. (Brown, 1965, p. 118–120).

In contrast to the assumptions framing contemporary discourses of organizational change, Brown's formulations, based as they are on practical experience and empirical observation, suggest that bureaucratic constraints, formalities and procedures may be understood, in context, as conditions *for* the existence of executive freedom to act, rather than simply and inevitably as *barriers to* the exercise of such freedom. This point is not simply relevant for the assessment of bureaucracy as an organizational device, but holds a basic warning against the decontextualised importation of any general principle or recommendation. It all depends, seems a useful maxim to hold onto, as does that elaborated by Weber (1989) in *Science as A Vocation*, where he commends detailed empirical description prior to moralising. For contemporary theorists of change, as for some of their predecessors in organizational analysis, a precommitment to values of a certain sort - such as the importance assigned to notions of flexibility, creativity and adaptability above all else - can only lead them to be always already antithetical to bureaucracy in advance of any empirical consideration of this organizational form (Crozier, 1964). That is not necessarily a productive stance to inhabit.

Concluding Comments: On the Lost Specification of 'Change'

In this article, we have argued that there is a pronounced tendency within contemporary organizational analysis to treat 'change' as an existential absolute, a generalized epochal condition, and concomitantly in a highly abstract manner. We have suggested that this general propensity, which takes a number of different forms, depending on theoretical orientation, has resulted in some unfortunate consequences, not least for the empirical grounding and relevance of organizational theory as a practical science of organizing. Utilising the frame provided by Wilfred Bion's notion of 'basic assumptions', and the empirical investigation of 'requisite organization' undertaken by Elliott Jaques and Wilfred Brown, we have sought to indicate how contemporary representations of 'change'

as a generic entity have occluded or otherwise 'disappeared' many of the classical concerns or tropes animating work in the field of Organization Theory, as well as the pragmatic spirit informing them, and to suggest that this shift of perspective and orientation has little to commend it. In particular, we have stressed the importance of recovering a lost 'specificity' when it comes to analyzing 'change' – the revival or recovery of a pragmatic, empirical stance, grounded in the detailed description of content, context, purpose and tools – as a prerequisite for any normative appraisal or critique.

At present in the field of organization studies, as elsewhere in the social and human sciences, rather less prestige or standing appears to flow to such a stance and to the idea of 'piecemeal engineering'(Popper, 1985, p. 304) associated with it, than attaches to more grand and metaphysically inclined theorizing and prescription. This is a pity, we feel, because a strongly contextualist approach, which privileges detailed empirical description over and above theoretical reconstruction or metaphysical speculation (e.g. "change never starts, because it never stops"), gets us closer to the object (in this case, organizations) we seek to analyse, rather than, as in much contemporary theorizing, spiriting it off the stage entirely. As Bruno Latour has put it: "[N]o scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement" (2005, p. 136). In this sense, the empirical stance we advocate does not 'disappear' its object but rather treats it with a degree of concern that more abstract or otherwise 'elevated' theories cannot, because the latter set out their co-ordinates too far in advance and leave no way out from their terms of reference. This tendency, we suggest, exemplified in 'epochalist' approaches to 'change', such as that characterizing the work of Osborne and Gaebler, for instance, has the effect of rendering certain crucial but often (seen from the heights of grand theory, whether managerial or critical in orientation) seemingly banal empirical details insignificant or invisible. Only by underdescribing, decontextualising and 'typologizing' are abstract, generic and metaphysical approaches to 'change' capable of generating whatever rhetorical power they are deemed to possess. And that power should not be underestimated, for, as we have already suggested, a certain prestige or standing seems to attach itself to those versed in the arts of metaphysical 'change' talk.

'Change', though, is not a 'count' noun in the metaphysical sense that it is frequently allotted in much contemporary organizational theorizing, standing in for the same thing throughout all possible modes of usage; constant in its reference. In ordinary everyday parlance, 'change' can mean a host of different things, depending on context of use and preferred project. Indeed, dictionary definitions of change proceed on the assumption that the term always denotes something but not the same thing in every instance. This being the case, then, it seems only possible to ask whether such things as 'organizational change' have the same 'structure' or 'identity' under a certain description. This in turn suggests that we must specify the description *before* the question can be identified. This is a crucial point. For it indicates the importance of the empirical stance, and of detailed description and specificity, to analyzing and understanding any concrete instances of 'change'. And it is precisely such specificity and detailed description that is signally lacking, we suggest, in contemporary theories of change that posit this 'something' as an abstract, generic and constant entity whose dynamics and effects can be posited 'in advance', whether for or against. However, when 'change' is recontextualised and subject to the empirical stance, it can once more be practically related to specific modifications of concrete organizational phenomena (as it was in classic organizational theory): work roles, authority structures, payment systems, production technologies and so on and so forth. This may seem a rather boring proposition, especially when viewed from the dizzy heights of many recent theories of 'change' (including 'radical' critiques of 'change, as well). However, we believe that a revival of the empirical stance in organizational analyses of 'change', with its focus on context specificity, detailed description, a dissatisfaction with and devaluing of explanation by postulate, a pragmatist call to experience, and a ongoing rebellion against high theory, offers an important resource, not least because the adoption of such a stance is a precondition both for effective organizational action, and for the normative evaluation of such action.

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