ephemera | articles
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866
www.ephemeraweb.org
volume 11(4): 387-405

In praise of boredom

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abstract

This paper proposes that, because of the reflexive potential in boredom, boredom at work has some utility for resisting managerialist attempts to colonise the emotional, psychological and spiritual life of employees. Starting with the popular assumption in Organization Theory, and among the powerful, that workers can always do more, we follow Marcuse in seeing exhortations to work ever harder, along with excessive attachment to work, as injurious to the human condition. Taking, as illustration, a recent UK government initiative to encourage employers to 'engage' their workforce in the expectation of higher profits, we characterise it as an exemplar of such exhortations: insincere with respect to the welfare of workers, asymmetric in allocation of anticipated rewards, an attempt to re-write the employment contract and intending to intensify labour. Inspired by 'gay science', we explore the potential of poetry and 'poetic thinking' to offer an alternative language with which to talk about work, boredom and boredom at work.

> I feel more contented when I remember that I have two professions, and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I am bored with one I spend the night with the other. Though this is irregular, it is not monotonous, and besides neither really loses anything through my infidelity. (Anton Chekov, Letter to A.S. Suvorin, Sept 11th 1888)

Introduction

Boredom can be defined, loosely, as what we experience when what we are engaged upon fails to engage us. It may seem strange to 'praise' boredom, because it is clearly 'a bad thing', but, in this paper, we propose that the 'problem' of boredom at work can be turned into an opportunity.[1] We suggest that there is some potential utility in boredom for workers, as a way to resist the ever-increasing demands that are made on them. We seek to adopt a radical – in the sense of 'back to basics' – approach in our portrayal of the conditions of employed work. Organization Theory (OT) can be dichotomised, admittedly rather crudely, into two broad strands: A critical, generally ameliorative, approach and a functionalist orthodoxy that seeks to serve the interests of management. Critical OT displays an unfortunate tendency towards ever-increasing refinement of analysis that sometimes obscures the basic structural conditions of contemporary

1 The inspiration for our title comes from Russell's *In praise of idleness*. It is a happy coincidence that another source of inspiration for this paper, Brodsky, had already used it in a most appropriate context. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference, 'Work, Play and Boredom', May 2010, at St. Andrews University, UK.

employed work, and thus makes it difficult to say anything 'concrete'. The functionalist orthodoxy, on the other hand, indulges in denial of the disparate interests of capital and class, in favour of a surreal world of 'rational' organization, value-neutral management and idealised workers who freely choose to subordinate their own interests to those of 'the organization'. In trying to avoid some of this sterility, we turn, particularly in our discussion of work and boredom, to a literature outside OT: Poetry and 'poetic thinking'. For the sake of clarity we also focus on the eternal constants of organized work, rather than on the infinite variations that characterise, and have always characterised, the conditions and experience of workers and managers. Thus we adopt broad stereotypes of both, typifying 'workers' as people who, generally speaking, work for money and who engage in a constant struggle to maintain and, hopefully, improve their conditions, and 'managers' as those who represent the interests of 'ownership' and who, in service of this interest, resist such claims, unless forced to give way by legislation or scarcity. This is a heuristic device adopted in order to simplify complexity, and does not deny the variations inherent in the categories of 'worker', 'manager' and 'ownership', but parenthesises them for the purposes of our argument.

The joys of work?

Certainly from the time of the Industrial Revolution, if not since time immemorial, 'the worker' has always been seen to possess a latent capacity to do more work, to work harder. A century and a half of OT has furnished a constant supply of 'techniques' designed to unleash this potential, and there is no sign of this supply drying up. It does seem to be assumed, as an eternal verity, that workers will always perform below the level that *could* be achieved, and, by implication, the level that *should* be achieved. Of course, it is not only organization theorists that have identified this 'reservoir of unused energy'. Business leaders, managers, social commentators, politicians, the rich, have also observed this 'phenomenon'. Indeed, the one group that does not, apparently, recognise this particular understanding of what should constitute a 'fair day's work for a fair day's pay' is the workers themselves – they may, as individuals, have a view, of course, but it is likely to be different, and, being neither consistent with the dominant view nor expressed in the appropriate managerial language, also de-legitimated. But it is not entirely the case that workers have been alone in resisting the hegemonic certainty that the *raison d'être* of the worker is to work. It has also, at intervals, been challenged by philosophers and social theorists. For example, in the modern era, Lafargue, in *The right to be lazy* (1883/2002), saw excessive work as an obstacle to human development, both physical and spiritual, and an impediment to active citizenship. Russell, in *In praise of idleness* (1935/1976), noted the aversion of the rich to work while they, notwithstanding, prescribed its benefits for those less fortunate than themselves. More recently, for example, Maier, in *Hello laziness* (2006), has advocated laziness as a way to resist the encroachments of managerialism. From a different perspective, yet augmenting this general view, Foucault's (1977) concept of the dressage functions of labour strongly suggests that the contemporary organization of paid work is characterised by the increasing intensification of increasingly pointless activity as part of the carceral function of the work organization (see also Carter and Jackson, 2005; Jackson and Carter, 1998, 2007a). Our topic here, boredom, however, is unlike any of these, and is also a profoundly personal experience. And, while laziness and idleness are fundamentally inactive states, and dressage requires action under compulsion, boredom presages an active state, because it stimulates the desire to act, to change something.

