



Images of the Academy, or, Lenin in Seattle

André Spicer

I

I have just paid five dollars for a beer. I'm loitering in the Seattle conference center waiting for a friend from Australia to turn up at the appointed time. He is late as usual. This means I have to talk to an American doctoral student about network analysis. Now I'm talking to Patrizia. She tells me that there is a statue of Lenin in an inner suburb of Seattle. I mention that I saw an ex-Russian nuclear submarine positioned as a prime tourist attraction on the Seattle waterfront. Actually, the sign told me it was the 'commie submarine'.

II

We picked our way through an inner suburb of Seattle, eventually coming over the top of the hill. We looked down onto the rapidly gentrifying shipping canal that connects Puget Sound to Lake Washington. What seemed so surprising was that the street grid just continued downwards with no nod to the lie of the land. Having grown up in New Zealand, I should be quite used to cities with grid street plans drawn up in office in London or Edinburgh without a thought given to the natural geology of a space. But the strict grid of suburban streets that fell off the hill in front of me was still befuddling.

III

To remove the bushes, to render the ground as smooth as a billiard table, is to enclose the land within a permanent ring of light. The open field is a rebuke to clouds or other evidence of primitive chiaroscuro: the colonists' eagerness to remove every vestige of vegetation cannot be explained simply as a mistaken theory of agriculture; it expresses an overwhelming need to clear away doubt – not to make the land speak in accents all its own, but to silence the whispers, the inexplicable earth and sky tremors which always seemed to accompany colonization. Progress, it seems, stamps the earth flat, turning it into a passive planisphere.¹

1 Paul Carter (1996) *Lie of the Land*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 9.

IV

The USA is a country that needs no introduction – it’s so well known that even first time visitors feel like they’ve been there before. It’s just like on TV, only more so. There’s something very satisfying about seeing all those fast-food franchises, Coca-Cola commercials and baseball caps in the place where they really belong. The biggest surprise is the scale and extent of all Americana. You expect to see freeways, but the spaghetti-like criss-crossing of a six-level interchange and the endless interstate highways is still astonishing.²

V

We drove into a suburb called Fremont, where hipsters and small time Internet entrepreneurs live. The main street is populated by a few ‘canvasers’ for a local NGO called the Civic Defense Fund, locals strolling in the sun, a bookshop, and a few of those shops which sell R. Crumb comics, Cramps tee-shirts and cock rings. We turned the corner, and there he was – Vladimir Illich Lenin.



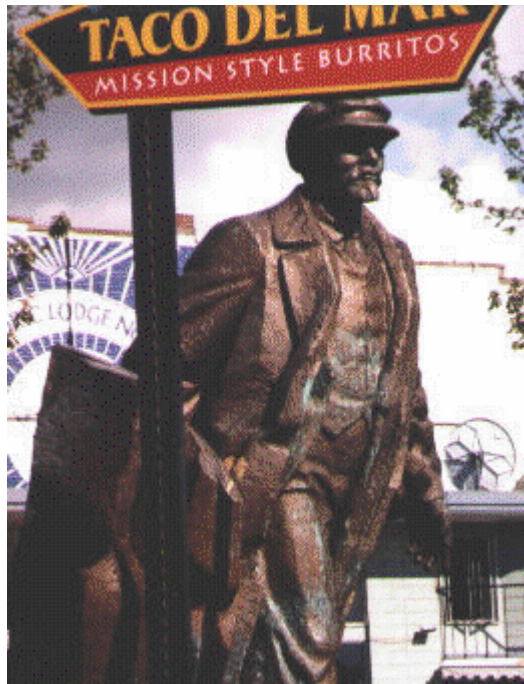
2 Lonely Planet (2002) *USA*, 2nd ed. Melbourne: Lonely Plane, p. 19.

VI

Lenin appeared at the right time. It seemed appropriate that my five tangled days at the world's largest meeting of management academics would be sutured by such a stare. Five days of buffet food, insights from Alabama, kooky mandalas, background muzak, conference coffee and business cards. Lenin's iron stare reminded me exactly how plural America can be.

