

Organisational Change and Discourse: Hegemony, Resistance and Reconstitution

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The article considers the discourse surrounding culture change programmes in two British manufacturing organisations. The analysis of organisational discourse is pursued as a means of revealing the indeterminacy of organisational experiences and the problems inherent to the introduction of generic change approaches such as TQM (Total Quality Management) and BPR (Business Process Reengineering). An examination of the discourse used in the case companies will show an intricate set of structural, cultural, economic, and personal pressures passing through the TQM/BPR concepts. Organisational actors from all hierarchical levels are shown to be "disciplined" by the change discourse to various degrees. Three discursive movements are examined: the imposition/ introduction of a hegemonic discourse, the resistance to this discourse, and the appropriation of the discourse by line managers to reconstitute their actions and those of senior management. The outcome of these movements is a contested set of stories, full of contradiction and ambiguity. If the change discourse is to be embodied in local practices it cannot remain purely monologic, but has to engage in a dialogic relationship with existing and emerging concepts and meanings.

INTRODUCTION: ORGANISATIONAL DISCOURSE AND CULTURE CHANGE

«To claim that the researcher somehow explores the real world directly, without mediation of language, and then represents, mirrors, or translates that world into a precise word picture is today unthinkable.»
(Van Maanen, 1996, p.378).

The language we employ to describe what we take to be the facticity of organisational life has become a focus of interest in recent years. Organisational researchers have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that organisational life, like any other human activity, cannot be separated from the discursive fields of which it is an integral part (Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995; Hatch, 1996; Van Maanen, 1995). The idea that language has a role in the constitution of reality has gained prevalence in a wide segment of social studies primarily as a result of work in social construction and natural language philosophy (Phillips and Hardy, 1997). This idea emphasises that discourses create ways of understanding the world, they do not mirror reality

(Rorty, 1980). The organisational discourse perspective does not deny that social events do have causes and social institutions effects, but organisational actors necessarily operate in the cognitive domain, namely a domain within which they interact with their own descriptions (Geertz, 1980), and they cognise situations with the terms they have available.

Discourse can be seen as a historically contingent body of regularised practices of language that are condoned by a particular community. It is made up of rules and procedures that construct and legitimate the way we see things and talk about them. These practices make possible certain statements and communicational practices while disallowing others (Casey, 1995). Discourse not only restricts, limits and arranges what can and cannot be said about the phenomena within its domain; it also empowers (and disempowers) certain agents to speak on this or that question or fact. In many respects discourse empowers certain agents to create representations, and thereby to authoritatively pronounce on the shape and form of the world (Prior, 1997). In using a particular discourse actors not only secure the right to speak but they maintain or challenge power relations. Consequently, discourses reproduce and transform power relations and are, therefore, political processes (Phillips and Hardy, 1997).

1. They were certainly lucrative from the consultants' point of view. A senior partner at Andersen Consulting is reported to have proclaimed: «God Bless Mike Hammer» after having estimated yearly worldwide company revenues of \$700 million as a direct result of BPR consultancy work (Thackray, 1993).

Over the past decade, the most popular discourses¹ aimed at trying to change organisational practices have been those of Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR). These discourses are typified by terms such as empowerment, culture change, cross-disciplinary teams, work process flow, internal customers and continuous improvement. From an organisational discourse perspective the TQM and BPR rhetorics can be seen as ways of constructing realities or schemes for sensemaking (Kieser, 1997). Through a particular change discourse (examples of this can be found in company videos, newsletters and management presentations), senior managers attempt to define the normative expectations of their employees' role. In constructing the organisation as one thing as opposed to another, certain lines of action are invited and others discouraged.

The popularity of the TQM and BPR rhetoric in the practitioner orientated literature has been matched by a rising scepticism in the more academically orientated literature (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Boje and Winsor, 1993), leading to accusations of faddism (e.g. Aldag, 1997; Ramsay, 1996) or, even worse, of undermining worker dignity and efficacy (Steingard and Fitzgibbons, 1993). In this paper I am not so much concerned with the meaning of TQM or BPR in an abstract sense; rather I intend to capture experiences, as expressed in organisational stories, resulting from the imposition of the TQM/BPR discourse in two case companies. In a final discussion section I will provide a grounded critique of the BPR and TQM rhetorics based on these stories.

GROUNDING AND REPRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH

This study can be situated within a growing body of storytelling research (for an elaborate overview of this literature see, for example, Boyce, 1996). I understand by "story" a report about an event, a situation, a little world, as seen through the eyes of the storytellers who report about their relations with an object or objects in that world (Hummel, 1991). Stories do not merely recount events. They are the products of severe editing. As such they are inventions rather than discoveries (Weick, 1995). Storytellers are not concerned with "facts-as-information" but with "facts-as-experience", turning every-day experience into meaningful stories. In doing so, the storytellers neither accept nor reject "reality". Instead they seek to mould it in a distinct way (Gabriel, 1995). Stories and storytelling are not just diversion. Stories connect facts, store complex summaries in retrievable form, and help people comprehend complex environments (Weick and Browning, 1986).

The storytelling literature places great importance on narrative ways of knowing. The distinction with more traditional ways of organising reality was aptly captured by Barry and Elmes (1997b): «There are two basic ways we, as social beings, construct and organize reality. The logicoscientific mode seeks truth through empirical verification; its goal is the reduction of uncertainty and its language is regulated by requirements of consistency and noncontradiction. The narrative mode, in contrast, emphasizes the creation of good stories that are contextually and temporally bound. This perspective leads not to certainties but to kaleidoscopic understandings.» (Barry and Elmes, 1997b, p. 847)². Fisher's work (e.g. 1984; 1985) is referenced consistently in the storytelling literature (e.g. Boje, 1991; Boyce, 1996; Weick and Browning, 1986). He is credited with coining the term "narrative paradigm" which encompasses various narrative ways of organising reality. Within the narrative paradigm people are portrayed as meditative as well as calculative thinkers who judge the reasoning in stories by how well the story hangs together and how fully it rings true with experience. The meaning and value of a story are always a matter of how it stands with or against other stories. There is no story that is not embedded in other stories. One considers not the truth *per se* of the stories, but the consequences of accepting them as truth after a determination of their truth qualities as assessed by the tests of narrative probability and narrative fidelity³ (Fisher, 1985).

