Ambivalence and Engagement

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Irony and Cultural Change in Late Modern Organizations
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Abstract: This paper attempts to provide a more complex and nuanced interpretation than is normal of some of the ways in which such changes are experienced and addressed by organisational actors involved in culture change programs. It does so through a critical look at existing interpretations of the 'ambivalence' of organisational actors towards corporate change programs. In this task, the aim of the paper is not merely to reveal a greater degree of ambiguity and uncertainty in cultural change than previous analyses have uncovered. It is, rather, to document and argue for the importance of a previously neglected form of interpretation and action — one that we shall characterise as forms of 'ironic commitment'.

Keywords: Culture, Change, Irony

Introduction

GARRY, THE PLANT manager of Coke-making Oz, leaned forward in his company Toyota Prado and spoke softly,

“Off the record, it means that I get support to take three of my people off-line to spend time doing what we desperately want and need to do anyway – redesign and resuffle middle management to drive the cultural change.”

Garry was referring to the secondment of three of his key middle managers to a consultancy organization implementing the Jacques Programme (a works-wide re-organisation of upper and middle management based on Elliott Jacque’s concept of the ‘requisite organisation’) across Steelmaking Oz. Earlier in his office, in an arranged interview, one of the authors had asked Garry whether he really believed in the Jacques programme or whether he was manipulating it for his own ends – the furthering of the normative cultural change program that he had been undertaking for some years in the plant. ‘A bit of both’, he smilingly, but guardedly, replied. It was only later, more relaxed, and providing a lift back to his car, that Garry felt able to reveal another motivator, gaining a direct funding source for his program.

What this account illustrates is some of the multiple layers of meaning and interpretation that surround the introduction of corporate change programs. A formal interview with Garry and his superiors would have revealed a strong commitment to a new wave of management restructuring, an outline of a systematic programme for allocating managerial tasks and responsibilities. A more reflective interview with Garry, as was the case with the arranged interview above, uncovers some of his ambivalence about the program, a belief in its value but also a concern about its direction, and interest in making sure that it did not derail his existing activities. In the even more confidential aside in an informal chat, Garry reveals how – in true ‘garbage can’ style – he is actively using the program in concrete ways to further his pre-existing goals. As a result of a 6 year ethnographic study of cultural change in the plant, the relationships established between the researchers and the plant personnel enable and allow for the collection of such insights as part of a multi-level quantitative and qualitative study. This closeness to the data was essential in capturing the multiple nuances of the organisational actors’ ambivalence, and sometime ironic stance, towards the cultural change.

What Garry and Cokemaking Oz were experiencing was part of what is now recognised to be a more widespread swing of the corporate change pendulum – away from the ‘soft’, ‘normative’, ‘devotion’, ‘strong culture’ programs of the mid 80s to mid 90s to the more ‘rational’, ‘downsizing’, ‘outsourcing’, or ‘financialising’ programs of the later 90s and early ‘noughties’ (Sturdy and Morgan, 2002; Morgan, 2002). While some critics have explored the broader character and significance of the ensuing change in ‘psychological contract’ (Morrigan and Badham, 2003) others have documented in more detail the changing ‘scripts at work’ as managers working in ‘strong’ cultures that emphasised loyalty, commitment and job security are encouraged to move to a more ‘enterprising’ approach to their careers where employment is replaced by ‘employability’ as a key concern (Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999). Again,
however, as was the case in studies of earlier cultural change programs, in depth ethnographic analyses of what happens to people during such transitions are rare on the ground.

What this paper attempts to provide is a more complex and nuanced interpretation of some of the ways in which such changes are experienced and addressed by the organisational actors involved. It does so through a critical look at existing interpretations of the ‘ambivalence’ of organisational actors towards corporate change programs. In this task, the aim of the paper is to do more than reveal a greater degree of ambiguity and uncertainty than previous analyses have uncovered. It is, also, to document and argue for the importance of a previously neglected response to ambivalence – a form of interpretation and action we shall characterise as types of ‘ironic engagement’. The paper uses the incident of the introduction of the new Jacques Programme in this one industrial plant, and the interpreted reaction of three key actors to this incident, as the basis for illustrating and exploring the issues involved.

