Canetti’s Sting*

Robert Cooper

Elias Canetti was born in 1905 in Bulgaria. After formal education in England and on the Continent, he settled in Vienna as a writer whose work – several plays and a novel – was noted for its mordant insight into the human condition. In 1960 he published, in German, a remarkable psychological and sociological study of social power as expressed in crowd behaviour, which later appeared in English as *Crowds and power* (Canetti, 1962). A key concept of this work is the ‘sting’. Power, we are told, is the expression of order via command. A command consists of momentum and sting. The momentum is the force on the person to act, while the sting, invisible and mute, remains behind after every command is obeyed. The sting is indestructible and waits, often for years, for the chance to avenge itself by reversing the original command. ‘What spurs men on to achievement is the deep urge to be rid of the commands once laid on them’ (Canetti, 1962: 306). The sting is therefore a device whose goal is to free the command’s recipient of a deference order and thereby make relationship ‘equal’.

* Editor’s note: This paper was originally presented at Lancaster School of Management in 1982. It was later published in SCOS Notework in 1992 (volume 9, issue 2/3, pages 45-53). Some sources and page numbers were missing in the 1992 SCOS Notework publication. These have been added to this lightly edited version of the paper.
At the core of the sting lies the structure of ‘reversal’. The principle of reversal suggests a form that condenses or collapses upon itself like the hermeneutic circle described by Heidegger:

Here something turns round in itself. Here something curls up in itself without, however, closing itself, but rather unlocking itself at the same time. Here is a ring, a living ring, something like a snake. Something catches itself with its own tail. Here there is a beginning which is already completion. (Heidegger, 1957: 51)

We see the principle clearly and simply demonstrated by the artist Robert Rauschenberg in an early work which consists of the imprint of a car tyre on paper. Where exactly is the form of the work, in the shape of the object reproduced or in the white ground of the paper? Actually, in neither one nor the other. We might be tempted to say that the tyre reveals the ground while the ground reveals the tyre but such a formula is too dependent on our habitual asymmetrical forms of thought. The point of reversal, which we have to learn to see, is where tyre and ground flip over into each other and are the same. Distinction is refused. In another early painting, *Bed* (1955), a set of bedding complete with sheets, quilt and pillow (actually Rauschenberg’s own bed) is spattered with variously coloured paints and fixed in a picture frame for hanging. The painting represents a gap between two objects: a real bed which we normally expect to see in a bedroom and a painted representation of a bed which we normally expect to see hanging on the wall of an art gallery. Rauschenberg deliberately conflates the two placings and forces us to pose the question: Is this a painting of a bed or is it a bed that has been painted? The work thus represents a gap that in turn represents a reversible whole which Rauschenberg, like Canetti, sees as the essential structure of human perception. Canetti first develops this theme in his novel *Die Blendung* (1936), translated into English as *Auto-da-Fé*, whose title suggests two significant features of the reversal motif in human behaviour: (1) a blending or mixture in which all distinctions are lost, and (2) a blinding or loss of the ability to see distinctions. Absolute reversal means equality or pure ‘mass’ which in turn entails the loss of structure.

The photographic negative provides a simple model for the concept of the reversible whole in that its black and white image is the reverse of the object photographed. The positive print is the reversal which returns the object to
its original image. *Wholeness is a property of the complementary yet differential relationship between the blacks and whites of both negative and positive pictures kept separate.* When they are joined together – when the negative is superimposed on the positive – the image of the original object is lost.¹ Distinction is required for the perception of the whole just as the conception of the whole is required for the perception of distinction. At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that the idea of the whole is held in a state of suspension, as it were; paradoxically, wholeness would be lost if it were realized.

Information theory, which deals with the mathematics of communication, encounters the same idea in the principle that transmitted information is not a property of individual messages but derives from a *set of equally likely possibilities*. The attribution of equivalence or identity, in one or more respects, to a set of terms is a prior condition for the emergence of information or structure. What is equal – that is, whole – becomes the necessary condition of difference. We are presented here with a picture of two worlds which, while interdependent, yet exclude each other: the one, sheer, plastic and prodigal; the other, in comparison, constrained, incomplete and dismembered. The former will not go into the latter without loss, the essence of the problem being the impossibility for two or more things to occupy the same space at the same time. Thus the act of distinction reveals an a priori state of equivalence which has to die in the very moment of its birth.

