

Bites of organization

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review of: Alison Pullen and Carl Rhodes (eds.) (2009) *Bits of organization*. Copenhagen Business School Press: Copenhagen. (PB, pp. 206, £46.00, ISBN 9788763002240)

Let us begin as we mean to go on – perversely – and start with the words on the back cover of this edited book. It proclaims that organization studies is made up of diverse methods and theories which ‘collide and compete, gathered together only in the broken net of a name. This book assembles some of the bits that break off in the process of this collision’. The authors are a group of ‘the most exciting, innovative and original thinkers and writers working in the field of organization studies today. They are writers who push the boundaries of innovative and unconventional work that is on the fringe of publishability...’.

Bits of Organization (hereafter *BOO*) is a book that Pullen and Rhodes, its editors, variously describe as lying on the fringe, outside the mainstream, pushing the boundaries, overflowing the boundaries, teetering on the edge, borderline to the mainstream, at the margins, the peripheries, the extremities. The reader interested in metaphorical language will see the two-dimensional nature of the picture with which we are presented. The map-like presentation is of a space, both flat and broad, in which collisions occur and the resultant broken pieces gravitate to the periphery where they enjoy a speed and motion unknown to those resting in the stasis of the mainstream. This is a space of flows. But it is movement at the surface; there is no depth *in* the metaphor or *to* the metaphor. There is a crucial third dimension, then, which is more or less absent in *BOO*. If we talk of ‘fields’ and how cultivated they are, then what will be missed is a feel for the land’s substrata, its archaeological history and the possibility of achieving ontological depth. The metaphor of the ‘field’ comes at a cost and ‘bits’ get missed out from spatial analogies (10). It may be geology that is required more than geography.

BOO contains papers by authors who will be familiar to readers of *ephemera* and whose work is likely to have been read by them. But this collection acknowledges that despite the

credentials possessed by the authorship, these papers may well have been rejected by peer refereed journals. The reasons for publishing them here in *BOO* are declared to be in order to push the boundaries of what is acceptable to mainstream journals. By focusing on the surface of the fact of editorial rejection, however, few questions are asked by Pullen and Rhodes about the 'depth' of analysis contained within the papers. And here is the rub. There are other reasons for one's work being rejected apart from its transgressive nature. Perhaps, even in terms of a mission aimed at pushing the boundaries and extending the field, it may be that one's work in some widely shared inter-collegial sense is just not good enough. Speaking personally, I have too many letters, secured in a locked drawer, that have rejected my hand-crafted pieces, not because they were transgressive, but because they were just not gestated enough to be forced out into the light of day. Indeed, these editorial letters, loudly fulminated against at the time, have saved me from considerable embarrassment. Reading these papers in *BOO* invokes a judgement of categorisation – of inclusion and of exclusion. Are they of a ground-breaking inventiveness not yet recognised by the custodians of organization studies, or are they just poorish pieces of writing that, as yet, lack the journalistic polish necessary for entry into journals? Or is the collection a mixture of both? And, indeed, are some of them close to being an embarrassment?

BOO does have the feel in places of 'leavings', of the 'trimmings' to a meal (in the original sense of the term), and the appearance of what drops as dead meat on the lime-coated cart when you shout out as editors to the populace, forcibly barricaded behind red crossed doors, 'Bring out your dead, bring out your dead'. Some articles *are* deceased. A number are dead parrots; they have slipped their mortal coil. Yet *BOO* also contains some fine transgressive material. On the 'sources' front, we are offered a prestigious line of thinkers including Nietzsche, Artaud, Burroughs, Freddie Flintoff, Kafka and Andy Friedman. Paralleling this, we are offered parts of the human body to 'affront' us. Here the tongue and mouth stand alongside the phallus, the arsehole, the vagina and the whole zombied body. This is *organ*-isation as it was meant to be. As for places, we are offered the hospital waiting room by two separate writers and the city as a jungle by others. There is a fine concentration of effort within these 'marginal' organization studies to wilfully ignore the staples of information technology, organization structure and corporate culture, for example. The focus upon anti-Establishment body parts means the book is unlikely to play well in INSEAD, LBS and the Judge but the less Said on this the better. To these readers, it would look like *BOO* does offer a horrifying glimpse of a different, maybe even infantilised, aspect of the discipline.

But what about the need for depth as well as breadth? Marginal material in and of itself does not necessarily shed light on the abyss of our organized world. To illuminate our human predicament, these challenging subjects also need to be set on fire in the heat of searing insight and a roasting analysis. Do the chapters then offer this combusive illumination of the depths of dis/organization through being hot? Which chapters offer *abysmal* writing in the full and positive sense of the term? Is there on offer some 'drilling bits' of organisation?

Chapter 1 is the ‘opening’ chapter in which there is an attempt to encourage transgression and the breakout from the traditional. There is an attempt to ‘subvert the proclamation of a centre’ (16). Pullen and Rhodes do not see that all those differences between organisation theorists need to be ‘handled’ but call instead for them ‘to be fuelled’ (15). The piece is replete with metaphorical exploration of this kind in which antinomies are used to the full. Here is promise.