Sharing the concerns of, among others, the above thinkers, we have argued against increasing the commitment of employees *to*, in favour of increasing detachment *from*, both work and work organization. However, in advocating this increasing detachment, both physically and spiritually, from employed work, we fly in the face of contemporary management, both in theory and in practice, and, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari (eg. 1984: 104), of the latent but potent desire of people to collude in their own oppression. In this collusion, workers facilitate their greater incorporation into the managerial fantasy of 'engineering' the perfect worker and the prospect of achieving the holy grail of a congruency of organizational (sic) and worker goals – and it is worth noting that such congruency would require, not a mutual approach to each other, but that workers should accept unreservedly the corporate vision. In the context of the intensification of labour, an accelerating feature of 'modern management' is the continuing urge on the part of managers to acquire the use of what should properly be the prerogative of the individual worker (broadly speaking, his/her psychological, emotional and spiritual life), thus further facilitating enslavement.

The progress the work organization has made towards the total institution makes the spaces for resistance to the pervasive demands of managers correspondingly smaller. But the incarceration of the corporeal worker in physical, or, more recently, cyber, space has limitations in achieving the 'hearts and minds' acceptance of the corporate vision that is desired by managers. Workers may 'attend' but that does not equate with motivation to work. How necessary, therefore, to engage strategies and techniques with which to corral the *emotional* presence of the worker! Since the earliest days of the 'factoryisation' of work, managers have attempted to make work attractive beyond merely its wage benefit (see, for example, Marglin, 1980). The current vogue for creative play is merely the latest manifestation of this urge. Once something recognisably external and antithetical to the work obligation, play (tellingly, workers used to call a day when the factory was closed through lack of work 'playing a day'), is, ideally, to become synonymous with work.

A modern fairy tale?

The UK government has been running a campaign, aimed at companies, to encourage them to 'engage' their workforce. The full-page advertisement in *The Guardian* newspaper proclaimed:

> An engaged workforce will make a big difference to your business. They'll each take *5* fewer sick days a year and raise profitability by *12%,* as well as productivity by *18%.* This same workforce will also generate *43%* more revenue. And, if you asked them, they'd tell you that they were *87%* less likely to leave. (23.03.2010, emphasis in original)

It is instructive to look at the distribution of benefits from increased engagement[2]. The employer gains significant increases in productivity, revenue and, most importantly, profit. The employee experiences a reduced desire to leave the company, which equates to a reduced cost for the employer, thus contributing to the profit gains. He/she also experiences improved health on five more days per year – or, possibly, just an increased incentive to attend. The claimed gain to the employer is material, while the employee must be satisfied with the less tangible. The claimed benefit to the company is increased profits, while that to the workers is, not surprisingly, only spiritual.

This campaign has been based upon a 157-page report, *Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee involvement* (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009), commissioned by the UK government. The authors do not attempt a comprehensive definition of what they mean by engagement, but they do provide a flavour of it, and stress that it is not what they describe as 'old wine in new bottles'. Although there are 'overlaps' with concepts such as commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviour, and so on, there are also 'crucial differences' (*ibid*.: 9, para. 15). 'In particular, engagement is two way: organizations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer' (*ibid*.: 9, para. 16). Importantly, engagement is also measureable, and correlates with both 'performance' and 'innovation' (*ibid*.: 10, para. 19ff). Engagement is 'a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organization's goals and values, are motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being' (*ibid*.: 9, para. 12). However, in spite of the claims of the authors, there is an overwhelming sense of the all too familiar here.

Coalescing, after World War 2, out of the behaviour modification approach to management, the Organization Development (OD) movement was an approach that sought to engage the 'total worker', utilising the theory and techniques of applied behavioural science. The aim of these techniques was to secure involvement, satisfaction, commitment, and so on, with much emphasis on interaction, and often with the intervention of 'change agents', in the service of developing a responsive organization in the face of a rapidly changing environment. It was a vogue that reflected the ethos of the 1960s, the period of its greatest popularity. A later definition describes it as

> the attempt to influence the members of an organization to expand their candidness with each other about their views of the organization and their experience in it, and to take greater responsibility for their own actions as organization members. The assumption behind OD is that when people pursue both of these objectives simultaneously, they are likely to discover new ways of working together that they experience as more effective for achieving their own and their shared (organizational) goals. And that when this does not happen, such activity helps them to understand why and to make meaningful choices about what to do in light of this understanding. (Nielsen, 1984: 2-3)

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2 For all that you could wish to know about the 'meaning' of 'engagement', see Macleod and Clarke (2009).

We would suggest that 'engagement' is, at best, no more than a reworking of this general approach, but without the rigorous theoretical basis of the original – a kind of 'ordinary language' version of OD, recycled to fit into the very different conditions that pertain half a century later. One of the more surprising aspects of both the campaign and the report on which the campaign rests is the relapse into the sentiments and practices of this OD movement, in an epoch where those at the top of the organizational pile seem to need, and indeed claim to need, unbelievably large cash bonuses to make *them* engage. Seemingly, those at the bottom still do not. The old adage remains true: To make the rich work harder you pay them more, to make the poor work harder you pay them less.

