Unmanaging/Disorganisation

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abstract

This paper intrudes the strategies and agendas of management into the theme of disorganisation. Cooper's (1986) analysis of systems suggests that what is talked about *as* organisation is always the 'organisation of organisation'. Indeed, inasmuch as normal science bootstraps itself from its attention to anomalies, abnormalities and general disorder, his argument is that organisation is the organisation of disorganisation. In contrast, I attend to the sedimentation thesis of 'social' organisation and argue that managers' long-running attempts to dislodge what they brand as 'tradition' has resulted in a kind of disorganised organisation in which there is no centre. Rather, at any moment, different parts of the multiple and diffuse accumulation of managerial technologies are drawn down and performed *as* system.

Introduction

To those versed in deconstruction, it is perhaps of little surprise to find a front-ranking scholar like Cooper investigating the 'priority' of disorganisation over organisation. Perhaps all too easy also to mistake Cooper's (1986) analysis as offering a mere inversion of an existing hierarchy, such as popular misconceptions of deconstruction usually imply. The surprise quickens, however, when managers themselves appear to be deploying the mode of disorganisation. Aren't managers supposed to organise, not disorganise? Why might they systematically disorder and disrupt, even to the extent of setting out to 'unglue' their institution?

In what follows, I develop the theme of disorganisation differently to Cooper. Equally concerned to recover a sense of organisation as *social*, rather than the merely economic, Cooper's emphasis turns on the importance of thinking about boundaries, a concept marginalised by the study of organisation being itself organised into a dichotomy between system and environment (see also Munro, 1986). In contrast I emphasise the institutional thesis of sedimentation, the continuous construction and recreation of all that has gone before. My argument is that disorganisation becomes a viable and potent strategy for managers once the *multiplicity* of orders circulating among institutions is better understood.

Order *and* Disorder

Two dangers: order and disorder. What are we to make of this injunction, adopted by Robert Cooper as the motif for his seminal paper 'Organization/Disorganization'? How could order – in Paul Valery's formulation – *continually* "threaten the world"? Easy to understand how disorder appears always threatening, more difficult to engage readily with the idea of order itself being a danger. To say nothing yet on the difficulties of thinking about *dis*organisation. Is disorganising more than nihilism? If so, how would this be organised? Or could disorganising come to be regarded as an end itself?

Already we feel the muddle of any 'middle' here. Problems arise whenever terms are given *equal* weighting; when disorder is insisted on as having its own force and allowed to be a phenomenon in its own right. After all, few would deny a little bit of disarray as healthy; the ability on occasion to wear odd socks, or leave a magazine on the floor by coffee table. And after the Holocaust, the danger of order becoming extreme – when order itself gets 'out of order' – is self-evident. So much easier, then, to keep terms as they are! To insist on black being black and white being white, with no grey areas in between.

Disorder appears admissible only when order, so to speak, keeps the upper hand. Yet, according to Cooper (1986), this is to succumb to the formulation of a prior organisation. It is to insist, unwittingly, on the organisation of a "violent hierarchy" (Derrida, 1981: 41), in which one term of a pairing is privileged and the other is denigrated. To keep terms as they are, to forbid inquiry (and so seal them off from examination), is to make immune what Cooper (1986) calls the 'organisation of organisation'; to proscribe investigation of the 'organising concepts' (Foucault, 1970; cf Gutting, 1989) of a discipline is also to leave unquestioned its organising principles.

The Organisation of (Dis)Organisation

Cooper's (1986) analysis stems from a recognition that organisation, in its most fundamental sense, is the "appropriation of order out of disorder" (p. 328). Inasmuch as the implication here is that order is a *response* to perceptions of disorder, this definition is intuitively plausible. As Cooper emphasises in his analysis of information, "order is extracted *as* form and disorder is *refused* as non-form" (p. 328, emphasis added).

Yet if Cooper's definition makes disorder prior, this inversion of the traditional ascendancy of organisation over disorganisation would also seem more contentious. Isn't a sense of disorder set up in turn by expectations of order? However, the corollary of our composing ideas of order out of disorder – the organisation of organisation – is that we then re-impose these ideas upon the world in order to make the world as we find it. In deconstructing organisation, therefore, Cooper points to how *talk* of organisation obviates its own status as the organisation of (dis)organisation and intrudes itself as the very object of discussion. In consequence, disorganisation is simply 'refused'. Banished as a topic of investigation, it becomes a 'no-thing'.