Information results from selecting one of two mutually exclusive choices which are a priori for the subject, that is, distinction corresponds to a dilemma which every message implies – yes or no, this or that, here or there, etc. In other words, information or message is the division or distinction of a prior unity into one or other of two possible cases. At this point information theory

¹ After writing this, I found I had been pre-empted in the use of this analogy by Lewis Carroll who in his last work, *Sylvie and Bruno*, wrote in relation to the then nascent art of photography: “He has described the appearance of the thing exactly!” the Professor exclaimed with enthusiasm. “Black light, and Nothing, look so extremely alike, at first sight, that, I don’t wonder he failed to distinguish them!” (Carroll, 2006: 631). It is worth recalling in the present context that Carroll (as C L Dodgson) was a professional mathematician and logician as well as a pioneer of photography in Victorian England.
reminds us that distinction and counting follow the same laws. We constantly assert that ‘one exists’, ‘one thinks’, ‘one feels’, and so on, and in this ‘one’ we observe the impersonal subject that lies at the origin of structure whether numerical or social. ‘One’ is never ‘one’ in the sense of unity or whole since ‘one’ always requires ‘two’. ‘Two’ reveals the ‘one’ as a lost whole (that is, a hole or gap) by transforming it into a divided ‘one’ or, more exactly, two ‘ones’. It is this ‘one’ that we represent (repeat or present again) in social structure by means of the second term or ‘another one’, that is, by distinguishing the subject from itself. Distinction is an act of separation that is necessary for the creation and maintenance of wholeness.

Canetti illustrates the concept of the reversible whole in a variety of ways all of which reflect the mutability of a power that nevertheless remains the same. The themes of *Crowds and power* echo this: mass, transformation, permanence, the authority of the dead over the living, survival, question and answer, and many more, whose net effect is to suggest the existence of a mechanism at the heart of things that is ultimately resistant to division and sharing out. Difference is normally understood as the unlike, even the unique. For Canetti, difference is merely temporary change, that is, the transformation of a form that in the course of time returns to itself. We are reminded here of Weyl’s essay on the mathematics of symmetry or sameness which provides a relevant analysis of the arbitrariness involved in distinguishing, for example, left from right (Weyl, 1952). In mathematics symmetry is defined as automorphic: a form that returns to itself and by so doing preserves the essential structure of space. Reflection in a plane – a mirror, for example – is an automorphism. Symmetry is therefore to be understood as an automorphic operation rather than simple identity or equivalence; it is a force that brings differences back to a common origin or whole; it is less the expression of similarity and more the representation of a

---

2 This is simply another way of expressing the idea of identity or sameness. The idea of the ‘same’ is double-headed inasmuch as it means unity (‘we are all the same’) and yet needs another term for its realization since one is always similar to another one. This is reflected in the root ‘semi-’ which is cognate with ‘same’ and means half of a whole that is the same as the other half. The same idea also appears in *semeion*, the Greek for ‘sign’, a sign being a representation of a lost whole.
condition of ‘no change’. Weyl tells us that the inner structure of space does not permit us, except by arbitrary choice, to distinguish left from right. From the mathematical point of view, distinction becomes a purely arbitrary and contingent act and yet it is distinction or asymmetry that reveals symmetry. Canetti pursues this point with studies from the ethnology of myth, especially accounts of the functions of the totem.

