ephemera | reviews
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866
www.ephemeraweb.org
volume 10(1): 82-85

The potential of vulnerability

Cecilia Cassinger

review of: Cavarero, A (2009) *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence,* trans. W. McCuaig. Columbia University Press (PB: 169 pages, 15,50 £, ISBN: 978-0-231-14457-5).

The global financial crisis recently exposed the uncertain conditions of the capitalist system reminding us of the vulnerability of both life itself and of capital. Capital organises labour relations that nowadays extend beyond the grasp of the nation-state (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 236). While in the past the economic fate of citizens was secured within national territory, the stability and growth of capital is now linked to a mode of governing that operates through the sovereignty of individuals, which enables people to conduct themselves as entrepreneurs with skills and flexibility (Rose, 1996: 160). Human relations techniques and the language of organisational psychologists contributed to constructing the workplace as a realm in which self-promotional activities to foster individual sovereignty were developed (Rose, 1996: 160). At the same time, as Sennett (1998) notes, the introduction of concepts such as flexibility and decentralisation in the workplace instigated feelings of unease and disorientation in the lives of workers. To seek ways out of this unease, attempts have been made to open up spaces from which to examine the limitations of liberal accounts of humanity and to explore alternative forms of subjectivity that are not grounded in individualism. In relation to such endeavours, the political philosopher Adriana Cavarero's recent book *Horrorism* makes an important contribution.

The book attempts to rethink the individualistic ontology of 19th century political philosophy, on which the modern welfare state and by extension modern forms of organisation rest. Cavarero argues that the language of political science fails to account for the contemporary violence that is currently spreading across the world in unprecedented forms (Cavarero, 2009: 2). According to Cavarero, what is novel in the so-called war on terror is that the categories of combatants/non-combatants, enemy/criminal, and us/them are blurred and replaced by larger categories (e.g. the free world vs. the axis of evil), leading to a higher degree of indiscriminate and random violence against citizens. She maintains that terror is internal to the sovereign state founded on Thomas Hobbes' thesis in *Leviathan*, which equates social order with peace

and security (Cavarero, 2009: 80). In its effects, however, the terror necessary for securing the sovereign state transforms itself into an ontological crime - against being - targeted at destroying the uniqueness that Cavarero, after Hannah Arendt, regards as constitutive of the human condition. In suicide attacks, she observes, the vulnerability of the human condition is expressed with particular clarity, since they unexpectedly occur in the midst of everyday life. These attacks are difficult to predict and strike against those with no means of defending themselves. When the deadly violence coincides with the helplessness of the victims, acts of terror turn into horror.

In the seventeen brief chapters that comprise the book, Cavarero outlines the neologism of 'horrorism' that she suggests is better suited to account for contemporary violence than the established concepts of terror and war. In order to delineate horrorism, she traces the articulation of horror in ancient Greek texts and writings in the modern age by, most notably, George Bataille, Primo Levi, and Hannah Arendt. Enclosed in an appendix is an interesting reading of the works of Joseph Conrad, where the argument seems to culminate in the observation that horrorism involves the overlapping of means and ends, victim and perpetrator, in the valorisation of a primitive innocence. The methodology Cavarero uses in revealing the nature of horrorism is instructive for organisation theorists interested in critical methods. She describes this particular method as undoing 'the master's house using his own tools' and reading with 'bad intentions' (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008: 134, 137). Reading with bad intentions involves re-signifying sacred concepts and figures in influential texts by means of strategically resituating them (Cavarero, 1995: 5). The aim is to intervene in the symbolic order to accomplish radical change, particularly with reference to the way that the feminine is traditionally cast within philosophy (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008). In this way, Cavarero advances the poststructuralist project by engaging in a productive form of deconstruction. Accepted truths are not rejected but strategically rethought, which is consistent with the ambition to rework conventional representations.

A central task in *Horrorism* is to rework the archetype of the mother by demonstrating how its traditional association with care is intimately entwined with the destructive nature of violence. There is something repugnant about horror that makes the body paralyzed. In part, Cavarero relates this repugnance to the observation that physical violence is increasingly carried out by women, who we tend to associate with concern rather than brutality. The female face of horror is made visible through the telling of stories of perpetrators and victims: teenage girls blowing themselves up in mundane environments like the supermarket, a father collecting the pieces of his daughter's mutilated body after a suicide attack, a group of naked prisoners subjected to torture by pony-tailed female soldiers smiling at the camera. In shifting the perspective from the anonymous casualties of war to the embodied experiences of violence, Cavarero concretises the abstractness of war by revealing its voices, smells, slaughters, and bodies.