In the 'old days' it felt 'right' for managers to beat more effort out of workers and there is some evidence that this is not altogether history (see, for example, Equality and Human Rights Commission [2010] for such evidence in the UK, and, rather more bizarrely, Ehrenreich, 2009: 103, on what she calls 'motivational spankings'). As workers slowly acquired more protection from employers, the *modest* bonus scheme became, (if piece-work was not viable), the preferred method to 'incentivise' – or, more correctly, 'incite' – workers. During this developing understanding of man(sic)-management, it was still routinely part of the conceptualisation of the relations between employer and employed that there was an inherent conflict of interest between them, each party seeking to optimise their material benefits from the work-effort expended. The advent, in the 1940s and 1950s, typically attributed to Maslow, of the theory that psychological satisfaction could be gained through work spawned the heyday of the motivation-to-work theorists. Conveniently forgetting its clinical origins (see, for example, Maslow, 1943), this theory soon metamorphosed into a theory applicable to an abstracted concept of wage labour. Its use in practice in this form also conveniently omitted the requirement that higher level needs did not kick in until lower level ones were satisfied, a major manifestation of which was an adequate wage. And, as Vroom showed with Expectancy Theory (1964), (a final recognition of the subjectivity of motivation), adequacy of satisfaction of lower level needs is something determined by the worker, not by managers. The widespread perception that, however reasonable a theory Expectancy Theory might be, it is impossible to operationalise in the workplace, is, we have argued elsewhere (Carter and Jackson, 1993), largely attributable to this observation, that motivation to work, as opposed to behaviour, cannot be manipulated by managers, but is a perception of the desirability of the potential rewards offered, *on the part of the worker*.

Inherent plurality of interest, and the role of perception in motivation, created a problem for encouraging the worker to greater effort. This problem was 'solved' with the advent of Human Resource Management by its (unilateral) declaration of the indivisibility of interest amongst those associated with 'the organization' – unitarism, then, usurped pluralism as the operant management 'philosophy'. This allowed the development of the model of the rhetorically re-valorised worker – 'our employees are our most valuable resource' – alongside management techniques that engineered an increasingly infantilised employee (see, for example, Sievers, 1994), a condition necessary to dissuade the workers from questioning 'management's right to manage'. However, it would appear that reducing the workers' autonomy has not encouraged their 'engagement' with the organization. Hence the need for a government initiative.

The work principle?

It is, perhaps, revealing in itself that this is a government initiative. So dominant has the business model of government become that politicians, elected and unelected, see no contradiction in furthering the interests of business without reference to the impacts on the workers, aka the electorate, or a goodly proportion of it, in whose interest they are supposed to govern. Any attempt by labour to improve its condition is routinely resisted and indeed the prevailing political wisdom, in all parties, is still that workers must work harder and longer. Thus, any call to encourage worker 'engagement' assumes that the outcome will be more work. 'Engagement' may improve the sense of well-being in the workers (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) and make them healthier and happier, but it must, firstly, make them more productive. If not, then they must remain unhappy. Managers do not have an absolute desire for their employees to be 'engaged'. If, by 'engaging' them, profits were reduced, then disengaged they would stay. We should not regard expressions of concern for workers as anything other than a desire for more work from them. For that is the purpose of the worker – to work, to *perform*.

Why do we work? What are its attractions for us? From a psychoanalytical perspective, drawing upon the work of Freud, Marcuse (1969) labelled the current form of the Freudian reality principle 'the *performance principle*'. In its earlier form, the reality principle is what gets us out of bed in the morning and off to the, actual or metaphorical, 'factory'. For Freud, '(n)o other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; ... And yet, as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men (sic)' (1930/1963: 17, note 1). We go to work to earn our daily bread, to bring home the bacon. Because of this manifold existential necessity, we forgo the pleasures we desire – the pleasure principle gives way to the reality principle as the 'manager' of our motivation. We forgo *immediate satisfaction, pleasure, joy (play), receptiveness, absence of repression*, and seek *delayed satisfaction, restraint of pleasure, toil (work), productiveness, security* (Marcuse, 1969: 30). However, once we have enough to ensure that we can reproduce ourselves, then surely we revert to, at least in part, the pleasure principle? Not so. The reality principle is re-established as the performance principle, 'which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society', 'stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members' (Marcuse, 1969: 50). Under these conditions, to satisfy the demands of social control, the carceral function of the work organization, and, more subtly, the demands of consumerism, wages must be kept low enough to ensure that workers must work, and this work must occupy 'practically the entire existence of the mature individual' (Marcuse, 1969: 45), notwithstanding that the economic affluence of modern society makes this imperative no longer necessary. In contemporary society, the imperative derives, not from primordial scarcity, that which makes the reality principle inescapable, but from a manufactured, organized, scarcity which ensures that workers remain workers. However, the work performed is no longer linked directly to satisfying the existential needs of the worker, but is an abstracted, alienated work, designed to satisfy the desires of the manager. The opportunity cost of performing, for the worker, is much greater than the time and effort expended – work-incarceration also dehumanises. Marcuse suggests (1969: 52) that employment and what we might think of as maintenance activities – sleeping, eating, etc. – leave us only about four hours per day for experiencing the pleasure principle. But even this is contaminated by work, as the pleasure principle does not function at the convenience of externally imposed time constraints. The more we are 'captured' by the logic of work, the less opportunity for resisting the performance principle.

We can now see that 'engagement' is merely another aspect of performance, and of the performance principle. And this is not just a rhetorical point. Marcuse comments that the performance principle and its concomitant, surplus repression, produce 'a destructive dialectic: The perpetual restrictions on Eros ultimately weaken the life instincts and thus strengthen and release the very forces against which they were 'called up' – those of destruction [Thanatos] (1969: 50). Perhaps it is even some very dim recognition of this that underlies the increasingly relentless exhortations to positive thinking, to which requirements for 'engagement' at work belong: We need pleasure, so, as work comes to occupy more and more of our time, thus allowing fewer and fewer opportunities for the pursuit of pleasure outside work – in any case, an illusory 'freedom from toil' because already colonised by the demands of work (see, for example, Marcuse, 1969: 51) – we should find our life-enhancing pleasure *within* work.