If organisations are "webs of meaning" (Geertz, 1973) then no one can stand outside those webs. The researcher, or any other "expert" for that matter, is a storyteller just like everyone else⁴. No matter how strictly a case is argued, it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspect of the world which is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality (Weick and Browning, 1986). Czarniawska (1997, p. 26) pointed out that while «narratives on organisations» (the traditional ways of writing about organisations) are

2. Butler (1997) makes very much the same point when he contrasts the essential difference between stories and experiments as a basis for empirical social inquiry.

3. Narrative probability refers to formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thought and/or action in life or literature; it concerns the question of whether a story hangs together. Narrative fidelity concerns the "truth qualities" of the story, the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values (Fisher, 1985).

4. Instead of discovering enduring facts of organisational life and reporting them through neutral description, the researcher actively creates truth by assigning meaning to the phenomena he or she observes and experiences. It thus becomes difficult to conceive of any possibility of an "accurate" or even an "impartial" representation of "organisational reality". In the very act of constructing data out of experience, the researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background, thus eliminating any possibility of providing "pure" description, sometimes referred to light-heartedly as "immaculate perception" (Wolcott, 1994).

usually stylised in the «only true story» format, «narratives *in* organisations» are manifold. The storytelling research tries to preserve this plurality. The kaleidoscopic aspect of storytelling research can be witnessed in many examples of this literature. In what follows I provide a very brief selection.

Martin (1990) deconstructs and reconstructs an organisational story of a mere six lines from a feminist point of view. She explores how apparently well-intentioned organisational practices can reify, rather than alleviate, gender inequalities. Barry and Elmes (1997a) take a narrative view of strategy. They investigate how tellings of strategy fundamentally influence strategic choice and action and highlight the discursive, social nature of the strategy project, linking it to cultural and historical contexts. Boje (1991) offers a first-hand observation of storytelling as it is performed naturally in an organisation. His work draws attention to the uses of storytelling by internal and external stakeholders and to the dynamics which vary story performance. These stakeholders posit alternative stories with alternative motives and implications to the very same underlying historical incident. In his study of the discourses surrounding the Disney corporation Boje (1995) traces the ways in which the official and the nonofficial accounts play with the same story elements but come away with very different readings and then analyses the relationship of the nonofficial accounts to the dominant legend of an official, happy, and profitable organisation. All stories about Disney are found to cover up a great deal of ambiguity. Boje concludes that: «Organizations cannot be registered as one story, but instead are a multiplicity, a plurality of stories and story interpretations in struggle with one another... More important, organizational life is more indeterminate, more differentiated, more chaotic, than it is simple, systematic, monological, and hierarchical.» (p. 1001).

The analysis of the reengineering movement by Boje, Rosile, Dennehy and Summers (1997) is perhaps of greatest direct relevance to this paper. Boje and co-workers deconstruct the concept of reengineering as found in Hammer and Champy's (1993) text and tapes from Hammer's "performances" at management seminars and pull out the storytelling aspects in the BPR discourse. Hammer and Champy promise a set of general principles that will reinvent companies in the postindustrial age but what appears to be a revolution or revision is actually more of the same, «a storyteller's fictive revisioning of the American dream» (Boje *et al.*, 1997, p. 639). For example, Boje *et al.* (p.647) show how 19 reengineering themes can be reread as bureaucratic themes.

The common theme running through these examples is that of «powerful storytellers propagandising their version of reality as the reality that other storytellers are to live in⁵.» The authors show, often through a deconstruction of various stories, how discourse is used to impose power over others, and how these «hegemonic discourses» can be opened up to various readings. In this sense all the authors build on Lyotard's (1984) concept of the «grand narrative» as totalising account. In considering the impact of the TQM/BPR discourse in the two case organisations I will elaborate on this theme. In the case organisations

5. A quote derived from a suggestion of one of the referees.

senior people were asking others to live out a particular script, partially drafted by management gurus. This set in motion a whole chain of discursive movements.

The empirical section that follows consists of two parts. The first part contains a description of the contextual embedding of two change programmes. The second part considers the official change discourse, the reaction of organisational members (both in terms of resistance and of "reconstitution" of practices) and the conflicting meanings which finally emerge from the encounter between the two. It will take the form of a mix of interpretation and mini-stories by organisational actors. I will try to represent the local hodgepodge of sensemaking by quoting some of the voices of the actors involved. Inevitably, I will have to impose a certain formal coherence on a virtual chaos of events and interpretations. There is no need to maintain the illusion that "those people" talk for themselves; indeed they do not (cf. Czarniawska, 1997). But at least I try to pay them a compliment by making the reader clearly aware of the fact that there are different languages being spoken. Representation is ultimately always self-presentation. Even when we allow others to speak, when we talk about or for them, we are taking over their voice (Denzin, 1994). Not an ideal situation, but as Martin argued: «It is difficult to imagine how to give up the author-ity game, without reducing the researcher to the role of a secretary or a publisher.» (Martin, 1992, p.201).

EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

«The adventures first,» said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: «explanations take such a dreadful time.» (Carroll 1865/1982, p.95).