From Gemeinschaft/Pseudo-Gemeinschaft to Critical Ambivalence Theories

In contrast to traditional celebrations of moves to create humanistic ‘strong culture’ Gemeinschafts or critiques of such initiatives as resulting in psychological and social incarceration within ‘pseudo-Gemeinschafts’, a number of more recent interpretations of such programs reject such ‘one dimensional’ views of internalised ‘commitment’ (and its opposite – ‘distancing’) replacing this with an awareness of ambivalent attitudes and experiences amongst managers and the workforce. One dominant approach to this ambivalence is what Fleming and Spicer (2004) describe as the ‘ideology of cynicism’ view. This approach documents an ongoing employee cynicism towards corporate culture demands as a central feature of the new corporate cultures, yet argues that this cynicism has the effect of reproducing and even enhancing rather than threatening managerial control. A Huxleyite ‘brave new world’ version of this view is presented by Kunda (1992) in his descriptions of the ironic manoeuvrings of the engineers in reaction to the ‘California bathtub crap’ at the Silicon Valley ‘Tech’ company. A more Orwellian ‘1984’ image is presented by Ezzamell, Willmott and Worthington (2001) and Collinson (1992) of worker ‘counter’ culture against the ‘bullshitters who did fuck all’ at ‘Northern Factory’ and against the ‘Yankee propaganda’ and ‘Goebbels Gazette’ at ‘Slav’s in Northern England. Arguments for the ‘incorporation’ of managers and employees through, rather than in spite of, the cynical reaction vary from: (i) a ‘safety valve’ view (that sees the belief amongst workers that they remain ‘free’ in their ‘counter-culture’ or ‘cynicism’ as something that leads them not to rebel against management’s demands in their behaviour and task fulfillment (Rodriguez and Collinson, 1995) to (ii) a ‘positive/negative liberty’ view (that sees managers, in particular, endorsing the positive nature of the company because it allows them freedom to hold and express such contrary views and opinions (Willmot, 1993). The conservative effect of the ‘ideology of cynicism’ remains in place whether it takes the form of managers and employees seeing themselves as ‘free’ in playing complex ironic dramaturgical games of balancing corporate loyalty and cynicism (as documented by Kunda at ‘Tech’) or employees regarding themselves as ‘independent’ in acts of symbolic opposition while continuing to subordinate themselves to management authority and control over work (as illustrated by Fleming and Spicer (2004) in the case of MacDonalds employees wearing ‘McShit’ teashirts under their uniform).

An alternative ‘cynicism as potential resistance’ approach is offered by Rodriguez and Collinson, Fleming and Sewell (2001), and Fleming and Spicer (2004). While being sympathetic to the ‘ideology of cynicism’ approach, they also emphasise the possibility of ‘saturial critique’ and various forms of Svjekist ‘cynicism’ as being a situationally appropriate and, in some conditions, even radical form of resistance to management control. While ‘disidentification’, according to the ideology of cynicism approach, may act to reproduce or strengthen managerial control, it can also threaten management’s explicit intention to obtain identification (‘identity politics’) and lead to disruptive acts of symbolic ‘overidentification’ (a critique of authority through exaggerated displays of enthusiasm or conformity e.g. swamping managers with employee suggestions, using egalitarian rhetoric of culture change against structural inequalities in the firm). Similarly, retaining a subjective sense of an independent self while objectively continuing to work within managerial directives, may also result in ‘externalisation of disbelief’ in new ways (anti-corporate slogans on advertising) or externalisation of blame for worker pathologies (e.g. not ‘stressed’ or ‘negative’ workers but ‘stressful’ or ‘negative’ workplaces or HRM systems).