The purpose of encouraging engagement is, in effect, yet another attempt to rewrite the employment contract in favour of the employer. A wage-labour system of employment is eminently simple. One party has a task that they wish to have done by someone other than themselves and can afford to pay for such a service. The other party needs the payment in order to survive. The only detail to be resolved is how much work for how much pay? There is no reason why the employee should share the employer's views about the necessity, desirability or value of the work to be done. In fact, it is not even necessary for the worker to know the purpose of the work they do. (In contemporary organizations, it is not even necessary for the employer, in the shape of the owner, to know what their employees do, or why they do it, or even who they are.) However, it is not really surprising that there are benefits to both parties from having a commitment and involvement beyond the minimum contractual one. The unresolved question is, how are these benefits to be shared? As noted, the preferred distribution is material benefits to capital and spiritual ones to labour. As people work for money – whatever the claims of some managers who have been exposed to motivation-to-work theory – extra work for no extra pay is a form of the rate-cutting so prevalent in piece-work systems, and from which workers have traditionally had to protect themselves. However, whereas workers are immediately sensitive to relative reductions in wages, they are less secure when the reduction is achieved through 'engaging' their interest and commitment. There is, of course, no law preventing employers sharing the material benefits of increased engagement, but this does not seem to have much attraction for them. Even if there is held to be some balance between the gains of material and spiritual benefit, there is no balance of effort – it is not a win-win situation. The employers' gains cost them nothing, the workers' gains mean more work for them. It is, then, not putting it too strongly to say that it is dangerous for the worker to be seduced by the promise of increased satisfactions for which there is no contractual benefit, whereas it is something-for-nothing for the employer. And once the worker becomes 'engaged', their ability to resist exploitation diminishes. (For a cautionary, Weberian, analysis of some of these issues, see also Andersen and Born, 2007.)

The dismal science versus the gay science

Much of OT, explicitly or implicitly, is concerned with improving organizational efficiency. While it is not difficult to agree that the purpose of organization is to improve on 'nature' by reducing entropy and utilising the benefits of cooperation – organization creates an artificial order and allows groups to do what individuals cannot do by themselves – it is much more difficult to justify the arising implied claim that the *raison d'être* of organizing is an absolute efficiency. In the realm of physics there may be an absolute measurable efficiency, but that is not the case in human systems. To be sure, some claim a cardinal organization science where all is quantifiable and where efficiency is precise and knowable, but even within a generally positivist OT this is seen as an extreme fundamentalist position. Mainstream OT is usually content with more ordinal measures. There, improved efficiency is claimed by asserting that the presence of one thing is better than its absence, or *vice versa*. However, either case suffers from a sad delusion: Efficiency, as all can agree, is the relationship between inputs and outputs, but what cannot be specified in organization involving people is what, objectively (or scientifically), *constitutes* inputs and outputs. Reckonable inputs and outputs, we would argue, are determined, ultimately, not by science, but by power (see, for example, Jackson and Carter, 2007b: Chapter 10). It is inescapably the case, then, that any OT that makes claims to improve organizational efficiency is pursuing a normative goal, is not value-free science and is serving some particular interest. By that logic, other goals are possible, such as optimising human happiness, and/or organising for an ecologically viable planet, or, more sinisterly, for the subjugation of certain groups. The prioritisation of improving efficiency as the purpose of OT locates it as properly part of the science of the efficient allocation of resources: Economics, also known as 'The Dismal Science'.

This phrase, now widely used (even by economists [see, eg. Marglin, 2008]), to describe economics, is commonly taken to have originated in a rather strange – not to mention appalling, and not just to modern sensibilities – essay by Thomas Carlyle (1849), *Occasional discourse on the negro question*[3]. In this essay, Carlyle was lamenting the reduction of government to the laissez-faire application of supply and demand. He insisted that governance needs to be contained within a moral framework, which he saw as having been denied by what we would now call economics (in effect, the metamorphosis of political economy into economics?). The point that he seeks to make is that it ought not to be possible to have an economic system that is, or that is claimed to be, independent of an ethical position (for example, that claims to be scientific in the most rigorous sense of 'science'). It is possible to agree with this point, irrespective of whether one agrees with the particular value position that Carlyle

3 Carlyle's essay is extremely controversial, as it is, on the face of it, an unsavoury, racist, pro-slavery diatribe. However, Carlyle obscures his own opinions by constructing the text as a report of a speech by an unidentified speaker, by a writer whose landlady discovered and published it, in lieu of unpaid rent when the writer absconded! This has led some to see the essay as satirical comment on the unrelieved condition of the unemancipated English working poor. However, a later re-working of the essay as the *Occasional discourse on the nigger question* (1853) tends to negate this interpretation. Carlyle's preferred value system, which he sees as truth rather than opinion, is a singularly unpleasant Christianity, but this should not, in itself, detract from the utility in his view of laissez-faire economics as the Dismal Science.

proposes – this caveat, of course, stresses the point that all value positions represent a selection from a plurality of possibilities, multiplicities, not objective truths. Carlyle's insistence that society is not, and should not be regarded as, synonymous with 'the market' still resonates. However, Carlyle saw work as a moral imperative for man (sic), as a good in itself, especially for those lower down in the Great Chain of Being – the workers, slaves or not.