The empirical findings represented here are based on a research intervention over the period 1992-1994 in two divisions of two large British manufacturing organisations: Pilkington Insulation Ltd. and British Nuclear Fuels - Fuel Division. These divisions will be referred to in this paper as PIL and BNFL. The intervention was concerned with the study of the introduction of the latest concrete manifestations of planned organisational change: TQM (Total Quality Management) and BPR (Business Process Reengineering). These approaches were described at the time as the two latest expressions of an increasing sophistication in management techniques and principles. BPR was introduced in BNFL under the label "rightsizing", in PIL the CATS (Competitive Advantage Through Service) programme was based on the BPR principles and philosophy. The TQM and BPR inspired change programmes were introduced chronologically in the case companies (roughly separated by a 3-year time gap) and were represented as distinct change approaches in the official change discourse. However, I will conflate the TQM and BPR constructs when I talk about "TQM/BPR discourse" in my interpretation, as I see these constructs as part of a hegemonic discourse that tries to sell a particular story of

6. I am aware that in doing so I am implicitly taking a stance against the official change discourse.

7. A phrase pulled from the PIL newsletter (Summer, 1990)

8. «TQM is like starting on a road that goes on forever. TQM will never end for any of us. We will always be asking: “What are the next steps we should be taking?”» (The BNFL quality handbook, 1990, p.39).
«We are on a long journey of continuous improvement...» (PIL newsletter, Autumn 1991).

organisational reality⁶. In any case, the conceptual distinction proposed in the official change discourse was not shared throughout the organisation. Most of the data used to build a picture of the introduction of planned change programmes were derived either from semi-structured interviews or company documents: 35 managers were interviewed in PIL and 41 in BNFL. The interviews covered people in managerial roles at various hierarchical levels and various departments in the divisions.

CONTEXTUAL EMBEDDING OF THE CHANGE PROGRAMMES

Economic reality, resulting in the perceived need to «increase organisational effectiveness and efficiency in order to ensure survival in an increasingly competitive market⁷», formed a powerful driver for instigating change in both case companies. The link between external and internal pressures for change was provided by the discourse of senior managers. Senior managers conceptualised the latest change programmes as the expression of an increasing sophistication in managing change («building on what we've already achieved»). The change programmes were presented/explained as a way to ensure the ultimate survival of the organisation, reduce internal inefficiencies, and involve people more in the working of the organisation. Consultants played a significant role in both case companies in establishing the initial conceptualisation of the change programmes by senior management. This conceptualisation involved moving the organisation from its present state to a future, more desirable state and was underpinned by the journey metaphor⁸. Frustrations created by the existing organisational set-up with its old rules and rigid departmental structures (i.e. dissatisfaction with the status quo, «we cannot keep running our organisation this way») were fully exploited in this discourse.

Economic pressures for change in BNFL Fuel Division identified by senior managers included: the disappearing market for Fuel Division's main product (Magnox), the privatisation of the electricity industry (and the accompanying move from cost-plus to fixed price contracts), and increasing international competition. When TQM was introduced (1990) these economic difficulties could be foreseen but were not yet tangible in day-to-day activities. The main perceived driver behind rightsizing was the demand of Nuclear Electric and Scottish Nuclear to bring prices for nuclear fuel down by 20%. This translated into a 20% or more reduction in the workforce. Although rightsizing was partly initiated by the desire to grasp organisational problems at their root, something which TQM seemed to be unable to achieve, the main driving force behind the initiative was beyond any doubt external.

Apart from these economic pressures, BNFL was not immune to the politics surrounding the nuclear industry in the UK. A less explicit, but very forceful driver in Fuel Division, was the need to “look good” and thus be considered as a candidate for privatisation when Nuclear Electric and Scottish Nuclear would cut their ties with the government.

Managers in Fuel Division saw themselves as the most progressive in the whole of the UK group. The desire to keep up this image of being in touch with the latest developments in management thinking constituted a further driving force to start the TQM and rightsizing change programmes.

Frustrations about demarcations (both vertical and horizontal) exerted a strong pressure for change and were fully exploited during the introduction of the TQM programme. The demarcation was apparent at managerial level in strong departmentalism and clear hierarchical distinctions. There also existed strong demarcations at shop floor level (e.g. the different "trades"). TQM and rightsizing were explicitly conceived as a way to replace the old rules («keep your head down and do as you are told», empire building) by new ones (challenge things, get involved, «we are all in this together»).

PIL had been operating in a far more competitive environment than BNFL and had faced harsh trading conditions since 1989. Even within the Pilkington group, PIL was perceived as being «at the sharp end of things». Prices of its main products had fallen by 60% (adjusted for inflation) between 1988 and 1993 as PIL struggled to maintain its market share. Jobs had been cut mercilessly in order to survive. Economic pressures had been a major driver in the introduction of the change programmes.

Internal drivers for change in PIL were a reaction to very similar problems which had been identified in the 1969 Productivity Programme in the Pilkington group: working relationships which were stifling any initiative (demarcation), wasteful practices and lack of involvement of employees. The internal drive for CATS seemed to have been twofold: a frustration with TQM that it did not «deliver the goods» and the desire of the new CEO to make an impression on the organisation. The CATS programme initially also benefited from the contrast with the inaction of TQM (e.g. by building on existing dissatisfaction with TQM). PIL directors took pride in being at the forefront of management thinking and were quick to take up any new developments in the management field. PIL was generally considered to be a "social laboratory" for the rest of the Pilkington group. The need to keep up this image of being a front-runner (a main driving force behind the introduction of the change programmes) was partly due to the fact that PIL was not a core business for the Pilkington group and therefore could be abandoned at any time. Later events proved that this fear was not unfounded⁹.