To substantiate these claims, Cooper draws on Derrida's argument in which the selection of 'order from disorder' is placed in a context of power. This gives rise to a process of displacement:

> …the selection of order from disorder in a context of power in which language (by which we mean systems of communication in general) becomes the very object of the conflict (Cooper, 1986: 328).

Language – the organisation of organisation – becomes the centre of a struggle for power. As Cooper adds:

> It is necessary to understand that, viewed in this way, language and speech are not merely the vehicles for the expression of conflict but become the objects to be appropriated (Cooper, 1986: 328)

A stress on conflict and power has the additional merit of establishing the central problem of order: the *reversibility* of any order. What may begin as a 'supplement' to the everyday disorder of living and breathing becomes, in turn, privileged and then is given priority as *the* organisation. So much so that we take as natural and normal those things which are seen to be 'in form', framing anything which threatens our stability as 'in-firm'. But, as we know, not everything that is taken as normal remains so.

Bootstrapping Normal Science from Deviance

According to Cooper, understanding is really a "curative process" (p. 330). By this I take it he means that it is anomalies, like boils or fevers, which manifest or 'present' themselves and, further, that it is the desire to cure such matters which leads to remedies and eventually to a more general understanding of the body and its systems.

In this way, Cooper asserts that the normal became an object of study initially through a concern, both practical and theoretical, with pathology and disease:

> Both correct knowledge of systems as well as their correct administration required an understanding of their correct norms and these were to be discovered only through their inversions in the abnormal. (p. 330)

Scientific interest in norms and normalisation, as Cooper suggests, bootstraps itself from its investigations with the abnormal. In a similar way, Kuhn (1970) suggested scientific revolutions are prompted by attention to anomalies. It is disorder – and, more generally, 'error' and the 'incorrect' – that first draws in the attention of science.

Drawing on Canguilhem (1978: 145-88), Cooper correlates the growth in science during the nineteenth century with the problem of administering the large populations that emerged with the rise of industrial societies. In this view, the norm became a formalised tool for dealing with 'aggravated differentiation'. Working forward from the formalisation of rules for the correct usage of the French language by the State's grammarians in the seventeenth century through to the appearance of technological and administrative norms, Canguilhem traced a process in which the norm "functions as the basis of order, not only ordering the system to restore the normal state in cases of

deviation but at the same time providing an order of knowledge for the system to conceptualise itself" (Cooper, 1986: 330).

While Canguilhem directed attention to "an object-language which works on the boundaries of systems", Cooper suggests his analysis "necessarily includes the human subject in the object-language where it acts through a 'will-to-cleanse'" (p. 331). This is to say "what is right and acceptable" within a system is based on an inclusion/exclusion principle which maintains the "purity" of the inside by keeping out "impurity" (p. 330).

Ordering Order out of Disorder

The powerfulness of this scientific approach should not be underestimated. Durkheim's insights on society by comparing suicide rates remains emblematic and, deeply aware of the 'paradox of consequences', Weber (and even Parsons) was sceptical of straight-forwardly 'rational' approaches. Order does not proceed as intended. It was by investigating disorder that order could be excavated and understood.

The kind of norms early sociologists were interested in were not the 'normative' of the prescriptive, but stemmed from the result of deep structures in society resulting, say, from the conflict between that of capital and labour. This kind of structure is not to be understood directly, but is to be observed – perversely – through the deviant. As I have argued elsewhere, the presence of a system is recognised not through what it includes, but from what it *excludes* (Munro, 1986). For example, money becomes a system only at the point when it drives out barter. Money can buy goods and goods can buy money, but what becomes increasingly difficult, and deviant, is for goods to buy other goods.

For much of the twentieth century, the sociology of institutions remained caught between a functional attention to the normal at the systems level and this clinical investigation of particular deviant cases. Yet work was emerging, particularly as Cooper notes with the studies of the Chicago school, that could eventually challenge the implicit spatial understandings in which norms were treated as central and deviation remained at the margins. More and more studies of the deviant came to question the very apparatus that installs the appellation of deviance.

More radically for the development of the sociology of institutions, in-depth case studies by symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists were also suggesting a process of sedimentation in which practices took on a mimetic or cultural quality which resisted 'functional' interpretation. Communities, for example, not only form themselves within institutions, and are so facilitated in their formation by institutions, they also take on a mind of their own. As Bauman (2001: 31) quotes Sennett, "maintaining community becomes an end in itself; the purge of those who don't really belong becomes the community's business".