The first two chapters share several things in common and presumably are placed together because of this. They are redolent of people who have reached a certain position in the life cycle and who are becoming unhappily familiar with the largest organisation in Western Europe. Chapter 2 is by Heather Hopfl who at the outset sets her piece in a NHS hospital, probably in Stockton. Here it becomes clear that ‘experience and pronouncement intersect and there is always a privileged interpretation. Such is the nature of organisation’ (30). But this order is the organ-isation of the rigid phallus which uses fear and fiction to have its wicked way. Particularly in the hands of hospital consultants where our lives, our fates and our notes are doctored. The following chapter is very short and is by Robert Grafton Small. Grafton Small, also in the hands of the medical profession in the Endocrine Unit of another UK hospital, ends with an examination of a doctor who holds the ring by having an indisputable worldview. Apparently, the ‘bit of organisation’ that glues the NHS together is the self-proclaimed demi-god status of the consultants. Although mine, a couple of years ago, only sought the status of a saint.

Damian O’Doherty and Hugh Willmott, meanwhile, seek to offer the unassuming Andrew Friedman the status not of saint but of sinner. The article is a ‘remnant – a paper that was submitted to *Sociology* as a detailed response to an earlier piece published in *Sociology* written by Andrew Friedman (2004): “Strawmanning and Labour Process Analysis”’ (39). Their paper was rejected and the authors appear to have been considerably miffed by this. Rather than put the rejection letter in the secure, locked drawer marked ‘legitimate disappointments’, they sought to engage in ‘self-exposure’ at the risk of the readership attributing ‘self-indulgence, resentment or vindictiveness, etc.’ to their response. This is a large risk! Another risk comes when the authors point their fingers at the Editor-in-Chief of *Sociology* and note that ‘established authors with strong reputations in the field are treated with considerable leniency and favouritism’ (52). Some self-reflexivity is surely to be expected here. This criticism of the favoured treatment of established authors comes from the lips of someone who was known to be a member of the evaluation subject group panel for RAE 2008 several years prior to the reporting of results, and in these years was feted by rafts of business school heads and their directors of research because of this role. As a general rule, the powerful are often lauded and so become unused to rejection and disappointment. The rest of us have to get over it quietly. O’Doherty and Willmott start their paper by arguing for ‘close attentiveness’ to the text in what is written and what is read. But close attention to *their* text reveals a bit of organisation that looks (as the authors prefigure) remarkably like ‘sour grapes’ (51). For what it is worth, I would have said the same things as Referee 1 of their original piece appears to have dared voice.

Chapter 5 is also about a sociological department but this time at the Ford factories of Detroit. It is by Stewart Clegg and is self-proclaimed to have been written ‘in relation to the conference theme, “doing good”’ (59). So clearly this is a remnant of a symposium of the past. It is about Taylor in the steel mills, Sinclair writing about the Chicago slaughterhouses and sordid investigators of private lives deep within Detroit communities. This is reconstituted meat from interesting bits within lectures given on early US sociology.

The following chapter is paired in a sense with its predecessor. For it is also about Taylor; and it is by Alexandra Pitsis. She offers a ‘shifting line between the poetics of Artaud and some concepts from Taylor’s Scientific Management and surreal moments in life’ (68). The focus is upon the body for, as well known, the body was problematic to both authors. Pitsis suggests that ‘the theatre of cruelty’ was relevant to both and seeks to make other connections. A ‘ficto-script’ is presented in which is imagined an interplay between Artaud’s poetic vision and phraseology derived from Taylor. More good lecture fodder ends the piece when we are reminded that Artaud composed the imaginative line ‘a dead rat’s arse suspended from the ceiling of the sky’ only to have his friends defend his body for three days from the rats that wanted to eat *his* corpse. This is analysis of two strange but important individuals.

Martin Corbett looks to the other end of things and the arse is declined in favour of the mouth, tongue and nose. Well known as a ‘fun guy’, Corbett looks to a tale of the tasty truffle as being about ‘excess, ritual, identity, power, death, deferment and resurrection’ (83). The paper is ordered as an Italian menu but its sources are divine Greek sauces. Getting food into the centre of organisational analysis is not easy but Corbett manages it with taste and aplomb. He achieves in putting the excremental, the cannibal, the indigestible, the abject and the desirable in ‘the visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity’ and on the menu in organisation studies (96).

