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The Manager and His Powers

John Law

This paper...

- is based on real events and seeks to catch their spirit ... however, in the way they are told they are composite and have been both simplified and dramatised ... they are therefore not an accurate description of particular events, words, or people. It follows that specific options and decisions taken in the laboratories on which this text is based were not those described here ...
- was presented to the Mediaset Convention, Venice, 12th November, 1996 ...

The distal

In which we witness a cathedral of science

I want to tell you a story about a gleaming cathedral on the Protestant fringes of Northern Europe. A gleaming cathedral of science. A laboratory. How high is the tower? I don't know, but like the towers of Canterbury or Chartres, it dominates the plain for miles around. And pilgrims, scientific pilgrims, come from all over Europe. They come to the North to work on the great machines. To work with them. To play with the forces of nature.

I have walked in the precincts of that cathedral of science. And like the gothic cathedrals of Europe, it dwarfs the humans who work there. For it is an awesome place. Holes have been dug. Concrete poured. Walls and roofs erected. Machines installed. Office blocks furnished. Thousands of kilometres of cabling and pipework have been laid. And bureaucrats,



bureaucrat/ scientists have been employed. Hundreds of them. For, yes, this is a huge organisation. A bureaucracy. An administration. With managers. Powerful managers.

In which we see the powerful manager

Enter the glass doors. Climb the stairs. Turn left. Walk down the corridor. And you enter a place of power. **The** place of power. The place where the Director sits. The place where the commands go out. You enter the management place.

I have come to watch that power. And I am frightened as I watch its enactment. Its performance. Andrew is the Director. 'Why,' he says, 'why are we **having** this meeting? What on earth has gone wrong?' He is irritated. Angry. Like Gorbachev, he is a man with a nice smile and iron teeth.

I cower and I hope I am not noticed while his managers start to sweat. There is a problem. Something has gone seriously wrong. Will he bark out orders? Will he scorn them for their foolishness, their inefficiency? Will he storm out angrily? Shout at them for wasting his time? Will he transfer them to some distant hell-hole, to the punishment brigades of science?

This, then, is power. This is the **source** of power. At the top of the organisation there is a man. A powerful man. A person, a place, of beginnings and ends. The alpha and the omega.

The proximal

In which we take away the manager's materials

Andrew sits in his office.

Look at that office! Look at the carpets! Look at the conference table. The easy chairs, the coffee table. The magazines. The oiled teak desk. The fancy chair. The personal computer. The telephones. The papers. The intercom. The secretary. The electronic mail. The fax machine. The airline tickets. The invitations to speak. To travel. For, as we look at this room, we can sense open doors in faraway places, London, Brussels, Los Angeles. We are watching the appurtenances of power.

To do ethnography is to watch. But it is also to dream. To daydream. It is to play games with realities. To invent forms of social-science fiction. It is to find ways of telling stories that make realities look a little different. Realities about organisations. Realities about managers.

Yes, I am a dreamer. An ethnographic dreamer. And in my dream there is a deconstructive fairy. She is a fairy who will come and take away the bits and pieces of power. The bits and pieces of the powerful manager.

This fairy, she is cruel. She strikes where it will hurt. For first she has taken his computer! His computer? A box with wires? A keyboard? Well, yes. But more. Much more. For it is also his spreadsheets. His budgets. His projections. Suddenly these are gone, all gone. And Andrew, the all-powerful manager cannot calculate any more. He no longer knows anything about the finances of the laboratory. Are they making money? He has no idea. Perhaps the creditors are knocking on the door. Perhaps they are bankrupt. He cannot tell. He has no idea - for without his computer he is no longer a manager-accountant.

And with the spreadsheet? Yes, with the spreadsheet has gone the word-processor. And suddenly he cannot write. Not so quickly. Not so easily. Not so well. So Andrew changes again: no longer a manager-writer.

But worse, his archives are starting to erode. For when she waved her wand and the computer disappeared, then suddenly his memory started to fail too. All those files. Years of work. All those papers and publications. All those letters. His electronic diary. All gone. He has no idea what he did or said. What he thought. Where he was. Where he should be. Or when. He is a man without a memory. A manager without a past.