9. In June 1994 PIL was sold to the Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation.

INTERPRETING THE CHANGE DISCOURSE

The mini stories provided here should give the reader a «flavour of the politics of language played out in a discursive field¹⁰». The aim is not to use them to "prove" my interpretation is the only possible one. Nevertheless, I believe it is important that the reader gets some insight in what kind of language was used by the various organisational actors. I decided on a textual strategy of keeping the interpretation and quotes pertaining to particular assertions separate (rather than illus-

10. A suggestion by one of the reviewers on how to restructure the first draft of the paper. The vague descriptions of managerial positions after the quotes are a compromise between the need to give some indication of the speaker's hierarchical position while protecting his/her anonymity.

11. Boje et al. (1997, p. 655) dig out a nice quote from Hammer in this respect: «Let them buck, let them speak up, then break the colt down.»

trating every assertion with some quote or other) in order not to play the puppeteer too much. Although the order I impose here over the chaotic is largely artificial, the quotes are not and should bring the section to life. My order takes the form of three movements: the imposition/introduction of a hegemonic discourse, the resistance to this discourse, and the appropriation of the discourse by organisational actors to reconstitute their actions and those of senior management. At the very least, this representation should provide a kaleidoscopic understanding of the phenomenon of “resistance to change”. Conventionally this resistance is interpreted as psychological backwardness (usually attributed to people at the lower levels of the hierarchy) and senior managers are often encouraged to be relentless in responding to resistance¹¹. Once we step outside the hegemonic discourse, “resistance” becomes the right to question the ideas that are presented as unavoidable. The result may be a rejection or an appropriation, a translation of the hegemonic discourse for one’s own purposes (Czarniawska, 1997). In a final interpretative move I summarise the dominant and marginalised meanings temporarily co-existing, thus undermining the idea of any permanent order.

IMPOSITION OF A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

«It seems to me that your power is a hidden power, because people only think of you as communicating reality, but in communicating reality, you construct reality.» (Hines, 1988, p.257).

The TQM and BPR discourse can be seen in part as a reflection of the necessity for large corporations to find new and innovative ways of competing constructively, of managing fragmented workforces and facilitating their survival in threatening circumstances (Kerfoot and Knights, 1995). It allows the organisation to tell itself as a coherent, centred, and strategically organised set of arrangements (Law, 1994). The discourse of TQM and BPR is powerful partly because it is made to appear complete and neutral, thus hiding the tensions and incompleteness. It emerges and assumes the mantle of common sense, as a new normality that subsumes that which came before (Knights and Murray, 1994). In espousing the TQM/BPR discourse organisational members can gain status and specific identities, but they also re-enact a dominant set of power relations (Deetz, 1998). What is good for the company is supposed to be perceived by employees as being good for them (Keenoy, 1997). TQM/BPR is presented as “the only way to be” if the organisation is to survive and jobs to be preserved.

«I am sure we are like any other organisation in that you think that you know what TQM is but it is only when you get further and further into it that you realise how big it is and the way it interacts with the business. TQM was seen as an umbrella initiative 4 years ago. The level that we are at now is that we see it as an integral part of the business process, an operating philosophy. We are at a stage where continuous impro-

vement is genuinely recognised as a necessity. It is now also built into our strategic and business plans. TQM has come of age. We understand what it means now. We understand what we need to do to be world class. What we need to do is prioritise and focus tightly on the critical areas which are going to advance us on the world class ladder.» (senior manager, BNFL).

«The philosophy and techniques of TQM have helped to overcome the inertia of this massive project [building of a new plant]. We tended to become more focused on giving people a better service, talk to other parts of the division. We had personal contracts with R&D where they promised to deliver us the goods by certain dates. And people took pride in working to achieve that.» (senior manager, BNFL).

«It's the only way to be. If you're not in the club you're dead.» (senior manager PIL).

«There is the outward image you would like to give if someone asks you at a senior level whether you agree with TQM; you are likely to say yes. Because if you say no..., it's a bit like the emperor's new clothes, it's incorrect from a career point of view.» (middle manager, BNFL).

I had some first hand experience of the operation of hegemonic tendencies during my research intervention. When presenting my material to senior managers in BNFL the research findings were treated very defensively. Concern was expressed that my findings were overly negative. The apprehension which was expressed by most interviewees was brushed aside as «hat will be very easy to overcome» (sic). Contradictions and deviating opinions were eloquently explained away. Even the managers I had interviewed and found very willing to discuss all sorts of problems displayed a totally different behaviour pattern in this final meeting. Eventually it was decided to extract four or five key issues from my research report and to «BNFL-ise» (sic) them. In effect this meant: fit it in with the official company discourse. Although I had informally agreed to make a series of presentations to lower level managers, this offer was now diplomatically turned down (something which had been predicted by one of the line managers)¹².

RESISTANCE TO THE TQM/BPR DISCOURSE

Narratives are necessarily incomplete. Their attempts to tell and embody arrangements tend to encounter resistances (Law, 1994). Organisational members are not simply passive agents, easily seduced by the TQM/BPR discourse (Parker, 1997). They quickly call attention to inconsistencies between the assumptions that the change discourse espouses and the historical patterns of authority relations that they have experienced (Wilkinson, Godfrey, and Marchington, 1997). For example, in the case companies actions taken under the TQM label reflected the same structure of power that the TQM discourse was ostensibly meant to challenge and change. The TQM discourse

12. Boyce (1995, p.126) relates a similar incident while examining collective sense-making and storytelling at a non-profit organisation. When the themes and stories emerging in the study did not confirm the president's desired direction, the study became invisible.

and its concerns with trust, commitment and “having the right attitude”, seemed in direct contradiction with its actual introduction and its effects on the organisational members.