VII

There he stood, a seven ton state of Lenin. His new comrade was a Taco del Mar sign. This brother in arms was a neon sign advising passing citizens that an outlet of a chain of Taco store was open for business. In this store they may sample the wonders flexible specialisation – individually producing tacos that are made to meet the customers exacting requirements.



VIII

I felt like I had already been to the academy before. I had been regaled with stories of excess by seasoned travellers. I had learnt by heart how I would encounter the strange laws of dress – the PhD students would be carefully fitted out in a new suit, brown shoes and a perfect grin. The run of the mill male academic would be wearing a pair of boat shoes, chinos, a navy blazer, and a blue shirt (perhaps with a discrete Polo logo). The star professors would either not be there, or they would be flip-flopping across the floor in beach shorts and a particularly garish Hawaiian shirt. They would all have plenty of business cards to hand out to anyone.

IX

Democratic communities not only contain a large number of independent citizens, but are constantly filled with men who, having entered but yesterday upon their independent condition, are intoxicated with their new power. They entertain a presumptuous confidence in their own strength, and as they do not suppose that they can henceforward ever have occasion to claim the assistance of their fellow creatures, they do not show that they care for anybody but themselves.³

X

I had one thought in mind when boarding the flight from Amsterdam to Seattle – self-preservation. I knew 60 percent of Americans are over weight and 20 percent are clinically obese. Given this was a flight to America it meant that about half the passengers would be Americans. This meant that about 30 percent of the seats would be occupied with flesh stuffed with lard and fruitie-os, and a whopping 10 percent of the seats would be receptacles for acres of sweaty skin. Would I be condemned to sit next to an overweight businessman with an expense account gut that would slowly ooze into my seat, crushing me against the opposite armrest? After settling down in my seat, I quickly arranged my props so I didn't have to talk to my neighbours. I had half a book to read, which should keep me safely out of any conversation. I was pleased to discover I had a mildly chubby twelve year old ensconced in a game-boy to my left, and a seventeen year old girl to my right.

XI

In the traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary the hole is in the back – that is the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between two opposed poles – the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it visible, but not to be inspected...Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographical triad of Germany-France-England as three different existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness and English moderate liberalism...The reference to lavatories enables us not only to discern the same triad in the most intimate domains of performing the excremental function, but also to generate the underlying mechanisms of this triad in the three different attitudes towards excremental excess: ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way. So it is easy for an academic to claim at a round table that we live in a post-ideological universe – the moment he visits the restroom after the heated discussion, he is again knee deep in ideology.⁴

3 Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/1994) *Democracy in America*. New York: Everymans Library, p. 100.

4 Slavoj Žižek (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, pp. 4-5.

XII

Perhaps Žižek is not quite the careful student of ideological symptoms that I thought he was. It seems to me that there is a fundamental difference between the English and North American toilet. The English toilet provides the prospective user with a modest few litres of water, however the North American toilet offers the washroom user gallons and gallons of crystalline water to pollute. This opposition seems to match the opposition between English understated pragmatism, and the excessive style of American pragmatism. Only a society who truly thought they have limitless resources to squander when they were pragmatically required (to wash away last night's dinner perhaps) could produce such massive toilet bowls.

XIII

The academy is excessive. There were thousands of attendants, 1197 official sessions, with 3153 papers and 539 symposia. There were thousands of participants. The conference was spread across thirteen venues in downtown Seattle. There were seventy eight exhibitors in the main room. The conference runs from 8.30am on Friday morning until 4.30pm on Tuesday afternoon. The cheapest room available in a recommended conference hotel is \$US99 a night at the Sixth Avenue Inn. The most expensive single room is \$US230 a night at the Sheraton.⁵



XIV

The Academy is a member of the global and pluralistic profession of management scholarship. Attention to global issues and concerns is encouraged among all members

5 Academy of Management (2003) 'Democracy in a Knowledge Economy: Program for the Academy of Management 2003 meeting'.

of the Academy. The Academy fosters alliances with other international and country/region-specific associations that advance a variety of approaches to management scholarship. We value the contributions and multiple perspectives of members from all countries and regions.⁶