Let us recall Levi-Strauss’s (1963) conclusions to his study of the ethnological literature on totemism. Using Bergson’s basic dichotomy of reality, the continuous and discontinuous, as a means of understanding the nature of totemism, Levi-Strauss gives priority to the former, equating it with ‘identity’ or ‘metaphor’. He follows Rousseau for whom ‘identification with another’ both governed and preceded the consciousness of oppositions’, that is, distinctions. In this respect, Levi-Strauss and Canetti agree: totemism originates in ‘mass’ awareness or man’s feeling of identity with the rest of the living and non-living world. But Canetti’s emphasis is different. He sees ‘mass’ not only as a force around which differences revolve but adds a further vital feature: reversal or return. This is the real meaning of the totem which he illustrates with several myths taken from Strehlow’s study of the Aranda people of central Australia (Strehlow, 1947). Canetti notes two interdependent themes of these myths: Transformation and self-consumption, which are, respectively, distinction and its lack. In one myth an old man has been sleeping since the beginning of time under a witchetty bush at the side of a great waterhole. As he sleeps, witchetty grubs crawl all over his body. One night something that looked like a witchetty grub fell from his right arm-pit onto the ground and took on human shape. At dawn the old man woke up to see his first-born son. Great numbers of grub-men were created in the same way. While the old man still slumbered, his sons existed by feeding on witchetty grubs from nearby bushes. From time to time they would feel a need to become grubs again and would chant a spell to return themselves to their form of origin from which they would once again emerge as human beings. The totemic grub embodies a reversal metamorphosis: the desire of grubs to turn into men and the desire of men to turn into grubs. However, the men eat the grubs which, as Canetti remarks, is equivalent to eating themselves. In another story a grub-ancestor consumes grub-men who are his own sons. One day their flesh turns into grubs in his bowels which then proceed to consume
their father from inside until he is completely devoured. Canetti characterizes the essence of self-consumption in the reversal formula: *the thing which is eaten eats back*. Significantly, self-consumption does not occur among the Aranda in real life but is reserved for myth. In fact, the members of a totem clan are forbidden to kill or eat their totem animal:

... self-consumption is replaced by what is essentially a principle of avoidance. Men eat the animals related to them as little as they would eat their own people. (Canetti, 1962: 413).

In the self-consumptive aspect of reversal we approach the essence of the sting. The reversal is not merely a simple automorphism, that is, an exchange of opposites that realizes an identity. It is also a reversion to a more general and more comprehensive condition in which distinctions are condensed and held together. In this respect, reversal is like the ‘prior unity’ of information theory that, when distinguished, evokes a message. (Incidentally, we may note, following Weyl, the arbitrariness involved in making a choice between terms that are thus distinguished, so reasserting the mathematical view of space as essentially whole or continuous). Let \( p \) be a distinction (e.g. ‘man’) and \( \sim p \) that state from which it is desired to distinguish \( p \) (e.g. ‘woman’). Further, let \( p \) and \( \sim p \) intersect as follows:

![Diagram of set theory](image.png)

*Figure 1*

The shaded area overlap, the fusion of ‘both \( p \) and \( \sim p \)’ represents a condition of wholeness which is conceptually the same as the ‘prior unity’ of reversal. The act of distinction represses or defers this fusion since it is also a state of
leak confusion.\textsuperscript{5} Leach (1964) has considered the concept of social distance from the point of view of the repression of ‘both $p$ and $\sim p$’. Let us note in passing that distance, whether social or physical, is just another way of expressing distinction – in fact, ‘distance’ and ‘distinct’ have the same etymology. Leach’s main point is that social space is structured in terms of ‘distance from self’, that is, with maintaining the binary distinctions between ‘me’ and ‘non-me’ (e.g. ‘me–it’, ‘we–they’). Leach echoes Canetti’s concept of self-consumption when he observes that ethnologists have often noted a relationship between eating (consuming) and sexual intercourse (consummation) and he goes on to show how this relationship is supported in language by the two areas of activity using similar terms according to the degree of ‘distance from self’. In both eating and sexual behaviour, language underlines the prohibition on using those most like oneself. For example, in respect of the male self, sexual relations with sisters are forbidden because sister, though belonging to a different sexual category and hence $\sim p$ is also $p$ in that she is a member of the same family group. The same formula applies to the eating of animals where pets such as dogs and cats, though non-human and hence: $\sim p$ are integral members of the domestic structure and hence are also $\sim p$. Leach interprets such prohibition on self-consumption in terms of the need for social agents to maintain distinctions between themselves and the rest of the social world. However, the sting’s function of resisting distinction suggests a contrary interpretation, that of preserving the in-one-anotherness that characterizes the wholeness and equivalence of ‘both $p$ and $\sim p$’ as a reserve from which distinctions can be drawn, as it were. In its resistance to distinction, the sting finds itself in a paradox: it needs distinction in order to realize itself and this is why self-consumption must be repressed. The effect of distinction is to distribute objects and events in space and time; the goal of the sting is to condense spatial and temporal differences so that in effect they do not exist. When a sting seeks to reverse an inequivalence through an act of vengeance, it does so in order to wipe the world clean of all distinction. But, paradoxically, the distinction serves to reveal that state of lost equality so that when the

