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Silence, Procrustes and Colonization: A response to Clegg et al.'s 'Noise, parasites and translation: Theory and practice in management consulting'

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The article by Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes in March 2004's issue of *Management Learning* is a refreshing and welcome contribution to an otherwise largely sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive literature on management consulting. However, and sadly, it stops very short of offering a critique and therefore generating substantially novel insights into this phenomenon. Also, and despite the authors' assertions otherwise, it ends up celebrating consultancy as a privileged arena in achieving what is described as radical change, but what is, in effect, typically a reinforcement of existing power relations and of managerialism and its associated language.

This response comes from a position that is, in many respects, empathetic with that expressed in the article. Consulting can indeed readily be seen as an activity through which theory serves 'as a means by which practice can be interrupted and transformed . . . disturb(ing) organizational realities' (p. 32) by creating 'noise'. Moreover, this 'parasitic' process is not so much one of creating a new order as one of translation, which combines both 'difference and repetition' as it mediates linguistically between different 'systems', especially those of the client and consulting organization (p. 39). Indeed, others have presented a similar picture where consultants occupy what appears to be a special place in postmodern thinking—liminality (Clark and Mangham, 2004; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003).

However, even if the account is intended as more aspirational and constitutive than representational, it remains firmly rooted within management discourse and within an apolitical and acontextual view of organizations and relationships. This in part arises from the failure of the article to fully align and locate its notion of consulting within a broader discussion of consultancy and related literature. For example, the idea of creating emancipatory spaces in which to disrupt established ways of doing and thinking and in the process 'create new concepts that encourage new realities and real possibilities' (p. 31) resonates with the work of those who take a critical approach to organizational learning (e.g. Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Fulop and Rifkin, 1997). Drawing on Boal's (1979) notion of forum theatre, these authors argue for the creation of democratized learning spaces that support the development of new insights out of the participants' contributions so that plurivocal rather than univocal understanding emerges. Forum theatre and its associated exercises and activities are designed to provide the opportunity for participants to step back, to consider the past history of their thoughts and actions, and to deliberate and rehearse their future thoughts and actions. It is about creating disorder and multiple realities through 'fantasy, imagination and "randonnee"' (p. 37) (see also Coopey, 1998: 375). These authors therefore also argue for a consulting

approach that seeks to suspend and disrupt the dominant order, using a process that is noisy (literally) and uncomfortable, but offers the possibility of new structures and ways of thinking. The role of carnival and the court jester can also be viewed as essentially parasitic in nature in that both operate in a world of blurs, adding disorder to order and rendering an experience of what is not permitted (see Bakhtin, 1984; Otto, 2001).

Regardless of the related heritage of these ideas, to suggest that consulting's deconstructive power can 'open up a space to the other voices' (p. 37) is fine and worthy, but those other voices are unlikely to extend beyond supporters of the commissioning client, such as certain middle managers (Sturdy, 1997). Overall, the history of management consulting in recent times has been one, not of noise and plurivocality, but of silencing certain groups (e.g. employees, consumers and citizens), sometimes systematically (e.g. O'Shea and Madigan, 1997). Furthermore, what practitioners and adherents of such a view appear to ignore is the fact that although it may seek to create an emancipatory space, the discourses that obtain in a given organization or inter-organizational relationship at a particular time are constrained by the elements of (inter)organizational roles and role relationships that have previously been constituted discursively. As Perinbanayagam (1991) argues, the status that is accorded to the ranks of organizational members has to be acknowledged and given discursive presence in emerging interactions unless, of course, a member intends to insult, challenge or provoke other members by repudiating his or her rank and/or role. In other words, what one can say (and how much one can claim to know) are functions of one's place in a hierarchy of power and privilege, and the right to speak, the right to interrupt others and the obligation to keep silent, significantly define such power and privilege. As Perinbanayagam (1991: 93) puts it: 'There is no doubt that the oppression of the larger society is manifest in small conversations.' By contrast, Clegg et al. appear to believe that—given the right circumstances—social actors can step out and back from their roles and renegotiate them. Yet they do not discuss how these spaces are created, maintained and sustained. These are critical questions given that organizations generally suppress 'noise' by reinforcing power and status.

Likewise, to suggest that consulting seeks to enact 'new worldviews, new ways of world-making, and to encourage people to disrupt established ways of thinking . . . a walk on the edge' (p. 40) that leads to the 'disruption of dominant orders' (p. 36, emphasis added) reflects an extremely conservative (managerial?) view of change. As Jacques (1996) and others have pointed out, when management ideas occasionally do present a potential challenge to existing orders, they are cut or stretched, like the 'guests' of the mythical figure Procrustes. As a result, they retain a modernist sense of order and hierarchy and capitalist notion of ownership (Willmott, 1992). This is evident in the field of learning as well, where, for example, the hegemonic nature of legitimacy in Lave and Wenger's (1991) work is written out of subsequent translations and consultant interventions (see Contu et al., 2003; Contu and Willmott, 2003). In other words, anti-capitalist protesters would find business hard to come by as management consultants! Similarly, the idea that consulting not only challenges and gives voice, but creatively brings chaos, disorder and increasing variety and complexity—'new ways of thinking, seeing and being in the world' (pp. 35–6) again, at best, reflects an organization-centric view. An equally legitimate perspective would be to reveal commonality in consulting through their construction of managerial discourses (e.g. those of enterprise, strategy and customer) into different realms of social life and space (Grey, 1999). This is not to argue against the authors' notion of translation or a multiplicity, if not exactly 'playfulness', of meanings, but to point to the simultaneous colonization process associated with management. Thus, rather than use their cosy and familiar metaphor of consulting (translation) as jazz improvisation, a more appropriate one might be over-produced boy/girl bands' familiar 'covers', even if in the form of karaoke. We are all implicated in this process of course—consultants are not demons nor necessarily more implicated than

management academics—but hopefully, the reflexivity the authors prescribe might include one’s own role in preserving the status quo and limiting nonmanagerial voices (Parker, 2002).

In normal circumstances, perceiving an article to be managerialist and conservative would not provoke a written response like this one, but the authors draw on an impressive range of theorists from critical traditions (e.g. Benjamin, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard and Nietzsche no less!). They also note in passing that consulting often doesn’t measure up to their aspirations for it (p. 37), but fail to explain why this might be the case, beyond a concluding comment on the ‘organizational’ constraints of long hours and toeing the company line (p. 41). By presenting client–consultant teams as ‘the excluded interstitial relational third’ (p. 38), they miss a key point—that they are talking about management and that the excluded are not always or even typically minorities, but silenced majorities (e.g. in terms of class, ethnicity and gender) (Eagleton, 2003: 20). Similarly, to say that ‘the consultant can help free practitioners from the “iron cages” that organizations become’ (p. 37) not only privileges consultancy, but reduces politics, organization and freedom to very narrow domains. Avoiding this does not necessarily mean discarding the authors’ theoretical position, but seeing it as a means of ‘interrupting’ and ‘transforming’ power relations rather than tinkering with managerial practice.

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