And with his memory? Yes, communications. His ability to shift his words beyond the office. Gone - the email! How will he talk with his managers, his friends, his contacts around the world? No fax? How will the plans and pictures move around the globe? And what will happen now to those obscure invitations to speak here and there, tell the stories of science? For he is



disconnected, an autistic subject, a manager with neither ears nor voice. For, yes, the cruel fairy of deconstruction has been busy while we've been talking. He went to lift his phone - and it had gone! He looked for a pocket calculator - and it was snatched from his hands. Paper, pen and pencil - all gone! And then he called to the next room. But there was no answer. The secretary, too, had gone. No dictation. No more typing. No more filing. No more coffee. And with her had fled the financial director, the postman, the driver. All gone. An empty building.

A man who is no longer an accountant. A man who cannot write. A man who cannot remember. A social deaf-mute. So what is left? Are we **left** with a manager? Are we **left** with a powerful man? Or are we left with something else?

In which we see that the manager is a network, a process

This is a dream - but a dream with a point. A dream that tells us something of the realities of the manager, the decisionmaker, the powerful person, the person with responsibility. And what we have learned is this: that Andrew, the greatest power in the cathedral of science, this organisation, the fearsome Director, that Andrew is nothing by himself.

By himself? What is he by himself? Answer: he's a naked ape - with all the powers of a naked ape! Yes! He can beat his chest. He can shout. He can hit us too, if he's big and strong. The powers of the body. To extract compliance. Important of course. Sometimes personal violence works well enough. But it isn't, shall we say, very reliable. Or very long range. Even thugs like to carry weapons, and leave their calling-cards. For the powers of the body - or of the mind - are the least part of it. The least part of the power of the powerful.

The powers of the powerful manager - this is the lesson of the deconstructive fairy - these are **extended**. Spread out. **Distributed**. They are distributed through the arrangements of the organisation. They arise **from** those arrangements. The people who do the work of subordinating themselves. Secretaries. The tiers of under-managers. The clerks. The technicians. All those people. But not just the people. For the powers of the powerful manager lie also in the papers. The texts that fix the commands. That map the organisation, its financial health, its credibility. They lie in the funds that circulate through the narrow networks of finance, oiling the wheels, promising, persuading, seducing. And in the **technologies** which remember. Which calculate. Which write. Which talk to the other end of the business or to the other end of the world. Technologies which act at a distance. Act through time. Act to extend the organisation into the future.

This, then, is the lesson. We are all spread out. We are nothing more than a network of social and technical relations. We are **made** by our organisational relations. Power resides elsewhere. It is always deferred. It is always a **product**. It is always an **effect**.

Distribution

In which we give the manager his materials back

The deconstructive fairy has gone. The computer, the telephone, the secretary, these have all come back. And I am watching. Watching the meeting. But Andrew is angry. Yes, there is a crisis. Yes, the flagship project is **months** behind schedule! The project that will make or break the organisation.

Months behind schedule? But how does Andrew know? Has he actually seen the delay? Has he looked at the hole in the ground, the bulldozers, the place where it will be built? Has he **seen** that the hole is not large enough yet? Or that concrete is still to be poured?

Philosophical questions these! How do you **see** delay? How do you **know** that things are going wrong?

Sometimes you can **see** the answer. Or **feel** it. For instance, when you breathe the fumes in a traffic jam. Or wait at a fog-bound airport. Sometimes. But not now. Andrew's body, the body of the naked ape, doesn't tell him much. His eyes don't **see** delay. The months that have been lost. So what **is** it that tells him about the impending crisis? The crisis that will throw the organisation into turmoil?



Answer: he is looking at a sheet of paper. Just a banal sheet of paper with some print. Figures. In two columns. One says what **should** have done. The plan. The projection. The other says what **has** been done. The reality. Two columns which are meant to be the same. But they aren't. And the difference tell him that thousands of man-hours **should** have been spent on the project. But they also tell him that less than a third of those hours have actually been worked.