\textsuperscript{5} This is again the hermeneutic circularity of something containing itself since that which includes itself (like the paradox of classes that kept Russell (1967) awake at night) contradicts itself.
distinction is lost so is the perception of equality. The sting’s energy derives from the very obstacle it is bent on removing.

The preserving of a reserve which can be re-served by means of reversal leads Canetti to emphasize the sting’s essential continuity and immutability as well as the exactness of the reversal it seeks. Two further characteristics of the sting – *the reproduction of earlier situations* and the *deferred reversal* – help explain this intrinsic recalcitrance.

Every exercise of power involves a distinction or inequality. The structure of distinction is as follows: first, an original unity is divided into two parts; second, one part takes precedence over the other. That part which precedes experiences a sense of gain; the preceded part, a sense of loss. The sting is really the outraged sense of loss of equivalence occasioned by distinction. The function of the sting is to redress the inequality and it does so by reproducing earlier situations but in reverse. Revolutions are perhaps the most dramatic examples of this compelling desire to reverse a state of distinction and to deliver people from the stings of power and command, but the sting is at work all the time and in the most mundane, routine encounters of everyday life. It is clear that the sting is another way of defining the idea of freedom; one desires to be free of the commands, requests and expectations of others. However, since freedom is denied to most of us, the sting takes its place. Our desires for freedom are in reality desires to be freed from the stings imposed on us by other people. The reproduction of earlier situations implies the correction of an imbalance and perhaps the return to a mythical state lacking in distinction and therefore replete with equivalence. Its deep embeddedness in human nature prompts Canetti (1962: 355) to note that the ‘reproduction of earlier situations, but *in reverse*, is one of the chief sources of energy’. The sting’s desire for reversal therefore assumes an explanatory role in human motivation. Motivation is no longer an impulse that moves individuals to satisfy personal needs but a force that is intrinsically bound up with the *social* nature of human life, a vital energy that stems from the need to reverse the inescapable distinctions that exist between people. The energy of the sting derives from differentials in power so that energy and power become synonymous with and thus curiously close to the scientist’s conception of energy or physical power as a function of mass. For such reasons, Canetti studies the operations of reversal and sting in Franz Kafka’s life and work.
(Canetti, 1974). ‘Of all writers’, notes Canetti (1974: 62), ‘Kafka is the greatest expert on power’. Kafka’s own life is stained with the need to reverse a whole list of stings. He resented the arbitrary exercise of his father’s power. From the time he decided to take up writing, he was deeply jealous of the achievements of other writers. But what most attracts Canetti about Kafka is the character of his relationship with Felice Bauer as it is revealed in the published letters he wrote to her during the years from 1912 to 1917. From his correspondence, one feels that Kafka’s special sensitivity to power hinges on an exaggerated and painful awareness of his own weaknesses – ‘the indecisiveness, the fearfulness, coldness of feeling, detailed description of lovelessness, a helplessness so vast that only excessively exact description makes it believable’ (Canetti, 1974: 25-26).

