Disruptor in chief

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review of

Woodward, B. (2018) *Fear – Trump in the White House*. London: Simon & Schuster (HB, pp xxii + 420, £12,29, ISBN: 978-1-4711-8129-0)

Bob Woodward's book *Fear: Trump in the White House* was one of the most awaited, hyped, and talked about books of 2018 – and understandably so. Woodward has authored or coauthored 18 books, several of which have portrayed American presidents and topped the national bestseller-lists. His previous work, not least with Carl Bernstein at the Washington Post, has earned him fame and acclaim, and has, among other things, been instrumental in starting a process that brought a former president down (e.g. Bernstein and Woodward, 1974). In 1973, the Washington Post received a Pulitzer Price for public service for the reporting Woodward and Bernstein did on the Watergate break-in. Here, they revealed how the scandal had ties all the way to the White House, implicating President Nixon who had to resign, as the nefarious details were uncovered. Woodward's role in shaping America's recent political history explains the hype and anticipation leading up to the publication of his latest book on Trump in the White House. And it perhaps also explains some of the mild disappointment generated in reading the book – at least for readers who had expected (or hoped for) consequences that merely gestured in the direction of those generated by the disclosure of the Watergate-scandal. Overall, it is a book that leaves one with a feeling of ambivalence as to its qualities. While I will get back to the book's qualities, especially seen from an organization theoretical perspective, it is perhaps useful first to provide a short summary of the book, and to highlight a

number of similarities and differences between Woodward's earlier work and *Fear*.

Fear gets its title from a quote by then presidential candidate, Donald Trump: '*Real power is – I don't even want to use the word – fear*' [xiii, italics in original]. The book gives us an unprecedented look into the breakdown and chaos of the White House decision-making process as experienced by the people comprising Trump's inner circle. It narrates a number of crucial events stretching from Trump's presidential campaign to his first 18 months in office. In so doing, it portrays a completely dysfunctional work environment characterized by utter incompetence, mistrust, internal sabotage, and an occasional coup d'état to prevent national disaster [xvii-xxii]. In other words, *Fear* not only paints a picture of how Trump's management philosophy of fear is improvised ('implemented' would signal too much foresight here) in unpredictable bursts of spontaneous, chaos-producing actions, and how his aides (sometimes successfully) reign these in. It also paints a picture of how the implication of having Trump in the White House is something that the reader and the public should (still) fear. While Woodward never states the latter point directly, it comes across implicitly throughout the book, as one outrageous event replaces the next.

While there are innumerable incidents that could be utilized to illustrate this point, one of the more interesting yet completely underplayed ones is when Woodward, in a few lines, portrays former chief-strategist Steve Bannon as someone seeking to bring a bit of order to the derailed White House decision-making process: By spring 2017, 'the constant disorder in the White House (…) had become too disruptive even for certified disrupter (…) Steve Bannon', as he realized how the chaos created 'wasn't helping him or anyone' else [144]. The context not fully explicated by Woodward here is of course Bannon's famous proclamation:

> I am a Leninist. (…) Lenin wanted to destroy the state and that's my goal too (…). I want to bring everything crashing down and destroy all of today's establishment. (Bannon quoted in Sebestyen, 2017)[1]

Portraying the far-right nationalist Breitbart-founder Steve Bannon as a *moderating force*, as Woodward does here, perhaps better than anything reveals just how crazy 'crazytown' is, to use former White House chief of staff John Kelly's characterization later in the book [286]. However, the implicitness also

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1   And this stance, as Bannon explained in another setting, was also guiding the selection of key-figures for the Trump-administration: '[I]f you look at these Cabinet nominees, they were selected for a reason, and that is deconstruction' (Bannon quoted in Klein, 2017: 3; see also Kakutani, 2018: 127, 136).

illustrates how Woodward rarely offers direct verdicts, but rather attempts to let the facts speak for themselves.