In BNFL the change directive arrived as a *fait accompli*, with little reflection of local concerns, dissent, or alternative views. As the change process unfolded, many of the old cultural rules tended to corrupt the new rules. For example, “playing the TQM game” became a new way of empire building; managers who wanted promotion had to be “seen” to support TQM. Expectations of operational managers were that vertical demarcations would become less pronounced (and they did to some extent) but many were disappointed by the perceived commitment shown by colleagues, senior managers and the director. To many TQM had become part of the political games that were played in the organisation and was no longer seen as way to make BNFL a better organisation. Apathy set in. Although in the official change discourse rightsizing was presented as a way of delivering the drastic changes TQM failed to produce, in practice the programme was perceived by operational managers as being driven by external constituencies (i.e. the need to cut costs by at least 20% by any means). This led to extreme apprehension which undermined the programme. This apprehension was further amplified by people's anxiety about their employment prospects in the “rightsized” BNFL.

«TQM was wonderfully done [ironic]. “We are going to become a better organisation, therefore you will love TQM, whether you like it or not”. There was a video from the chief executive “I am determined that we are going to become a better organisation; we are going to participate [slams fist on table]”. Not: “I have the desire” or “we would like you to...” The words were awful. Whoever sanctioned that video should have been shot... It sent us a terrible message. No vision about it, completely top down, no input, no ownership...» (middle manager, BNFL).

«People have been asked to join teams and are reluctant to do so because they don't feel they are getting anywhere. It takes up a tremendous amount of time to move a small step. There is the perception there is a lot of fuss about nothing. They formalised it, got people's photographs everywhere; that somehow justifies the time, money, and effort it has taken to do this. I was a sturdy follower of TQM for a long time. I initiated a lot of quality improvement teams and even I now think “Why are we bothering?” We seem to be driven into doing something. That is where the problem lies. It is almost as if we are driven to make changes for the sake of making changes rather than living with the fact that people are going to make changes in their own area in their own time.» (middle manager, BNFL).

«People leaving and not being replaced, is that rightsizing?» (ironic voice - junior manager, BNFL).

In PIL a significant number of employees had come to believe there

was a necessary link between the TQM programme and job reductions and thus many rejected all proposed changes under the TQM banner. They referred to two major redundancy rounds coinciding with the implementation of TQM. Furthermore, since the same work had to be done by far less people, managers became subject to a lot of additional pressure. Consequently they resented having to spend time on issues that they perceived as not directly related to “doing the job” (e.g. TQM meetings). TQM then became «the damn thing that had to be done». Furthermore, any changes which required a considerable amount of resources (either money or manpower) were not made because all resources needed to be focused on the day-to-day survival. This constraint was most apparent in the allocation of resources. Only a particular type of change —small, efficiency improvements which did not require any up-front investment— was possible on a recurrent and reliable basis. Inevitably, the TQM discourse tended to get trivialised.

Many managers made sense of TQM by using the experiences of the old change programmes (these were framed negatively, i.e. trumpet celebrations and no changes in actual working practices). Under the CATS label changes were introduced and implemented at great pace. However, over time doubts began to surface about the value of the CATS programme. An elite had been created (PIL managers who were working closely with the consultants) and all managers were put under a great amount of pressure. Some clearly expressed the feeling they were «being pushed around». This made many managers very apprehensive about the whole exercise. Doubts had begun to surface concerning the value and sincerity of the CATS programme at the end of my research intervention.

«TQM, continuous improvement, we have got to give a better service, and yet our resources are cut again and again. Fundamentally, that is the contradiction we have got. People certainly think they are tight on time and therefore have not the time and resources to do what the organisation says we are doing: TQM, spending time to get it right.» (senior manager PIL).

«I believe the managers need to stand up for themselves a bit more to the directors. The middle management are getting squeezed in between the staff and directors. I see a lot of our conditions are changing, at the stroke of a pen, without consultations: this is it guys.» (middle manager, PIL).

«We had these TQM story sheets. A couple of those were wrong. I say that quite confidently. The conclusions drawn from these TQM initiatives were incorrect from a scientific point of view. That is the sort of daft things we were doing. Trying to impress people with success stories. One was about labelling in the warehouse. It was said that because of TQM the number of errors had gone down. The evidence clearly showed that with the introduction of the new scheme the number of

errors had gone up. You don't need many of those before you say: this is all wrong.» (middle manager, PIL).

APPROPRIATION OF THE TQM/ BPR DISCOURSE

Dominant discourses are totalising only for those who view them as such; they are replete with fissures within which people engage in their individual practices of sensemaking. Organisational actors will try to appropriate the discourse, translate it for their own needs, "authorise" it as it were (cf. Czarniawska, 1997). Thus the change discourse becomes a double-edged sword whereby operational managers can "reconstitute" their practices and those of senior management as much as senior management could do the same to operational managers. If senior managers talk about working within a TQM philosophy, then there is an opening for their subordinates to represent themselves and their superiors within the same logic (Parker, 1997; Wilkinson et al., 1997). It then no longer is a question of being for or against TQM/BPR. The issue becomes: How do the different parties involved reshape their interests in the context of TQM/BPR (Munro, 1995)? For example, buying into the change discourse can be a possible way of signalling to those with the power to promote that managers are not averse to change, but that while they are prepared to look critically at the system in which they work, they will not unduly rock the organisational boat (Huczynski, 1993). Of course, there is no guarantee that this strategy will necessarily work to an individual's advantage.

«TQM got me a promotion... You'll notice that wherever you go, wherever there is a TQM co-ordinator, there has evolved a little empire, someone got a promotion out of it.» (middle manager, BNFL).

«People belittle TQM but the way they work is within the TQM philosophy anyway. They say: "Why call it TQM? We've always done that". I've never come across anyone saying "We're not doing it because it is TQM". Teamworking, taking responsibility for their own quality is seen by people as the normal way to work.» (middle manager, BNFL).

«For example, there was a TQM lunch scheduled by one of our directors so that he could speak to a wide variety of people. Now the date has been moved back. Unfortunately people predicted that this would happen. They feel a bit let down and wonder "Is that what TQM is about?". It is the same with cutting down costs. We are saying to people "you can't just use as many pencils as you want" and then you see someone in a more senior position having a grand lunch somewhere or travel first class... It is not essential but people feel there are different rules that apply for different people and that undermines TQM. TQM then becomes a very easy label to blame things or people. Instead of the individual, TQM gets the slant.» (middle manager, PIL).