On his own admission, Kafka lacks the zest and energy so necessary for creative work:

My mode of life is devised solely for writing ... Time is short, my strength is limited. ... It is certain that a major obstacle to my progress is my physical condition. Nothing can be accomplished with such a body ... My body is too long for its weakness, it hasn’t the least bit of fat to engender a blessed warmth, to preserve an inner fire, no fat on which the spirit could occasionally nourish itself beyond its daily need without damage to the whole. How shall the weak heart that lately has troubled me so often be able to pound the blood through all the lengths of these legs. ... When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions. This was necessary because the totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively could they even half-way serve the purpose of my writing. (Kafka, quoted in Canetti, 1974: 19-21)

Writing he recognizes as perhaps his only real means of expression and therefore of influencing and even hitting back at people. He writes to his friend Max Brod following an early amorous adventure: ‘Could it be that one could take a girl captive by writing?’ (cited in Canetti, 1974: 8). Canetti notes that Kafka’s emotions seemed to come alive in the written word: ‘The three most important women in his life were Felice, Grete Bloch, and Milene Jesenska. His feelings for each of them came into being through letters’ (1974: 45). But his feelings were not so much for them as women but as sources of
recognition for what he saw as his only field of competence, writing. These women, so opposite to Kafka in their efficient, matter-of-fact dealings with the everyday world, might almost have been chosen by him through some sort of dialectical design. To Felice he writes: ‘You are not I, your nature is to act; you are energetic, quick-thinking, observant ...’ (cited in Canetti, 1974: 36). The energy required for the creative act appears to derive from the desire to gain power over the dialectical other. The period of his relationship with Felice is one of his most creative as a writer. He shines when his written word is directed to a significant other but with the spoken word and in the face-to-face relationship he is a disaster. He wishes to preserve his relationship with Felice through the written word; it is convenient that he lives in Prague, she in Berlin. Despite his reluctance, they decide to become engaged. But he is tormented by many second thoughts and finally pulls out. He stops writing to her. She sends her friend Grete Bloch to Prague to see if things can be patched up. Grete now becomes the object of Kafka’s desire for recognition. He writes to Grete in the same vein as he has written to Felice but for the most part the subject matter of these letters is Felice, and Kafka’s part in the sordid business of the broken engagement. Surprisingly, he writes Felice a second marriage proposal. Not surprisingly, she is wary and resists him. ‘But precisely this resistance makes him more certain and more stubborn. He suffers humiliation and painful reverses; since he can tell Grete Bloch about these, everything is described to her at once and in detail’ (Canetti, 1974: 45). Kafka’s writing, it seems, can only thrive when obstacles are placed in his way. It is not that he loves to suffer but that suffering at the hands of another provides him with the stimulus and energy to hit back through his writing. He is a classic case of the efficacy of the sting. In a period of weakness occasioned by some family trouble, Felice allows herself to be pressured by Kafka into a second attempt at engagement. He continues to write to Grete and in fact wishes to intensify their relationship. It is she whom he loves, not Felice: ‘... more and more he unloaded into his letters his fears about the approaching marriage to Felice’ (1974: 46). Grete finds herself in a double-bind of contradictory signals: Kafka loves her but is going to marry Felice; she loves Kafka but is a close friend of Felice. She resolves the impasse by warning Felice of Kafka’s double-dealing. Kafka is called to Berlin to face ‘trail’ before his accusers, Felice and Grete. The effect of this experience on Kafka is catastrophic; it stings him to reply with what is perhaps his greatest work, The trial. Canetti maps the
equivalences between the personal inquisition and the actual novel: for example, the engagement to Felice becomes the arrest in the first chapter in the book, the ‘trial’ becomes the execution of the final chapter. Indeed, the whole of the relationship with Felice begins to have the bizarre look of something stage-managed by an unconscious force solely to provide the sting for a creative endeavour. Canetti remarks on Kafka’s proclivity to nurse his stings and not communicate them to others:

It enables him not to obey commands immediately, yet to feel their sting as if he had obeyed, and then to use the sting to strengthen his resistance. Yet when he does eventually obey, the commands are no longer the same, for by then he has taken them out of their temporal context, considered them from every angle, weakened them by reflection, and thus stripped them of their dangerous character. (Canetti, 1974: 23)

Nevertheless, The trial incorporates the spirit of the sting in its repetition of a personal humiliation and the clear wish for this to be reversed on to his accusers as expressed in the final words of the book where the shame experienced by K at the animal-like nature of his execution is projected into the future as an indictment of the inhumanity of his destroyers: “Like a dog!” he said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him’ (Kafka, 1955: 251).