Organisation as the Construction of its Members

My understanding of how 'disorganisation' works proceeds particularly from the insights of this later, ethnographic tradition. In line with Garfinkel's (1967) analysis of members making themselves 'visible and accountable' to each other, Bittner (1965) argued organisation to be 'the production of its members'. For example, in his study of Skid Row, Bittner (1967) shows how the police operate in ways which keep the peace. This is to say that the police on Skid Row do not uphold the law, as is their official function. Instead they intervene in ways which would seem arbitrary and even lawless. Only in the context of their own understandings of the need to keep the peace do their actions begin to make sense.

While they might not put it so, what managers appear to dislike about their institutions is exactly this propensity for organisation to be the 'product' of its members. Such 'social' organisation is not only open to accusations of being inward-looking, it resists instructions and prefers the sedimentation of its own practices to the forced introduction of new methods. In a word, such organisation is not only resistant to change, it actually *organises out* change. The 'will to cleanse' of the (social) organisation's members ensures the survival of the 'purity' of the sedimented and syncretic organisation by excluding new ideas and new methods as 'impure'.

The strength and resilience of such exclusion work can be judged by the failure of earlier management regimes to supplant such informal organisation with formal rules (Gouldner, 1954) and the very limited success of recent management in imposing a corporate culture on the more 'indigenous' organisational culture. By means of 'role distance' (Goffman, 1958) on the one hand and 'attachment' to control artefacts on the other, employees seem able to make themselves 'visible and available' (Munro, 1999) to the new managerial agendas without necessarily mending their ways.

In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising managers develop an almost pathological urge to disorder; to break up what they regard as stultified and backward and begin to shake other managers out what they take to be their complacency and insularity. As an early example of such 'disorganisation', I watched senior managers – in advantageous circumstances of a takeover – 'rubbish' precedent and tradition *as* belonging to the past (Munro, 1998). While not unproblematic, particularly in the company having to re-import much of the previously failing accounting technology, this ploy did give senior managers the ability to switch between holding their subordinates within relations of hierarchy one moment and imposing on them relations of the market the next.

At the time of the fieldwork, 1987-8, I saw such attempts to 'rubbish' tradition as rather unsophisticated, although I accepted that such 'disorganising' discourses became relatively widespread, particularly so for the public sector which is still disparaged for clinging onto tradition (cf Strathern, 1993). In my subsequent ethnography of a highly successful market leader, I began to see how senior managers distanced themselves from everyday organisation, by disparaging subordinate managers as 'glorified supervisors' and by declaring work statistics as 'misleading' (Munro, 1995). In one sense this might just be accepted as the by now familiar disparagement – a disordering

kind of talk rather than disorganisation per se. However, given the institution's lack of sophistication in management technologies, it seemed to me that more was going on.

In particular, I began to identify *ambiguity* – the withdrawal of instruction – as a potent technique for control. Preserving a silence over local debates between ideas of order and disorder, while talking the talk of more general managerial discourse, allowed managers to reap the benefits of 'social' organisation and yet simultaneously deny its importance. And yet this analysis leaves an uncomfortable question: how is such ambiguity possible? It is to this question of conditions of possibility that I now turn.

The Archaeology of Orders

It is a fair assumption about organisation that virtually any technique of ordering and organising is still going on somewhere today. Indeed, one might go further and wonder if this set of diverse and inchoate material does not, for the most part, also remain imminently available within many institutions. For example, fundamental analysis of share price continues alongside 'chartist' approaches, debates on centralisation and specialisation rumble on interminably and earlier notions, like that of the optimal span of control – a residue of administrative theory – can sometimes be appealed to as if these had current credence.

So, too, strategy is added to planning, planning has been added to procedures, time management sewn onto project management, activity based costing added to standard costing and the balanced scorecard approach added onto a profit focus. Similarly, over quality, an emphasis on continuous improvement is added to a customer focus and each gets added in turn to some version of statistical process control. There is, however, no necessary order of accretion here. For example, where quality circles have long continued, these are charged with absorbing 'new' directions like team-working, or whatever else is thought to missing or absent.

The point is not that each new addition is revealed to be a 'failing' technology (cf Miller & O'Leary, 1993), in line with the expectations of critique. As Watson's (1994) study of management discourse in GEC illustrates, the potential benefit of some of the techniques is conceded:

> DOC was brilliant. It really worked at building the sort of culture a business like this needs. BIP was completely necessary. It is only common sense. TQM seems to me the only way to manage a high-tech operation. Team-briefing's a good idea, problem-solving teams are a good idea.