«I know people find me a pain at times but I have always tried to do as near a perfect job as I could. TQM therefore was absolutely superb. I thought “great, at last somebody else is going to do the same sort of things”. There were all sorts of problems in R&D at the time and I tried to get things put right. As a result of that I got branded as 'incomplete' and had a salary cut. You conclude what you like from that. Obviously it is only me who says so but I genuinely tried to do something about things under the banner of TQM and that is what happened.» (middle manager, PIL).

«CATS was an opportunity for us to show to the board how important we are in the organisation providing computer services.» (junior manager, PIL).

«People did not take other people seriously when they were trying to do something about it [organisational problems]. One could quote a hundred examples which prove that the board did not really understand what it was about and what the consequences of it were.» (middle manager, PIL).

OUTCOMES: A CONFUSING AND CONTESTED SET OF MEANINGS

The discourse promulgated by the senior management became increasingly irrelevant as a significant number of operational managers saw it as «high flying language» which had very few connections with the day-to-day work. The meaning attached to outcomes and events as managers made sense of actions, or lack of these, by colleagues and the top team became increasingly inconsistent with the company message. As the official change discourse tried to control actors' sense-making, it effectively marginalised alternative meanings attached to outcomes, issues, and events and got progressively more out of touch with lived organisational experiences. Eventually this discourse would be stretched to breaking point. The way the companies coped was eventually to drop a particular change discourse (the TQM discourse) in favour of a new discourse which promised to alleviate all the existing problems (rightsizing or CATS discourse). However, towards the end of the research intervention this “new” discourse had generated just as many alternative meanings among organisational members. **Tables 1** and **2** contain some examples of the “official” view on certain issues and cultural rules and the requisite alternative meanings attached to these same issues and cultural rules.

Table 1. Meanings of the TQM/Rightsizing discourse and cultural rules in BNFL

Official Meanings	Alternative Meanings
TQM is the continuous improvement in the performance of BNFL, in meeting safely and cost effectively, agreed requirements of internal and external customers, by releasing the potential of all employees.	There is certainly the attitude that TQM is the practical alternative to work. A lot of the meetings could just be held for TQM's sake. People who are never invited to them feel they are carrying the new culture, that they are doing the work, send out the fuel to the gates to make money.
An organisation that is extremely responsive, lean, flexible, process oriented, customer oriented, works closely with suppliers, no stocks, no lead times, empowered, highly motivated. That is the goal.	When you talk to the guys on the shop floor, they just see it as mechanisms for spending money. They don't see it as beneficial to them.
This was not just change for change's sake, but change which would give enough improvement and benefit to be worth doing. What we did was go back to fundamental questions and ask what business have we got and if we were starting from scratch again how would we organise and run them?	Rightsizing is nothing more than a demanning exercise. The intention may have been originally there to streamline the workforce and put people in the right work but that is not how it is perceived now.
I viewed rightsizing positively because it actually made us set some positive targets for reducing our cost which we did not have in TQM. That is what this division needs. Had it not been for that, we would still have been fiddling at the edges.	Certain directors are settling old scores on the rightsizing. They are targeting certain individuals and put undue pressure on them.
	Rightsizing was implemented overnight. The troops didn't get to know about it until the 11th hour. Are they hiding something or does it just tend to happen that way? I'm not sure. People are faced with a fait accompli and so experience it negatively.
Come up with initiatives, challenge, try and seek better ways of doing things. If you're not happy with the answer you get from your supervisor, go one line up. The hierarchy is not sacrosanct.	The advice to get on and survive comfortably? Dead easy: keep your head down, do your own work, stick to it, make sure that you get plenty of paper out, follow the rules. Stay on the right side of the right people, get your head down and get working.

DISCUSSION

«The meaning of contribution emerges not from the presentation of brute facts, but rather from the development of honest claims to convey knowledge intended for academic audiences.» (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997, p.1026).

The aim of this last section is to pull together some key themes and to convey what sense I make of the magnificent muddle I have presented so far. I will refer explicitly to several of the reviewers' comments in this discussion. Organisational tales can be told in many ways and different readers can potentially unlock different narratives from the same text. As the reviewers have contributed significantly in shaping the particular story I am telling about my field experiences, I decided to give them some kind of "voice" in the paper. They are the best substitute for a reader the author has to work with, thus allowing me to engage in at least something which approaches a real discussion¹³. The cynical reader may see this, with some justification, as part of a rhetorical strategy to support the validity of my story (cf. Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997).

13. The reader may have noticed that I already incorporated some reviewers' comments in this text (see footnotes 5 and 10). Of course, most of the reviewers' comments are of no direct interest to the reader (such as those concerning the lack of focus, theoretical basis, and interpretation in the first version of this paper). I limit myself to those comments I believe a reader might offer him/herself. The methodological reflections on "voice" offered earlier in the paper still apply.