Since this is not unprecedented seen in light of Woodward's previous books, it is worthwhile to explore a number of similarities and differences between his earlier work, especially on Watergate (Bernstein and Woodward, 1974; Woodward and Bernstein, [1976] 2006), and *Fear*. Concerning the similarities, one is struck by three things: a continuity in (1) the method, (2) the style of writing and (3) the traits of the main characters portrayed, i.e. Nixon and Trump. Starting with the method, Woodward opens *Fear* with a 'note to the reader' in which he explains the 'deep background' approach utilized for gathering the information disclosed in the book. In essence, this entails conducting hundreds of hours of interviews and crosschecking the information as much as possible, while refraining from disclosing the sources. As Woodward elucidates in an interview in *The New York Times* (2018: n.p.), this method was also utilized in his early work: '46 years ago in Watergate, Carl Bernstein and I turned to using unnamed sources because you can't get the truth, you won't get the straight story from someone, if you do it on the record'. While there are a number of potential downsides to this approach, including, not least, that the reader cannot check the sources, and therefore is left at the mercy of Woodward's judgement as to the reasonability and trustworthiness of the sources, the upside is that it allows Woodward to assemble facts and statements that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to disclose.

Just as there is continuity in the method utilized, there is also continuity in the style of writing. In *Fear*, as in Woodward's earlier work (see e.g. Woodward, 2003; 2010; 2012), the prose is somewhat dry, registering, and matter-of-fact. While several of the circumstances reported in *Fear* are highly colorful, often entertaining and always alarming, the writing itself is not particularly interesting to say the least. The book is generally carried by dialogue and by scene setting of this dialogue, and is devoid of overarching analysis and an elaborate narrative structure. As Woodward explains:

> If you look at the books I have done they tend to be scenes. This happened, then this happened, and so forth. This is very much in that tradition I think. (Nuzzi, 2018: n.p.)

While Woodward's style of writing is excellent at presenting snapshots and peaks into the Trump administration, it seems less adequate for a 400-page book. And when Woodward actually veers from his style by, for instance, delving into excurses on policy-issues, the reader's attention is sometimes challenged.

Nevertheless, in its best places, the method and style of writing utilized in *Fear* gives us almost unbelievable details concerning the President's reckless and childish behavior, including his incapacity to grasp even the most fundamental issues pertaining to international politics, national security, trade agreements, etc. Woodward displays how Trump sabotages not only the White House decision-making process, but also some of his own (idiosyncratic) pet beliefs. This is not least 'accomplished' by impulsive and reckless morning and Sunday night tweeting (called 'the witching hour' in 'the devil's workshop' according to former Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus [195, 205-7]). However, it is also a result of jumping the line [160-1], and of the president's profound inability to remember and think more than one step ahead – the latter being illustrated by the spectacular opening scene in the book, where Trump's former top economic advisor, Gary Cohn, steals a document off the president's table in order to prevent him from signing it [xvii-xxii].

The picture painted by Woodward is of a chaotic and completely disorganized White House headed by a President, who lives in an eternal present, and whose impulses, Fox News-binging habit, fluctuating mood, and gut reactions determine how he responds to everything he is presented with. Besides significantly compromising national security and undermining key-institutions that contribute to upholding the American state (see also Lewis, 2018), the president's behavior gives rise to a number of tragic-comic scenes. In one instance, Trump's advisors manage to get him out of the White House and isolate him in a remote, cut-off meeting-room in the Pentagon called the Tank in order to get him to concentrate on serious policy issues. To their dismay, however, this backfires as Trump brings a reductive business perspective to complex problems of national security, and furthermore seems more impressed with the carpets and curtains in the Tank (also known as the Gold Room) than with what his advisors try to get him to understand [218-226]. The meeting ends with Trump complaining to Steve Bannon that his advisors 'don't know anything about business', while then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, says, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, 'He's a fucking moron' [225].