Kafka’s projection of his sting into the future is an example of deferred reversal. The sting, let us remind ourselves, is really an objection to an obeyed command or act of deference. It is a definitive feature of the logic of distinction or difference since what comes first must force the postponement of that which comes after. We know from the writings of Derrida (e.g. Derrida, 1978), that the very structure of the word ‘differ’ is reflected in the word ‘defer’, and what is deferred in difference is the sense of the equal. Reversal of the sting always takes time but it is obvious that the length of time may be long or short. In fact, reversal is the very essence of time whose measures of day, week, month and year always repeat themselves. It can be said that time is really the speed of reversal. The faster the rate of reversal, the less clear are the differences, that is, the more equal are both sides of the reversal. Absolute equivalence means the loss of time. Ethology shows that animals differ in the rate that they process environmental information and that these differences are a function of what ethologists call the moment sign, the smallest indivisible sensation of time (Derrida, 1978). The duration of a human moment is 1/18
second and this governs all human sense modalities, for example, the human ear does not discriminate eighteen air vibrations in one second but hears them as one sound; eighteen taps on the skin within one second are felt as even pressure. In other words, the moment sign is a basic measure of stasis or ‘no change’ in which both sides of the reversal are equal. We thus see that the temporal function of difference is to slow down (i.e. defer) the rate of reversal in order to ensure a threshold of structural stability below which the speed of shifting differences would create a chaos. Difference therefore functions like slow-motion photography which decelerates activity normally too swift for the human eye to perceive. It is significant that Canetti studies examples of long-deferred reversals which work themselves out over long historical periods. It is true that we locate the French Revolution at a particular point in time and space – July 1789, the Bastille, Paris, for example – but the processes of reversal were set in motion long before when the first act of arbitrary oppression by the nobility – though not recordable by any historian – sank deep into the people’s memory where it was nursed in the shadow until it was big and strong enough to explode into the light. There are also reversals whose periods exceed our earthly time. Canetti provides examples of these from the ancient literature of Indian religion whose theme is that of reversing in the next world the deferences that men engineer in this world. In the Jaiminiya Brahmana, a treatise on sacrifice, appears the story of Bhrigu, a saint, who wanders from one world into another. In this other world he sees men eating other men who are screaming. He is told that the former are cattle which were killed and eaten in that world and in this world have taken human shape and do to man what he once did to cattle. He also sees trees which have assumed human shape and are now cutting men into pieces and eating them. Rice and barley reverse their sufferings in the same way (Canetti, 1962). These examples dramatize the self-consumptive or self-referential aspect of reversal and also suggest that it is inescapable. At best, we can only defer self-consumption. The idea of life in another world is predicated on the permanence and indestructibility of the sting (which, by definition, survives death) with its promise of the ultimate correction of difference.

The deferral of reversal aligns the sting, particularly in its energetic or motivational aspects, with the Hegelian concept of desire. In his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, Kojève (1969) grasps the same idea when he says that
desire is time. Desire is endless insofar as it is continuously deferred. From Hegel himself, we learn that Self-consciousness is the consciousness of a split and that desire is the yearning to heal the separation that results. Desire is the dynamic of social structure which appears in the latter’s differences. Its etymology reflects this – ‘desire’ is cognate with the French *dechirer*, to tear or rend, with its connotation of something destroyed, a more poignant sense of which is revealed in the definition of the Latin word for desire, *desiderium*: a longing for that which is lost. What is lost is the experience of the whole, the undivided.