John Stuart Mill, responding to Carlyle's essay with *The negro question*, sees work as

> not a good in itself. There is nothing laudable in work for work's sake… The worth of work does not surely consist in its leading to other work, and so on to work upon work without end. (Mill, 1850: 4)

And yet it is precisely this idea that informs much of contemporary OT – a dismal science, indeed. We live in a curious world where our well-being requires an endless economic growth fuelled, in part, by increasing effort from workers. This is facilitated by a compliant OT, various forms of official propaganda and an educational system ever more geared to producing employees. However, it appears that all this economic activity – work-fuelled consumption – is driving our planet to the brink of runaway global warming. Part of the problem of even beginning to address such issues, and, in particular, the role of organization and of work in both problem and solution, is that the very language of this OT is imbued with its commitment to 'improving organizational efficiency', integral to which is a belief in the necessity for ever increasing production and productivity, for work and more work. This language, thereby, severely constrains what it is possible to say about work. To speak to such problems, therefore, we need a 'new' language. Where, then, might we look for inspiration, to find an alternative vocabulary with which to talk about work in the contemporary context of organization? There is, of course, a paradigm of critique encompassing, *inter alia,* philosophy, political theory and a sector of OT. Yet a distinguishing feature of this paradigm is its intellectual distance from that of which it speaks: The worker experience – we have, for example, the autonomist 'refusal of work', Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs' (1984 passim), the idea of 'authenticity', both in its rigorous existentialist, and in its new-ageist, usage. Though useful in its context, this language is not yet enough.

Carlyle opposes his Dismal Science to Gay Science, but this is a term now more commonly associated with the work of Nietzsche. The idea of a Gay Science originated in medieval Provence and can be seen as, in modern parlance (but without capturing anything of its significance), a holistic approach to poetry and life. The full title of the most relevant book by Nietzsche is '*The gay science, with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*', (1887/1974) and it is indeed a book replete with aphorisms, poems and songs. Nietzsche described it as 'a bit of merry-making' (1974: 32) and 'awesomely aweless' (1974: 33), yet it is firmly based on his argument that science, the 'serious, disciplined, rigorous quest for knowledge', does not have to be 'stodgy, heavy, dusty' (Kaufmann, 1974: 5), but can 'sing and sizzle' (Kaufmann, 1974: 13). An alternative translation of 'gay science' is 'joyous science', and it is a concept that has profoundly influenced later thinkers, notably the poststructuralists (see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari [1986]). However, the original phrase, '*gai saber*' is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* simply as 'the art of poetry'. It is the Gay Science with which we wish to align ourselves here.

Banville (2011: 20) notes that, for Kafka, 'the artist ... is the one who has nothing to say. By which he means that art, true art, carries no message, has no opinion, does not attempt to coerce or persuade, but simply – simply! – bears witness'. This suggests that the 'language' of art, and, for our purposes here, particularly the language of poetry, may be a very appropriate one to counter the economistic language of OT. The possible connections between poetry and organizational analysis are well-recognised. In a special issue of the journal *Management Decision* (2006) – part of an ongoing project which focuses on the potential relation between poetry and management – Saunders offers an extensive discussion on the nature of poetry and role of poets. She talks about poetry's 'capacity to carry epistemic as well as (self-)expressive value, to liberate as well as to describe the full panoply of practice' (Saunders, 2006: 506) and the poet's 'freedom from fashion's oppression and from particular cults and allegiances' (Saunders, 2006: 507). Her argument is that 'because our language is polluted and impotent, a poet's task is also to cleanse the language' and, particularly relevant to our own argument later, that poetry has 'an unnerving capacity to open up an empty, vibrating space at the centre of things' (Saunders, 2006: 507). In an amusing illustration of the poet's need to write, *The poet's call*, Nietzsche (1974: 355) likens poetry's evocations to 'deadly little arrows', at least as far as poetry that rhymes! Not something we find in OT, other than perhaps as a sense of dread. In short, we want to propose that poets and poetry can give us the possibility of a different language in which to speak of the labour process, one that has not already been colonised by OT, a language that does not necessarily speak of 'work upon work without end', a language that might make it possible to begin to discuss Mill's argument (1850: 4) that '(t)o reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence is as needful as to distribute it more equally', not least because his view that progress in science, justice and good sense would bring this about is yet to be realised.

Larkin(g) about

According to the poet and Nobel Laureate, Joseph Brodsky, poetry is 'the soul's search for its release in language' (1991: xii) or, as Seamus Heaney, perhaps more prosaically, puts it, 'poetry ... kick[s] in like an emergency power system to reinforce the self, besieged as it is by [the] constant clamour and distraction of circumstance', adding that poetry helps '…the individual to credit the validity of personal experience and intuition' (Heaney, 2004: 14). Thus, when we are besieged by the 'constant clamour and distraction' of work, an everyday experience, poetry legitimates our sense of being human rather than just a worker, authenticates our experience and affirms our understanding of being. And it does so in a language which we can make our own, rather than one that makes of us victims, and objects, as the language of OT, and, especially, managers, talking about, *inter alia,* work does, because, there, we are talked *about* in a language that we do not share (see Lyotard, 1988). Primo Levi likened work – '*le boulot'*, the daily grind – to a 'boundless region…less known than the Antarctic' (1988: 80). This ought to be shocking, given the vast amount of study on the subject represented by OT, but is not when one considers that, mainstream or critical, it is still, overwhelmingly, one group writing about another in a language they do not share (see also Levi, 1988: 80), even if some of it is sympathetic.