Fear paints a picture of Trump as a president marked by a profound paranoia, as someone who believes in and actively promotes conspiracy theories, has an intense hatred of the (liberal) press, and, not least, a willingness to subvert and/or pervert the instituted duties and responsibilities of the president's office for personal gain. In this regard, Trump shares certain characteristics with Nixon (Bernstein and Woodward, 1974; Olmsted, 2009: 149-158), although he is in

several respects worse.[2] In one telling scene, Woodward highlights the similarities between the two presidents, when he portrays how the former White House Secretary, Rob Porter, experiences Trump's reaction to the appointment of Robert Mueller as special counsel:

> Porter had never seen Trump so visibly disturbed. He knew Trump was a narcissist who saw everything in terms of the impact on him. But the hours of raging reminded Porter of what he had read about Nixon's final days in office – praying, pounding the carpet, talking to the pictures of past presidents on the walls. Trump's behavior was now in the paranoid territory. [165-6]

It is, however, also here that the similarities between Woodward's earlier work on Watergate and *Fear* ends. For if there is continuity in the method, the style of writing, and some of the characteristics of the presidents portrayed, there is a significant difference between the newsworthiness of the respective disclosures and, not least, the implications that the reporting of presidential misconduct has had. Whereas Woodward and Bernstein's early work disclosed something that was *not known* to the public beforehand – something which initiated a process that eventually led to Nixon's resignation – *Fear*, in contrast, confirms and adds details (albeit alarming and spectacular ones) to what has already been reported in innumerous newspaper-articles and books (see e.g. Kranish and Fisher, 2016; Wolf, 2018).

Another difference between *Fear* and Woodward's earlier work on Watergate is a rather different receiving context. While Nixon and his co-conspirators were not unfamiliar with lying and using dirty tricks, the political environment today nevertheless seems to have become even more polarized, hostile, and dysfunctional. This, in combination with a profit-driven, balkanized media landscape, and a general devaluation of truth (Kakutani, 2018) seems to have accentuated the toleration for presidential lies and misconduct – or, at least, resulted in a situation where such misbehavior does not pose a threat to Trump. It is perhaps also in light of this post-truth and highly partisan context that Woodward's style of writing should be understood. For although it is somewhat dry and registering, it can nevertheless be defended, indeed even praised, on the ground that attempted sober and factual reporting is to be savored in a time where feeling, fiction, manipulation, and fantasy have become the medium in which (Trumpist) politics increasingly is shaped (Davies, 2018; Anderson, 2018).

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2   In an interview in The Guardian, Carl Bernstein, Woodward's former colleague at the Washington Post, for instance, makes this point: 'Even using the word demagogue and saying that the president of the United States is a habitual liar, one would not have said that about Nixon' (Smith, 2018: n.p.).

For organization scholars there are a number of significant questions to ponder when reading through *Fear*, including, not least, what happens when formal organization is actively undermined, and when the distinction between person and official role collapses? Are our theoretical vocabularies attuned to grasp and criticize this, or should we as (critical) organization scholars revisit the foundations and historical conditions of our inherited concepts in order to question and retune them so as to better face contemporary realities? To what extent does the arrival of Trump – and of phenomena associated with populism more generally – challenge or reconfigure previous demarcations between power and critique (Nagle, 2017; Kakutani, 2018)? While some of these questions are already being discussed within organizational theorizing, albeit in very different ways (see e.g. Robinson and Bristow, 2017; Grey, 2018; Gills et al., 2018; De Cock et al., 2018; Lopdrup-Hjorth and du Gay, 2019), there is still a lot of intellectual work to be done here. And although Woodward's book does not raise such questions, much less gives us resources to answer them, it nevertheless provides innumerous examples of dysfunctional and reckless organization that bring organization theoretical readers face-to-face with the effects of institutionalizing the anti-formal mindset (du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016) in the highest office of one of the world's largest organizations, the American state. And as Woodward implicitly states by presenting the facts, and others explicate much more directly (e.g. Lewis, 2018), the cumulative costs of this have already been, and will continue to be, significant.

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