Now the sense of loss defines the human condition. To be human is to enter the social structure as a duality and not as a unity. Mead’s model of human interaction is a formalization of this insight, stressing the processes of reversal that constitute human exchange: A’s stimulus calls out B’s response, and B’s response returns as the stimulus for A’s response, and so on (Mead, 1934). B is the reverse of A and A is the reverse of B. Social structure as a system of human exchange is a structure of representations whose function is to defer the condition of wholeness or equivalence. The actors in the social structure thus represent themselves to each other as lacks – a lack being an inequality – of a larger whole. Desire is the presence of a lack or loss which is represented to us by another whose desire is the reflection of our own lack. The call is of one desire to another desire. It is not the call to fill in a biological need such as hunger but an appeal for valuation, which is why Hegel says that desire is the desire for recognition, i.e. to be valued by the other, the reverse. All this comes down to the fact that B’s response to A’s call is essentially a mark or sign of the latter’s lack and this is equivalent to saying that it valorizes or fills the lack through an act of deference. To defer is to submit to another, to repress or give something up for another, this being the process of valorization that fills in the other’s lack. But the deference that makes difference is simply a delay in time that waits for the recurrence of that more equal condition that characterises wholeness and which would banish difference. Yet, since it would be the end of desire, that cannot be.

The deferral of desire helps explain the sting’s indestructability and permanence. The sting itself can never be dissolved; one may free oneself of it only by passing it on to someone else, that is, by getting the other to defer to you. It is now the other’s turn to bear the sting. Canetti observes the
difficulty of ridding oneself of a sting created by *chronic* deference. Such a sting is normally the result of many stings suffered over a long period of time and which build on each other to form a sting which cannot be reversed through one’s own lone efforts. Solace and aid are therefore sought in the crowd. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the crowd is its *equality*; to identify with the crowd is to find that one’s sting, previously regarded as a personal cross to bear, is not only shared by a thousand others but that the mass identification involved obliterates all the other differences one possesses so that mass identity is substituted for individual identity. The dissolution of individual and social differences is however a mere preparatory phase which culminates in the dissolution of time itself. The effect of the sting-ridden crowd is to speed up the desired reversal of events so that temporal differences condense together. Thus Michelet describes the feeling of instantaneity that took hold of the Paris crowds during the French Revolution: ‘On that day, everything was possible ... the future was present ... that is to say, time was no more a lightning flash of eternity’ (quoted in Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 203). In that instant everyone and everything was equal and difference had been - at least momentarily – overcome. Just as the temporal function of difference is to slow down the rate of reversal in the interest of structural stability, the temporal function of the sting is to accelerate the rate of reversal in order to annihilate difference or, what amounts to the same thing, deference in time. The sting finds its refusal of temporal difference in the concept of the ‘instance’ which implies immediacy and urgency. In this respect, the force of ‘instance’ assumes an affinity with the concept of instinct which psychoanalysis portrays as an involuntary constant urge or drive whose source is internal to the subject and whose general aim is to suppress the movement of time. The sting’s pursuit of the whole may now be seen as the preservation of a state of ‘no change’ or rest and this observation enables us to connect Canetti’s notion with the metalogy of structure. Canetti underlines difference as temporary change, seeing it as a work of transformation which in the course of time returns to itself. The deference of difference implies choice, as we have seen. But what is significant in structure is not so much what is chosen but what is not chosen – the concept of the Rest. The Rest has two meanings: that of stasis, no change, no motion, and that of remainder, what is left over. It is a case of structure always staying the same. A primitive economics emerges at this
point for difference now appears as a sharing out of something that is essentially resistant to division and change, the sting being the agent which reclaims distinctions in the name of an anterior commonalty.

references


**the author**

Robert Cooper (1931-2013) was a prominent theorist of organization, known for introducing postmodernism and post-structuralism to organization studies. He has also been highly influential in process studies of organization. After writing and publishing poetry in his early years, and a PhD at Liverpool University, he held academic positions at various English universities – Aston, Lancaster, Keele – finally ending as an honorary Professor at the University of Leicester.