When one reads of worker experience of work, of which there is a rich store, we find a language very different to that of OT. And, unsurprisingly, poets, too, have a lot to say about work, also in a very different language to that of OT. Thus, in the autobiographical novels of the poet Charles Bukowski, *Post office* (1971/1984) and *Factotum* (1975/1982), we see in his depiction of his experience of work nothing at all that resonates with either Functionalist OT or its critique. It is, however, the poet and University Librarian, Philip Larkin, who has furnished us with one of the most accessible and memorable images of *le boulot* in his poem *Toads* (Larkin, 2003: 62 emphasis in original):

> Why should I let the toad *work*
> Squat on my life? …
> Six days of the week it soils
> With its sickening poison …

He answers his own question in another, unfinished, poem (Larkin,1988: 69):

> At thirty one when some are rich
> And others dead,
> I, being neither, have a job instead …

Larkin was part of The Movement, a literary group with a commitment to writing about the experienced world in a language that was accessible. He is uncompromising in affirming that, for those of us who are not of independent means (or dead), there is little alternative to work, though work may be neither pleasant nor desired. This, perhaps somewhat nihilistic, view may seem surprising in an artist, a group popularly thought to be ready to suffer for their art at the economically barren margins. But Larkin the realist, in *Toads revisited* (2003: 90), finds no attraction in the unwaged life, which he sees as the domain of the sick and the lame, the no-hopers (it should be borne in mind that this poem dates from 1962, a time when full, even overfull, employment was the norm):

> No, give me my in-tray,
> My loaf-haired secretary …

The tension between not wanting to work for a living, yet wanting the benefits of having a job – the income, security and social aspects that, realistically, can only come through selling his labour – is a recurring theme in Larkin's poetry (see, for example, *The life with a hole in it* (2003: 187) and *Aubade* (2003: 190)). *Toads* again:

> Ah, were I courageous enough
> To shout Stuff your pension!
> But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
> That dreams are made on …

And, again, in *Toads revisited*:

> Give me your arm, old toad;
> Help me down Cemetery Road.

One could hardly wish for a more succinct and evocative expression of the dilemmas that work poses for most people! Larkin acknowledges that, for him, as for most of us, working, though not a life, is *for* life (see also Motion, 1982). Indeed, according to Bradford (2005), Larkin dreaded retirement (incidentally, a state which he never managed to achieve). In Larkin's poetry, contra OT, there is no room for the romanticism of 'self-actualisation', of 'shared goals', of 'engagement'. For Larkin, work, as life in general, comprises a catalogue of equally pointless routines (see, for example, *Vers de société* (2003: 147-8)). As he expresses it in *Dockery and Son* (2003: 108-9), 'Life is first boredom, then fear'.[4]

In a *festschrift* published the year after Larkin's death, Maitre revisits Larkin's *Toads* in a poem entitled *Dodging the toad* (1986: 18-19):

> No, give me your arm, old toad;
> I'd break it if I could!

This is a sentiment that expresses rather more resistance to the demands of work, though one that Larkin would probably have appreciated. There is an extensive academic literature on resistance in organizations. Fleming and Spicer (2007: 29) point out that resistance is a normal reaction to the exercise of power, in whatever form. They also point out that resistance is not an external facticity, but a heuristic construct used by the researcher in the analysis of observed behaviour – it is an empirical-analytic construct. Since our concern here is non-empirical and synthetic, even prescriptive, we do not intend to explore this literature further. However, the concept itself is useful to our argument. Resistance does not have to seek to change the world; it can be no more than small acts that provide a source of transient satisfaction, small private denials of power, of the encroachments of the desires of others. Resistance does not even have to be a conscious reaction to be effective – yet it is still resistance. When the encroachments are the attempt to colonise the interior life of the worker for the service of the organization, to impose definitions of self-hood (for example, as worker, rather than individual), resisting this, protecting one's own sense of self, perhaps even re-defining that in opposition to the demands of work, can be experienced as a pressing necessity. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1825, in Gardner, 1972) poignantly puts it:

> Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
> And Hope without an object cannot live.

'Engagement' can be seen as part of an increasingly general trend to encourage the worker to depend on the work organization, not just for economic well-being, but also for emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being. If this level of incorporation is to be challenged, what will serve as an antidote? One possibility, we would suggest, is to resort to boredom.

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4 Larkin is often viewed as a misogynistic reactionary, even rather unpleasant, but this is a rather simplistic, over-attenuated, view, and, on the 25th anniversary of his death, his reputation is undergoing considerable rehabilitation. He was well-regarded as a University Librarian, a noted jazz critic, a talented photographer and managed to conduct at least three affairs of the heart at the same time (see, for example, Bradford, 2005).

First boredom, then...?

Boredom has long been a topic of interest to thinkers. To the ancients, as a manifestation of *acedia* – 'the noon-day sin' – and dangerous to the soul, it was linked to sloth and apathy – indeed, it was considered to be 'the worst sin, since all other sins derived from it' (Svendsen, 2005: 17). Later it was seen as a particular affliction of the wealthy. Some see it as the defining quality of the modern age. Noting that boredom has been of little interest to, for example, psychology and psychiatry, and that it has become the 'preserve' of philosophy and literature, Svendsen provides a long, but nonetheless, as he notes, incomplete, list of prominent writers from these areas who have written about boredom, precisely to make the point that all of them belong to 'the modern age' (2005: 20). It is also worth noting here that, in English, this particular sense of the words 'bore' and 'boredom' have very uncertain etymology and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, did not appear with this sense before the eighteenth century, and the first appearance of the word 'boredom' is credited, even later than that, to Charles Dickens, in his novel *Bleak House* (1852). This seems to reinforce the idea that boredom is a characteristically modern state of mind. It is possible to suggest that the concept, and the quality, of 'being bored' emerged in parallel with the onset of industrialisation: In the pre-industrial period workers worked in accordance with the seasons and the demands, and constraints, of nature, oscillating between, for example, manufacturing and agriculture, or fishing, and working considerably fewer hours on average than they did after industrialisation, and, indeed, than we do now (see, for example, Thompson, 1968). With industrialisation, and its concomitant 'factoryisation', workers also lost any control over the process of work. Weber notes of this period that

> (a) man (sic) does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose. Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalistic labour. (1930/1976: 60)

In losing this struggle and, at the same time, losing a previous identity as producers, becoming objectified as workers, 'boredom' became a meaningful concept.