This is disaster, but it is **disaster by proxy**. This is the story of the deconstructive fairy. The people. The technologies. The accountants, the clerks, the computer, the programs, the spreadsheets. This is the combination that performs disaster by proxy. The combination which performs the power of the manager. The power of the powerful manager. To see further. To act. To act decisively. To act with discretion. To act responsibly.

In which we watch the manager lose discretion

Libero Arbitrio. Freedom of choice. In the absence of God, **can** we choose? **How** can we choose? How do we exercise discretion? How can we make choices responsibly?

Here is the oddity. This powerful man, Andrew, has little choice. For the figures are there. The figures that tell the story. And that story is unambiguous. Like an actor with a script, he has no choice. For **unless** he acts, unless he switches resources, unless he steals resources from somewhere else in the laboratory, then the project will fail. And disaster will follow

Andrew is not a naked ape. He sees, he calculates, he remembers. But he only does so **within the relations made in his organisation**. He is the **creature** of the organisation. He is the **expression** of the organisation. He **performs** the organisation. Its relations. Its projects. Its desires. Its goals. He is a **moment** in the process of the organisation. And the relations of that organisation? Well, they work, they work to **remove** his ability to choose. His discretion.

Is he a powerful person? Well, yes. For when he acts, people jump. A nice smile and iron teeth. Does he have discretion? Free choice? Not really. Not if he is to save the project. Not if he is to serve the organisation.

Responsibility

In which we see him jump from one place to another

'I was only following orders'. A horrific phrase, the refrain sung by every executioner in history. 'I was only following orders'. The orders of my organisation. The orders of my country, my party, my bureaucracy.

Andrew's hands are not stained with blood. He is no executioner. Mercifully, most of us who live in liberal democracies, even the powerful, do not find ourselves making bloody decisions. But **why**? How are we different? How are we different if we are **made** in our organisations? Endowed by **them** with our ability to think, to write, to calculate, to communicate. Even to remember.

Two responses. Two answers.

The first is straightforward. It is a matter of luck. We are lucky that we live in Italy in the 1990s. Rather than, say, Bosnia. Or (forgive me) Italy in the 1930s. We are lucky to be caught up and made in organisations which do not seek genocide. Or to dominate the world. Or to accomplish their aims by bloody means. Truly we are lucky.

That is the simple response.

In which we judge that the manager is responsible because he is multiple

The second is more difficult. It has to do with pluralism. And to do with non-coherence. The **non-coherent organisation**.

Andrew sits at his desk. He looks at the figures. The figures that tell of the disaster. And at that moment he is a **creature** of those figures. A creature with no discretion.

But then he sits back in his chair. And he raises his eyes to the window, to the view beyond the window. Green wet English fields. A clump of trees. And then the grey tower. The grey



tower which holds the greatest machine of all, the accelerator. The place where nature is taken down to its smallest particles. The place where the secrets of molecular structures are made. And Andrew sighs. He sighs and he remembers that this organisation, it is not just a balance sheet. Not just a profit and loss account. Not just figures, pounds, lira. Not just money.

For Andrew is not just an accountant. He is **also** a scientist. He was **made** in the relations of science too. He has the instincts of a scientist. Instincts which still take him at weekends, back to the laboratory to wrestle with the obduracies of the equipment. The vagaries of the computers, the crystals, the beams. And then, rarely, sometimes, that sublime moment. The moment when the data begins to take a shape. The shape of the perfect curve. The curve that will make the next publication. That will make the next piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the natural world.

So Andrew is made to be an accountant. But there is alchemy. For he is not just an accountant. He is also something quite different. He is made to be a scientist. A bench scientist. An experimentalist. He has worked for years with delicate equipment. With the vanishing traces left by the tiny forces of nature. So he is **another** location. A **different** location. A location, a place, in the social relations of **science**. Of scientific investigation. A location that makes other kinds of personal necessities. Other kinds of logics.

Andrew sighs, looks back at the figures. To save the project, the organisation, something has to go. Resources have to be taken from somewhere, to get the project back on target. But where? From what?