Although resisting the idea of each of these being 'a magic fad, a new cure-all', what is left is often disappointment that the ideas are not fully integrated into practice. As the same manager continues:

> If only we would take these management good ideas to heart and incorporate into some basic hard work. Then we would get there. Instead of that we keep chasing rainbows; going through the motions without thinking out properly what we are doing things for. (Watson: 1994: 158)

It is hard not to hear a plea for order – integration – here. There is a sense of waste that each technology is never incorporated into practice, but merely set aside for the next.

The point is that while each new technology tends to be added to the heap of existing management technologies, few are ever deleted. Seldom are previous 'orders' dismantled or taken away. And this asymmetry over 'addings' remains broadly true even for ostensibly more radical agendas, such as business process re-engineering which adopt a top-down-approach to rationalisation. The benefits of each technique are surely calculated – and their introduction justified – on the supposition they will replace existing operations and processes. But, in practice, usually they don't. They end up *adding* to whatever is already being done.

Ambiguity and the de-centring of orderings

As I have argued elsewhere, the kind of organisational culture sought by 'purists' (Smircich, 1983) is illusory. Culture is not only imported as and when people enter and leave their institution on a daily basis; so, too, what passes for culture within the institution is shot through and through by the artefacts of control (Munro, 1999).

In this sense, the 'social' organisation of members is always syncretic, its rationale and reasons hallowed by time. To be sure one would expect a genealogy in its sedimentation of the kind outlined by Foucault (1979). But inasmuch as new techniques and technologies are 'kept apart' – neither being incorporated fully as part of the 'social' nor being altogether excluded and rejected – they can be kept on the shelf ready to be 'activated' (Simons, 1990) the moment some senior manager asks for information that can be produced in no other way. Such arrangements, I argue, satisfy both 'the will to cleanse' and the senior manager's need to 'drill' into performance in ways that are (ludicrously) thought to remain objective.

There is no single organisation to institutions today. Nor, I suspect, was there ever such a fabulous beast as the kind of organisation envisaged by the manager I quoted earlier. Common sense told him that all these 'good' ideas needed to be 'incorporated' by being fully integrated with each other. But common sense can also be wrong. For to privilege one particular kind of order would be to commit the fallacy of attempting to create a 'centre' to organisation. Whereas what the new management, indistinctly and vaguely, appears to be doing is abandoning any authoritative reference to what Derrida (1978: 286) would call an 'origin', or 'an absolute *archia.*'

In discussing this notion of de-centring, Cooper reminds us that Levi-Strauss (1970) realised that he was in danger of privileging the Bororo myth – his own reference myth – over all the other myths. Because myths are cross-referential:

> …all are equal and hence collectively refute the idea of one version being paramount for the understanding of all the others. There is no unity or absolute centre of myth. The "differential" structure of myth necessarily precludes it from being pinned down to any one position or point of view. (Cooper, 1986: 319)

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Much the same must be said about technologies of managing. There is no single architecture of control which could sustain and carry all the rest. The mistake textbooks make is of talking of management as if all its multiple and diverse parts integrated into a single cohesive system. Whereas the only system that is ever in existence is the one being enacted or imagined on the spot – momentarily and provisionally – out of all the wreckage and bricolage from what has gone before. And insofar as this is always being enacted differently over time and differentially across the institution, we can be pretty sure we never step in the same system twice.

Organisation and Management?

In this short paper, I have tried to make sense of two papers. First I wanted to honour much of the insight in Cooper's 'Organization/Disorganization'. The density of his encyclopaedic knowledge makes it impossible to do full justice to this extraordinarily perceptive paper. Yet I felt I should try, if only to exculpate the failings here of a different and more complex paper on 'Disorganisation' which I am due to deliver to its editors next week.

In this latter paper (see Munro, 2002), I had thought to focus on the extent to which current managerial agendas seem to me to be 'disorganising'. This is a topic on which Cooper's paper is silent. Given the rise and rise of management – so much so that management now presents itself as the solution to its own failings – it seemed to me that a continued silence is now dangerous. Continued attention to the running conflict between management and employees can obscure the radical division emerging between senior and subordinate managers. Increasingly it is this, I argue, which is bringing about a new kind of disorganisation.

And yet writing this new paper has left me wondering if I am not crossing vital boundaries. Should I not speak of 'unmanagement', rather than disorganisation? How might a potential rupture here – between management and organisation – affect our thinking of each? Especially if we can no longer take for granted – as Cooper seems to insist – the idea of management and organisation as belonging to the same discipline?

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