Table 2. Meanings of the TQM/CATS discourse and cultural rules in PIL

Official Meanings	Alternative Meanings
<p>Once the TQM had started you found people far more willing to sit around the table and solve a problem mutually. There are very definite changes as far as that is concerned. The TQM is on-going and although it is a very gradual change in culture it is there, although it has had its highs and lows.</p>	<p>It just never came into being really. Everybody went on courses, got the literature, notices everywhere... but I don't think it made an impact on people. There was no connection with the daily work.</p>
<p>It is more alive now than it has been for the last year.</p>	<p>Practical consequences? None whatsoever. It degenerated from very fine philosophical principles to a cartoon on the notice board they churned out once a week.</p>
<p>TQM will give the company an advantage over its competitors so we can stay in business.</p>	<p>Many of the work force see it as the route to further job reductions - and we have lost 35% of our work force over the past two years.</p>
<p>To make us an efficient company, save money. Also enhance our reputation with the customers and involve people more in the workings of the company.</p>	<p>The ideals of it are wonderful but in reality they are very hard to achieve. "People are your most important asset" is an awkward thing to say when in the same breath we got rid of people.</p>
<p>The CATS project particularly, it has challenged the way people work. CATS delivered what TQM promised to achieve.</p>	<p>There were all these good ideas supposedly coming out of the CATS project. We had suggested those many years ago but no one had given them any backing. An outside group of people comes in led by a couple of people from within our organisation and suddenly work is getting done... I think it is a question of who is taking the credit?</p>
<p>It's a fairly open style. Reasonably informal, with quite a lot of space given without necessarily reinforcing that that space is given. There is very little in this organisation that if you want to do it, people actually stop you from doing it.</p>	<p>Even if you know about certain things that are key issues to the company and should be spoken about at a senior level I would be very careful about how to do that. You don't just speak out. If you want to get on you must be afraid of upsetting the apple cart.</p>
<p>Don't be afraid of challenging what you do. There are very few pockets in the organisation that would resent challenge.</p>	<p>To get on? Do as you are told and don't rock the boat. I'm sorry but I'm absolutely dead serious on that.</p>

This section is structured around two different suggestions/objections of reviewers. A first objection forces me to confront the "use-value" of my interpretation: why did I not provide an analysis that is of immediate help to managers? Two subtly different interpretations from the reviewers will then lead into a grounded appraisal of the TQM/BPR rhetorics. In this final part I will also indicate how I conceive of the "contribution" of my text.

A "USELESS" INTERPRETATION?

«You need to forget trying to find solutions to problems of TQM in the writings of text analysts, and look at the organizational learning literature for why some interventions succeed and fail.» (reviewer 2, revision1).»

Because my unit of analysis is not the change project itself, but the discourse surrounding it, many organisational issues may fade in the background. The particular problem with the ambiguous picture I have sketched is that it does not really provide what the market wants (cf. Deetz, 1995). Because people (managers especially) want simple solutions and explanations there is a pressure to provide them. Hence the tendency to produce texts which limit concepts to those with which one particular social group is ideologically comfortable or to those which highlight only the variables which are easily manipulable by managerial interests (Watson, 1994). In particular managers want to know the exact reasons why change interventions succeed or fail. But the false clarity that results when bowing to "market pressures" is often part and parcel of the dominant discourse, the discourse of those who think everything goes without saying (Bourdieu, 1990).

A practical problem in looking for clearly delineated causes of success or failure is that it is hard to know why, when, and if a change attempt has failed, precisely because of the many competing discourses. The inability to successfully transform an organisation may be attributable to a multitude of factors and there are no hard and fast standards for assessing the results of a change programme. One can always point to some positive developments and ascribe them to an intervention, even when the organisation as a whole is worse off for it (Miller, Greenwood, and Hinnings, 1997). The key participants in any change process have an elementary interest in portraying the costly process as a worthwhile and successful endeavour (Kieser, 1997). These difficulties are further exacerbated by the propaganda image of TQM and BPR in the popular press which implies that, as success is nearly universal, difficulties must be related to the exceptional obstructiveness or inadequacy of some of the parties involved locally (Ramsay, 1996).

Incidentally, both PIL and BNFL were identified by the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) as "best practice" companies in the area of TQM. Apparently they were managing quite well within the context of British industry. At the very least, external constituencies were impressed. However, the companies faced the same tensions which are widely reported in the organisational literature and which remain unresolved for the vast majority of companies who engage in a culture change programme. For example, how is the demand for continuously higher performance to be reconciled with the ideal of teamwork (Gergen and Whitney, 1996), teamwork and increased flexibility with "voluntary" redundancies (De Cock, 1998), empowerment with the increased routinisation of tasks (Boje and Winsor, 1993), cost-cutting with quality enhancement (Legge, 1995)? This very much raises the question whether culture change programmes are the most appropriate means of securing organisational change (Keenoy, 1997; Legge, 1995)? It is an issue I will address in the final part.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO A GROUNDED CRITIQUE OF THE TQM/BPR RHETORICS

«*Maybe it is not an image of propaganda, but propaganda is the change strategy in effect, to enhance careers, in these feudal kingdoms.*» (reviewer 1, revision 1).

«*While the rhetoric is anti-bureaucracy, the design puts in place an even more bureaucratic (top down), mechanistic (one best procedure and process designed in), and certainly less democratic design...*» (reviewer 1, revision 2).

«*How are TQM and BPR these kind of [totalising] discourses?... On the face of it they seem anything but totalizing in that they engender open-hearted resistance and criticism that is held in check not by the discourses but by the power structure and the implicit threat of unemployment or demotion. So, I was not convinced that discourse is totalizing anything or dominating or hegemonizing.*» (reviewer 2, revision 2).

Despite the lip service paid to issues such as “empowerment” and “teamwork”, the change initiatives tended to be imposed as *totalising* solutions in the case organisations. The mini-stories put into doubt whether the celebration of “empowerment” and “teamwork” under the TQM or BPR umbrella can be fully reconciled with the lived experience of employees if they simultaneously encounter a reduction in their job security and an intensification in the pace and pressures of their work (cf. Willmott, 1995). However, I am rather hesitant to point to some Machiavellian plot or a «capitalist schema of alienation, dehumanization, and totalitarianism» (Steingard and Fitzgibbons, 1993, p.32) behind the TQM/BPR discourse. Power/politics issues are part of the fabric of organisational life in our late 20th century capitalist society and not a set of actions and behaviours which can be simply bracketed or reified (for example, by pointing a finger at the evils of TQM). The TQM/BPR discourses, as used by senior managers, to a great extent *reproduce* rather than *transform* power relations which continuously confront organisational actors (De Cock, 1998).