There are the other projects. Laid out. One by one. Their costs. He looks at them, and he knows them well. This one here - well, the science is beautiful. The structures of crystalline protein. Beautiful. Important. Expensive too. And then this one. Materials. Surfaces. He knows this science too. And the people who work on it. And it is also beautiful. Beautiful, again expensive. Different versions of scientific beauty. Here's another entry in the balance sheet. Administration. Hah! He smiles. He is **part** of administration. Administration, organisation, management, it is all the same! Necessary, to be sure. But beautiful? Well, it depends, doesn't it, on your sense of aesthetics. There is a beauty to a set of audited accounts! Andrew knows this. He knows it well. Remember, he is made as an accountant too. But perhaps the beauty is a little different. Not quite like that of science.

He sighs again. Andrew-the-accountant knows that something has to go. Andrew-the-scientist wants to save the science. To keep the work on proteins. The work on surfaces. So how about the administration? Can we cut that? Can we save **all** the science? Now Andrew-the-manager wakes up and joins in the discussion. No! That isn't possible. So administration is an overhead. So no one really likes it. But it is necessary. A necessary overhead. One that cannot be avoided.

Andrew is this: he's a kind of **debating society**. He is different voices at different times. Manager, scientist, accountant. He jumps. He jumps between the logics. And these are the jumps of transmutation. Of alchemy. Of organisational alchemy. The jumps of an organisation, a manager, built of **different** logics. Three of them at least. No doubt many more. An organisation with different kinds of necessities. Relations. Compulsions. Three different kinds of responsibilities.

He sighs. Looks back at the papers. And he lifts his pen. A red slash. Administration? Cut by 15%. Yes. It will hurt. None of this is easy. But perhaps it will not hurt so much. Surface science? Wow! 30%! Agony there. No doubt about it. But it is a choice. The choice of an accountant, but also the choice of a scientist. For, if we hurt the surface science a lot, then at least we can keep the protein project the way it is. The beauty of the protein project. Its scientific worth. These will not be touched.

So Andrew's decision hurts. But he doesn't have blood on his hands. Why? is this?

He is lucky. He was not in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was the first answer.

And the second? This is the point of the story. It is that we are made by our organisational logics - **but these are many**. Not one. Scientist. Accountant. Administrator. Artist. Broadcaster. Journalist. Producer. Scriptwriter. Musician. Engineer. Perhaps we are all or



many of these things. But if this is right, then it means that we are **made in many ways**. Simultaneously. Grown up in many different logics. Made into many different creatures. And made to bear many, many, different versions of responsibility. All at the same time.

That is the burden we carry. For the alchemy of the modern organisation is an alchemy of multiplicity. Of pluralism. Of different logics and necessities. It is an alchemy of **difference**. And if we cannot help the way we are - if we are the creatures of those logics - then at least we can pause before we act. Like Andrew we can lean back and look out of the window. We can wait for long enough to make a space. Make a space for the other logics to talk. The other logics which live within us. The other logics of the organisation.

A pause. A moment of reflection. A moment for the other logics to speak.

A heavy burden. Uncomfortable. Painful even, as the different logics, the different voices, argue and debate. Inconsistency. Non-coherence. **That** is the character of responsibility. The responsibility of the manager. The responsibility of the organisation. That it should, as a matter of ethics, of principle, seek to speak in many voices. In many non-coherent voices. And not in one.

Further Reading:

John Law, **Organizing Modernity**, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994, viii+219 pp. ISBN 0-631-18513-5

Robert Cooper and John Law, 'Visioni Distale e Prossimali dell'Organizzazione' in Samuel B. Bacharach Pasquale Gagliardi and Bryan Mundell (eds), **Il Pensiero Organizzativo Europeo**, Milano: Guerini e associati, pages 285-32. ISBN 88-7802-635-2

Robert Cooper and John Law, 'Organization: Distal and Proximal Views', in Samuel B. Bacharach Pasquale Gagliardi and Bryan Mundell (eds), **Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 13, Studies of Organizations in the European Tradition**, Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1995, pages 237-274. ISBN 1-55938-895-1