For Svendsen, boredom is about lack of personal meaning, though also 'not just a state of mind; it is also a characteristic of the world' (2005: 15). He proposes that '(b)oredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied' (2005: 30), and that this sense arises because we are given such meaning – (or rather, it is imposed on us) – whereas, on the contrary, it is something that we need to construct for ourselves. He particularly links boredom to the passing of time, since, in his view, '(b)oredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do' (2005: 19). However, it is also clear that boredom is, or can be, a stimulus to action, invention, creativity – it has what Russell (1930/2006: 35) called 'motive powers'. This observation is common to many discussions of boredom. Russell further argues that 'a certain power of enduring boredom is ... essential to a happy life ...' (1930/2006: 39).

In any case, there is, among thinkers, a wide degree of consensus that boredom is a normal part of the human condition, that it focuses thought on the problem of existence, and that it stimulates the desire to escape, not least from boredom itself. Boredom is widely seen as a stimulus to reflection. For example, for Heidegger, boredom, 'drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog' (1929/1998: 87), forces us to confront *both* the emptiness, *and* the possibilities, of existence. Boredom, the 'being-left-empty' and the 'being-held-in-suspense', is profoundly constitutive of Dasein, a defining characteristic of '*humanitas*'. As Agamben puts it, 'Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation' (2004: 70, emphasis in original). In a different literary sphere, Tolstoy (1995: 462) evocatively describes boredom as 'the desire for desires'.

Boredom is a very personal experience. For example, seeking the very epitome of boredom, Heidegger describes having to spend a few hours on a 'tasteless station of some lonely minor railway', waiting for a train (1995: 93). However, the poet John Betjeman (1962), in similar circumstances, experiences the very opposite emotion. While Heidegger speaks of his lack of interest in the surroundings, an inability to read or think, counting the trees, studying the notices and doodling in the sand, Betjeman can think of no more pleasant place to be, experiencing the railway poster (incidentally, advertising the delights of Bavaria) as 'delicious' and finding delight in the station's lilac tree. Boredom is, clearly, peculiar to the individual. Even so, it may, like enthusiasm, be 'infectious'. But, in the context of employed work, employers can use and gain from *enthusiasm*; *boredom*, on the other hand, defeats them. It is personal and protected. 'The organization' cannot make use of it. It is because of this that boredom can form a base for resistance to the demands of management. It gives the worker the opportunity to 'buy out' of the corporate vision. *Disengagement* from the corporate fantasy world creates space in which to regain an identity that is not derived from the wishes of management, rather than existing as an idealised corporate labour-unit. Boredom stimulates awareness of the life outside the organization.

We are not, of course, advocating boredom as a way of life, but merely as a useful antidote to exploitation at work. Indeed, as is already well-known, boredom is a salient feature of modern work, but it is almost universally regarded within the organizational literature as in need of remedial treatment in order to optimise the productive potential of the worker – boredom can be *cured*. This kind of approach is common in discussions of boredom, ranging from the academic journal to the broadsheet press. Thus Fisher, for example, makes the point that boredom at work can afflict any occupation or profession, but sees it as a problem with 'serious consequences' (1993: 395) and concludes that 'the *right* responses to boredom might be functional to both the individual and the organization' (1993: 414, our emphasis). More recently, Mann, for example, talks about the need for 'boredom busters', because boredom at work 'has been associated with a range of negative outcomes including poor performance' (2007: 92). Hollis (2007), emphasising evidence that high-flyers do not like feeling bored and tend to move on, cites strategies for dealing with boredom on offer from management consultants. It is not surprising that consultancies may see advantages to offering 'solutions' to the 'problem' of boredom in the workplace – there is money to be made out of 'curing' boredom, and it seems to be a booming market.

However, the poet Joseph Brodsky (1995) has a more constructive approach. Giving the Commencement Address at Dartmouth College in 1989 (a liberal arts institution that, interestingly, includes one of the most prestigious business schools), Brodsky took the opportunity to warn his audience, to prepare them for the eventuality that '(a) substantial part of what lies ahead of you is going to be claimed by boredom' (Brodsky, 1995: 104). Boredom, Brodsky proposes, is to be embraced as a natural human experience, if only as the precursor to something better. Boredom provides a space for contemplating things of desire, things to strive for. Nonetheless, these things, if achieved, will only give a transient satisfaction, because, he argues, boredom *cannot* be cured. So, to experience boredom is not to be suffering from some pathological condition, psychological or moral. According to Brodsky,

> (w)hen hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is, the sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface. The idea here ... is to exact full look at the worst. The reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendor. ... (B)oredom is your window on the properties of time that one tends to ignore *to the likely peril of one's mental equilibrium*. (Brodsky 1995: 108-9, emphasis added)

He adds, 'It puts your existence into its proper perspective…' (*ibid*.: 109).