Chapter 10 is by Christopher Land and is about the ass-thetics of William S. Burroughs, ‘the drug addled writer of fiction’ (142), notably *Naked Lunch*. He was such a symbol of subversion that Nike wished to use his radical chic in a footwear advert, yet he was also an influence on Gilles Deleuze. In Burroughs, the arsehole becomes ‘an ontological principle for the production of radically democratic forms of organisation’. Unlike the transcendent phallus, the arsehole is about falsification, forgery and fantasy. And Land makes a convincing case for its centrality in organisation studies, as the radical organ of choice. I can see journal editors turning up their noses at this article on the basis of its subject matter, not its intrinsic quality. Using the cut-up method of incising text, Burroughs sought to escape from linearity in text and thus the smooth functioning of control, yet Land develops his argument coherently and in a scholarly way without recourse to cutting up.

Chapter 11 is also about cutting up – in the *vagina dentata*. Located in demonology and feared among others by teenage boys who knew any Latin – or any Freud – the origins of the feminist analysis notion are described by Sheena Vachhani. The notions of monstrosity and fluidity are explored in the chapter and a number of very interesting sources on this

topic are discussed. The 'devil's gateway' is not unexplorable. As Cixous says, it is merely presented by men as too dark to explore. It confers non-human status on women. What is needed, says Vachhani, is a monstrous feminist-inspired organisation theory – and I wholeheartedly agree.

Speaking of whole hearts, Alf Rehn moves to the monstrous being of the zombie. Of course, the living dead (known as the *professoriate* in some places) are also the radical Other. It has been estimated, we are told, that armies of the living dead would save the US economy \$17 billion per annum but there are drawbacks in such employment. The necropalypse is one of these problems, for it is the time when more zombies inhabit the planet than the living. But, says Rehn, 'a zombie is often preferable to a living worker' (195).

These then are the bones of the book adorned by small pieces of flesh of my choosing.

Overall, the text does hang more tightly than at first glance and there was a pairing of chapters that may or may not have been deliberate, but it works. It gives it some structural stiffness which is necessary in any edited collection. It suggests a fusion of spinal bits along a line of argument. But stiff, fused spines are not very malleable for the user and the reader will need to exercise themselves through some hard work to get the play of movement that good reading requires.

On the issue of the depth of argument that the collection as a whole, or its component individual chapters, produce, I have to say I was somewhat disappointed. It was not abysmal enough for my taste. Nietzsche, Kafka and Artaud and Burroughs are deep thinkers but there was not enough of the tapping of the depths of suffering that the harrow can produce. What was missing was downward, excoriating movement. There was no recognition in my eyes half-way through of enlightenment (102), no recognition in my consciousness as if I were actually listening to the harrow's inscription. My argument is not that it has all been said before but only that it could be said more persuasively and more poignantly. I get the point, but I wanted it to go deeper. More harrowing please.

The naughtiness of the topics shocks me not, but many a journal editor would be flummoxed by making a decision as to whom to send these pieces for refereeing. No one would read these articles and see them as natural meat and drink for the typical metropolitan European MBA, never mind a student in the Bible Belt of the USA. It would be foolish to claim they are confections for the delectation of conventional teachers either. But there are journals, including this one, which do accept unusual pieces of provocation and it should have been possible for many papers to have been acceptable in the business and management orientated literature. There are exceptions, of course, and Land's paper on the arse (which I delight in) is an example of one that might confront petit-bourgeois notions of good taste. Bad smells too are unwelcome but Corbett's paper would have graced any journal. The phallus and the vagina are more acceptable topics, perhaps, especially when put together in polite heterosexual company. Zombies are positively welcomed at many a high table. True, aged concerns like hospital visits for those over 60

are less welcome in the thrusting world of magic bullets and magic wands; and industrial history is a declining interest among students who have never visited nor even glimpsed a factory in their part of Surrey, Sydney or even Sunderland. But let's be honest with ourselves. The principle of inversion – of turning the normal on its head and looking at it afresh from the 'wrong' way round – is a decent principle. But it does not mean that any shit will do.

So is it my argument that these papers are of low quality and should not have been published? No. My argument is that some of them should not have seen the light of day and have remained in the locked filing cabinet. *BOO* has bits of it that are good and bits of it that are not good. You, the reader, will have your own views. Do not be put off by the quality of the feel of the book itself. It is printed by 'Sahara Printing, Egypten', which should be totally irrelevant given many European books are printed in all parts of the world and publisher control over appearance is never compromised. But this feels and looks a bit different from a 21st century publication and that sometimes matters. It is part of well known series, so the editors of *BOO* may have been unable to intervene in such issues, being distanced from the publishers by both role and hierarchy. In any event, the aesthetics of the text are not without relevance to its reception, and its text-ure may have some effect upon the typical reader.

In conclusion, Sheena Vachhani says on page 200 that she sharpens her teeth daily. Good. It is extremely important that we bite the hand that feeds us – but we must bite deep. Down to the bone. It is worth reading *BOO* to make up your own mind, but I would have preferred *Bits of Organization* to have been more recognisably *Bites of Organization*, for deep wounding incisors are necessary to transgress any meaningful boundary. Bigger teeth, more poison, deeper harrowing – please. And not aimed at the 'vibrant fringe' of the discipline, but at its very heart.

the authors

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