XV

It would take more than 230 days for the 23 percent of the world's population who live on less than one dollar a day to afford a night in the Sheraton.⁷ It would take the average Tajikistanian professor sixteen and half months salary to pay for one night at the cheapest recommended conference accommodation. An entire months salary would pay for the average Russian professors room for one night in the cheapest accommodation.⁸

XVI

We seldom address publicly whether democracy has limits and what those might be. In the political arena, Western commentators often assume that more democracy is better. Note that above, we queried whether this assumption is thought to hold true in workplaces. In all cases, we need to ask whether assumptions regarding democracy rest on scientific theory and evidence as well as on values. Active experimentation with democracy goes on in organizations all the time via efforts at distributed decision making, information sharing, and experimental incentive systems mixing equity and equality or collective and individual rewards. Organizational researchers have a crucial role to play as public scholars to inform the discussion of democracy in a knowledge economy, whether it be manifest in workplaces, in marketplaces, or in the broader community.⁹

XVII

Whether there are limits to democracy's benefits probably depends on the organizational and societal contexts in which democracy arises and whether the opportunity for democratic forms is growing, declining or in crisis. It may be that democracy and the values promoting it are less universal than we realize. Though democracy offers protection from abuse of power, there may be other means of organizing that provide similar protections. As scholars of organizations and organizing, who operate increasingly cross-nationally, we must give more attention to alternative means of protecting against abuse of power, addressing functional organizations underpinned by institutions that differ from those we typically study.¹⁰

6 Academy of Management, Statement of Strategy Direction [www.aomonline.org/aom.asp?ID=0&page_ID=49].

7 World Bank (2000) *World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*. Washington: World Bank.

8 Open Society Institute (2000) *The Book sector in Eastern and Central Europe*. Budapest: Open Society Institute.

9 Democracy in a Knowledge Economy [meetings.aomonline.org/2003/submissions/theme.html].

10 *ibid.*



XVIII

In the face of the project for the reconstruction of a hierarchical society, the alternative of the left should consist of locating itself fully in the field of democratic revolution and expanding the chains of equivalence between the different struggles against oppression, *The task of the left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy.*¹¹

XIX

During the conference there was limitless discussion of democracy. Some of these discussions included ‘corporate power and democracy’, ‘democracy and discourse’, ‘government and democracy’, ‘democracy at work: a debate’, ‘democracy and diversity’, ‘balancing security and freedom’, ‘democracies limits’, ‘workplace democracy’, ‘democratizing education’, and ‘workers, firms and democracy’. I felt like I had never talked so excessively about democracy in my life. I had never heard so many words. No wonder I wanted to participate in the solitary totalitarianism of drinking and lolling about in my overpriced hotel room twenty-eight floors above the greatest democracy on earth.

XX

Alone, at last! Not a sound to be heard but the rumbling of some belated and decrepit cabs. For a few hours I shall have silence, if not repose. At last the tyranny of the human face has disappeared, and I myself shall be the only cause of my sufferings. At last,

11 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso, p. 176, emphasis in original.

then, I am allowed to refresh myself in a bath of darkness! First of all, a double turn of the lock. It seems to me that this twist of the key will increase my solitude and fortify my barricades that at this instant separate me from the world.¹²

XXI

I always seemed to wake up at 5.00am. A long shower and an hour of offensive news from CNN pass the time. I still cannot get over the number of pharmaceutical advertisements. I look forward to the orgy of consumer choices I will participate in during breakfast: coffee or juice, pink or blue artificial sweeteners, eggs or pancakes, butter or cream, maple syrup perhaps, hash browns? I am knee deep in ideology, even at breakfast. After my deliciously squanderous breakfast, I will step out onto the street to head to democracy.

XXII

Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form on of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city'.¹³

XXIII

Is there space for everyone on these democratic streets? Even Lenin?

the author

André Spicer is a lecturer in organisation theory at the University of Warwick. He is currently addressing globalisation discourse, space, a critique of the entrepreneur, and theories of resistance and power. This was the first time he attended the Academy of Management.
E-mail: andre.spicer@wbs.ac.uk

12 Charles Baudelaire (1988) *Twenty Prose Poems*. San Francisco: City Light, p. 23.

13 Michel de Certeau (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: University of California Press, p. 97.