Horrorism describes the consequences of offending the ontology of uniqueness that Cavarero has previously expanded on at greater length (e.g. Cavarero, 1995; 2000; 2002). In order to find a way between the universal (male) subject and the postmodern fragmented self, Cavarero develops a particular ontology pieced together from Arendt's

thinking of the political and the sexual difference perspective of Luce Irigaray. To Arendt's argument that speech becomes political not through what it designates but on account of the self-revelation of the speaker in action, Cavarero adds a focus on the corporeal (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008). In contrast to Judith Butler, for whom the conception of singularity is formed on social normativity and therefore involves a degree of substitutability (Butler, 2005: 33), Cavarero's conception of uniqueness refers to an absolute singularity. This argument is made possible by grounding singularity in the corporeal rather than in language. Uniqueness, then, means that the materiality of the body is performed in relation to another body. The exposure to the other is what constitutes the singular self and what defines him or her in a corporeal sense. In this way, our social existence is dependent on an exposure to and recognition by others, since it is in this relation that our uniqueness is revealed (Butler, 2005: 33). In horrorism, uniqueness is destroyed by means of the random dismemberment of bodies. Examples of the removal of uniqueness is found in the mixing up of body parts in suicide attacks to the extent that they become inseparable, the piles of naked bodies of prisoners in the torture scenes from Abu Ghraib reducing the individual body to limbs, and the extreme dehumanisation that took place in Nazi concentration camps. In other words, horrorism is found in those places where there is a lack of an exposure to and recognition by an other. Exposing oneself to an other is about making oneself vulnerable to the judgements of others, which is precisely what horrorism precludes. Understood in a corporeal sense, vulnerability involves recognising that human subjects are mutually vulnerable and that we are dependent on others for survival.

Even though Cavarero does not engage directly in a discussion of biopolitics, there are interesting parallels between horrorism and governmentality in advanced capitalism. As a mode of governing, sovereignty insists on the independence of the subject and so prevents the exposure of vulnerability. Horrorism installs itself at the point where the relations to others and to the self are made impossible by a subject that has become invulnerable. Cavarero takes Primo Levi's figure of the Musselmann as the extreme image of the invulnerable subject who is detached from all human relations. She writes:

> The aberrant final production of the invulnerable makes use of techniques, atrociously coherent, that begin by removing from vulnerability that relational dimension in which it consists. You could even say that the celebrated struggle of all against all depicted by Hobbes, far from being a state of nature, was instead an artificial condition that the Nazi system of horror, vastly exceeding the imagination of the English philosopher produced in the twentieth century. (Cavarero, 2009: 38)

Following Rose (2001) an important aspect of present-day governing is the control of the future by means of the calculation of risk. Life itself is turned into an individual project of securing the survival of one's job and protecting ourselves and our loved ones from misfortune. By controlling the present through preventive measures that intervene in the uncertain future, in my view, risk management attempts to minimise vulnerability. Risk management aims to undermine competition in the neo-liberal market by making the individual indispensible (e.g. through education) and hence able to maintain his or her established position. *Horrorism* informs us that the key to indispensability is not found in the rational calculation of one's own competitive advantages, but rather in the relation to others where the vulnerable self is revealed as

the unforeseen. From this perspective, the relation to others is grounded in the recognition that each of us is equally vulnerable, rather than in the suspicion that everyone else may not be as vulnerable as oneself.

While Cavarero demonstrates that the cost of sovereignty in its extreme form is dehumanisation, as it reduces humans to abstract categories, she also presents the reader with an alternative. In her exposition of horrorism, there are clues to an alternative mode of being grounded in the exposure and recognition of vulnerability. Examples of horror arising as the effect of risk calculations may also be found outside the global battlefield in organisational settings. In this sense, *Horrorism* helps us to identify what the effects of governing through sovereignty may be. This increases the relevance of the book for readers who are interested in the consequences of the governing mechanisms of advanced capitalism. In the context of workplace subjectivity, the embrace of vulnerability as a necessary part of human life would imply a shift from existing for others based on generalised categories (e.g. profession, position, gender) to an existence based on reciprocal moments of recognition. It seems to me that this mode of being has the potential to constitute a way of dealing with feelings of unease that arise from the current uncertainties of labour and the insecurities of everyday life.

references

Butler, J. (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Cavarero, A. (1995) *In Spite of Plato: a Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. S. Anderlini-D'Onofrio and A. O'Healy. London: Polity Press.

Cavarero, A. (2000) *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. A. Kottman. London: Routledge.

Cavarero, A. (2002) *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender*, trans. R. de Lucca and D. Shemek. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Cavarero, A. and E. Bertolino (2008) 'Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero', *d i f f e r e n c e s: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 19(1): 128-167.

Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2001) *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Rose, N. S. (1996) *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, N. S. (2001) 'The Politics of Life Itself', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 18(1): 1-30.

the author

Cecilia Cassinger is a lecturer at Essex Business School and the Department of Business Administration, Lund University. In her research, she employs Adriana Cavarero's concept of the narratable self to rethink the company-centred view on how consumers' images of retailers and similar types of organisations are formed.
E-mail: cecilia.cassinger@fek.lu.se