Some things at work just *are* boring, perhaps inherently, or perhaps as a reflection of our own emotional condition, transient or otherwise. Either way, boredom is something for us to experience, not something to be proscribed, treated or legislated against by managers. In the way that enthusiasm cannot be demanded of us, other than at the level of the signifier, so our boredom cannot be banished by fiat – or by some behaviour modification technique furnished by OT. After all, if our job is boring, whose fault is that? Not that of the workers. Job design is the prerogative of management. If managers have so little regard for our capabilities that, as Morgan (1997: 312) noted, many people exercise more skill in driving to work, than they do *at* work, why shouldn't we be bored? Has not deskilling been an essential part of the expansion of management control over workers for decades? Reversing the trend would loosen the grip of managers on the productive process – not a prospect for which they have ever shown any enthusiasm. This is what makes calls for 'engagement' nothing more than the prescription of a placebo – workers might feel better, but the underlying conditions have not been remedied. Indeed, one might suggest that to start to believe that what is boring is actually engaging could indicate a much more worrying development!

Brodsky makes the point that '...what's good about boredom, about anguish and the sense of meaninglessness of your own, of everything else's existence, is that it is not a deception' (1995: 111).

It might have been wondered why the UK government's initiative, deriving from the work of MacLeod and Clarke (2009) the government commissioned, is aimed at employers rather than at employees, if they too have so much to gain from 'engagement'. We would suggest that, perhaps, the answer is that, for the worker, 'engagement' is just another exploitative technique that is very unlikely to deliver even spiritual gains to them – it will be, precisely, yet another deception. As is implied by Brodsky's essay, whether, in our daily existence, we are bored or enthusiastic, engaged or otherwise, has significance beyond the mere experience of such emotions, because they are part of the window onto understanding our very existence. In the contemporary world of work it is still all too often assumed by the powerful that it is part of their prerogatives to define what constitutes meaningfulness for, in this case, members of work organizations. But meaningfulness cannot be defined by an other. To embrace boredom at work may be a step towards resisting such attempts to impose repressive, inauthentic, deceptive definitions of who we are. The more we identify with work in 'their' terms, the more entrapped in the Performance Principle we become.

Conclusion

We started this paper with a quotation from Chekov, which also has the value of pointing out that boredom at, or with, work is no respecter of profession. But most people do not have the luxury of Chekov's two 'loves'. For them, the commonly proposed 'cure' for boredom at work is, in effect, more work, but this surely cannot represent an escape. Nietzsche, writing about 'work and boredom' (1974: 108-9) and 'leisure and idleness' (1974: 258-60), waxes lyrical in his critique of the conditions of employed work (and he was writing in 1887, but what he describes is just as recognisable in contemporary conditions). He notes that, for most people, 'work is a means and not an end in itself' (*ibid*.: 108), and that end is the wage. But 'chasing after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion', and the emphasis on work and more work, the urge towards doing 'anything rather than nothing' is driving out joy – joy becomes suspect, 'ashamed of itself', culture is 'throttled': 'more and more, *work* enlists all good conscience on its side' (*ibid*.: 259, emphasis in original). But some people, such as 'artists and contemplative men (sic)', 'would rather perish than work without any *pleasure* in their work', and these people 'do not fear boredom as much as work without pleasure': Boredom should not be warded off at all costs, it is 'that disagreeable "windless calm" of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds' (*ibid*.: 108, emphasis in original). Boredom is a necessary prelude to thinking, to creativity, to what might be called a civilised life.

Given the limited opportunities for workers to opt out of the managerial 'regime of truth', we propose the therapeutic benefits of boredom at work. We champion Russell's argument, that work should be seen as just 'a necessary means to a livelihood' and that, for workers, 'it is from their leisure hours that they [should] derive whatever happiness they may enjoy' (1976: 21). Rather than trying to make work appealing to the senses and to last as long as can be borne, it should bore workers to the extent that they demand as little as possible of it. How much better to do four hours per day of tedious but useful toil, than to do eight hours of pleasurable but significantly useless work? Of course, as noted above, much work contains much that is already boring – what is required is to reject the managerial verity that boredom is both remediable and a dysfunctional response on the part of the worker (in a 'properly managed' organization), which thus places the responsibility for feeling bored onto the worker and characterises it as a shameful lack of commitment to corporate values. Boredom, when functioning correctly, really should generate the desire to escape from work to something more pleasurable, rather than the obligation to re-educate one's priorities. Benjamin (2002: 105) suggests that '(w)e are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for'. Contra Benjamin, we define boredom *at work* as knowing precisely what we are waiting for: Finishing-time!

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the authors

Norman Jackson:

Lack of fortune, need to labour,
Life of Engineer I quest,
Solving problems, building structures,
Looking for solution best.
Then one day the revelation
comes from high, from God is sent.
'Engineering is not holy,
What I bless is management'.
Study further –Myers and Maslow
Theory X and Theory Y.
'Man works not for bread alone'
That is what the 'experts' cry.
Management? 'A good career move'
Frontier pushing, where it's at.
Earning plenty, ruling 'millions'
And, at thirty, getting fat.
What's the problem?, feeling weary,
Nothing works that I can see.
Management's a load of bollocks.
Better do a PhD!
Now at last unfit to labour
in a good and worthy job.
Better take the only option.
Go and join the uni-mob.
Undergraduates; MBAs;
RAEs, and 'long vacation'
Then I learn the awful truth
What's holy is administration.
Early retirement? Snatch their hand off,
Forget about the doubt that lingers.
Managers, the lot, you keep 'em
What a chance to wave two fingers.
Now at Leicester, come to harbour,
Heat of sun no more to fear.
Visiting Fellow. Lovely people,
Treat me well and buy me beer.

Pippa Carter:

Lost for words.
A like trajectory,
without the engineering bit.
Visiting Fellow, Leicester.

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