Of course, the TQM/BPR discourse has political consequences in that some organisational actors potentially stand to lose and others to gain from it. But it is not all that clear who are the powerful «who seem to be able to define the story of others for others» (to use a quote from one of the reviewers again). All organisational actors are “disciplined” by the change discourse to some extent. Certainly, by virtue of their position senior managers have more opportunities to propagandise their version of reality, «to define the story of others for others». But even senior managers are limited in what they can and cannot do. As argued earlier, there is no story that is not embedded in other stories, and the TQM/BPR story lines are embedded in more macro-stories of the changes in industry and economic life. Organisations have to be

seen to be adopting the latest change discourse to demonstrate their legitimacy and rationality to significant others in the environment, even if their senior managers are not convinced of the value of this discourse. If senior managers do not appear to use the latest change discourse, then external stakeholders' expectations that the organisation is run rationally will tend to be disappointed, and stakeholders may withdraw their support from the organisation, thereby increasing the likelihood that the organisation and its managers will fail (Abrahamson, 1996). In this way all organisational actors are "disciplined" by the global change discourse.

Policy makers need to develop a coherent and plausible local discourse in response to these global discourses. They need to envisage an alternative way of institutional functioning, and this can be done only if they can articulate an alternative mission and establish an alternative discourse in terms of which reforms may be contemplated. In this sense «Ideological hegemony, far from being pernicious..., is a necessary prerequisite for challenging the status quo» (Tsoukas and Papoulias, 1996, p.861). The problem with discourses such as TQM/BPR is that they are generic discourses and therefore difficult to link to actual practices in a straightforward way. In order for the TQM/BPR discourse to embody local practices, a sensitivity to the parochial forms of reality that terms such as multi-functional teams, continuous improvement, empowerment, and the like sustain has to be developed (cf. Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996). Many managers and change agents realise that they should not follow Deming's, Crosby's or Hammer's rules religiously but is very difficult to break free of the TQM/BPR discourse precisely because it has been presented as natural, all-pervasive, "the only way to be". Perhaps some kind of hegemonic discourse is an inevitable first step to introduce change, but it is debatable whether a *generic* hegemonic discourse is the best starting point.

Organisational actors' understandings reside, first and foremost, in the practices in which they participate. Therefore, there will always exist an important asymmetry between the rules-as-represented (for example, in the TQM discourse) and the rules-as-guide-in-practice, the latter being far richer (Tsoukas, 1996). Thus the three movements of hegemony-resistance-constitution will surface in all organisations to a greater or lesser extent, leading to the ambiguous sensemaking I tried to capture in the mini-stories. The comment from reviewer 2 that the TQM/BPR discourses do not seem to totalise anything in practice (i.e. in PIL and BNFL) is correct. However, this does not mean that the BPR/TQM discourse is not totalising/hegemonic in its basic intent. The discourse very much tries to forcefully "sell" (supported by videos, seminars, and glossy brochures) a particular version of organisational reality¹⁴. It is just that, for better or for worse (depending on one's perspective), this totalising discourse has to compete with many other stories. What emerges ultimately is a unique combination of random events, sectional interests and existing routines. As Martin and Frost eloquently put it: «[T]here is no 'happy acculturated forever after' ending the change attempts. In all likelihood, there is no 'forever after'

14. As I clarified in an earlier point, this is not necessarily unique of the TQM/BPR discourse. This discourse is just the latest forum in which organisational power games are being played out.

in the script. At best, there may be some combination of agreement, dispute, and confusion that can be stitched together by human agency, as managers and others move the action along, accomplish some objective, and then regroup around subsequent problems, issues, and opportunities.» (Martin and Frost, 1996, p.614).

Managers who are serious about “change” will have to engage creatively with the various meanings created by the imposition of the hegemonic/monologic discourse and reflect on the dynamic unfolding of concrete interactions within a particular socio-temporal context, which should result in the acceptance of some kind of polyphony. Thus the hegemonic discourse would have to disappear or mutate over time if it is to have some lasting impact on organisational practices. The purely managerial interpretation and storytelling of the organisation and the world around it (the grand narrative) will have to be supplemented with local stories. These stories will not be decided upon by senior managers and consultants. Thus the organisational storytelling should become richer over time and go beyond the well-rehearsed script of saying something «about record profits due to a dramatically shortened cycle time and include great things employees have to say about the changes.» (Boje et al., 1997, p.655). The immediate implication is that any change process is more dynamic and recursive than the traditional linear or stage models with their underlying journey metaphor imply. These models which permeate the practitioners’ literature do not explain anything other than the order they try to prescribe in the first place. So if readers get away with the feeling that stage models are totally self-referential, see them for what they are (part of the popular consultants’ script), that would be at least one simple take-away product of this article.

Within a narrative approach the differences between story lines are at least as informative and useful as the formulation of an overarching account (Barry and Elmes, 1997b). Through the juxtapositioning of different accounts, the TQM and BPR constructs can become more contextualised and, thereby, more imbued with meaning. Thus I hope to have contributed to a grounded critique of the TQM and BPR discourses as well as to the burgeoning literature on storytelling. Ultimately my reflections can be only a contribution to a continuing debate about ways of organising, rather than a contribution to our knowledge of organisations. But most importantly... I hope you enjoyed reading my particular story and got something useful out of it, however you define “useful”.

Endnote: My sincerest gratitude goes out to the four reviewers for helping me to tell my story through the various revisions. Some sections, especially those tackling storytelling, almost could have been co-written by them. I integrated some of the reviewers’ suggestions and concerns to acknowledge their contribution to the construction of the text. The usual disclaimers apply.

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