In both these interpretations – the ‘ideology of cynicism’ and ‘cynicism as potential resistance’ approaches – the theme of ambivalence remains central. In each case, organisational actors are seen as, on the one hand, believing or acting in a way that conforms to management demands for a loyal committed workforce and, on the other hand, believing or acting in a way that challenges these managerial demands. Where they differ, of course, is on the effects of this ambivalence. The ideology of cynicism approach tends to perceive this ambivalent thought or beha-
viour as supportive rather than undermining of management, and resulting in either a sense of self or counter-culture that is psychologically damaging and socially ineffective for organisational employees. The cynicism as potential resistance approach, in contrast, is less deterministic in its analysis, noting the ambiguity yet potential effectiveness of these ambivalent forms of thought and behaviour as a means of resisting corporate authority. In direct opposition to the ‘ideology of cynicism’ approach, however, the latter approach also tends to adopt a more psychologically and socially positive view of what Fleming and Sewell describe as an anti-authority ‘Svejkism’ - ‘cynicism, irony and guile – an embodied ethic’ (Fleming and Sewell, 1991: 869).

Towards an Alternative View of Irony and Ambivalence

The critical perspectives on ambivalence detailed above clearly and deliberately restrict the scope of the irony and ambivalence that they identify.

Firstly, they document the existence of ambivalence amongst organisational actors towards organisational goals and structures and formal organisational change programs to introduce a new organisational culture or structure. In their analysis, however, they eschew no such ambivalence towards these goals, structures and programs. In a clear counterpoint to the celebratory managerial culture change discourse, they see the goals of the organisation and the formal management programs to be largely authoritarian and repressive. There is, however, nothing in the tales that they tell that seeks to justify this assumption through evidence. It is just assumed that the goals are repressive, and analysis is concentrated on either the psychological ambivalence of employees or the ambivalence manifest in the conflict between their cynical attitudes yet supportive behaviours. Yet, this assumption betrays one of the caveats to overly simple views of domination, a caveat that, at least since E.P.Thompson’s (1966) celebrated work on The Making of the English Working Class, has been an established part of the ‘critical’ sociological tradition. To a degree – and to what degree may vary and be uncertain or unclear – the actions, values and interests of subordinate groups are embodied in the goals of ‘dominant’ organisations, movements and programs. While debate is valid over the degree of ‘co-determination’ of such goals and objectives, the existence of this phenomenon became well established in ‘critical’ circles. The implications of reversing this assumption are severe. If a degree of ‘co-determination’ or ‘co-construction’ is allowed, then issues are raised concerning the degree to which those subjected to such programs should participate in their development or oppose them. In this context, ambivalence is, in part, built into the life of anyone involved in such changes, and should, arguably, be part of the analysis of those studying such changes.

This point may be illustrated using as an example Bauman’s works on modernity, ambivalence and community. In Modernity and Ambivalence (1991), Bauman argues that one of the authoritarian and dangerous components of the modernist quest, is a search for order and control that eliminates ambivalence. In the modernist search to establish a ‘black and white’ world, where truth is sharply separated from falsehood, insiders from outsiders, the truly ‘human’ from the ‘non-human’, the inevitable degree of ambiguity, uncertainty and ambivalence in human affairs is not catered for, and truth, beauty and ethics are put on the rack and force fed into neat categories. It is somewhat ironic, in the limited sense of the term, that critical writers who are no doubt aware of such arguments, and provide many useful insights into patterns of domination and control, end up by seeking to eliminate any reflective ambivalence in their attitudes towards organisational goals and initiatives.

In his book on Community (2001), Bauman adds another dimension to the one-dimensional critique of managerial programs to establish more ‘community’ like forms of organisation. Bauman contrasts the traditional view of Gemeinschaft as a static utopian achievement, a ‘resting place’, or ‘warm place next to the fire’ to his own more ‘elusive’ view of community, in which change is ongoing, more communal like arrangements have to be protected from internal disruption and external threat, where the ideal can never (and possibly should never) be realised if a threat of totalitarianism is to be avoided, and where the daily struggles on the journey to achieve the goal are the real form taken by the community. Rather than idealistic views looking up into the heavens, actual attempts to achieve and protect communal arrangements are more like ‘like stepping over dead corpses on the battlefield’, and rather than resting by the fire, supporters are continually manning the ramparts against internal and external threats. In such a view of community, the struggle to achieve ‘more communal’ like organisational arrangements is a feasible, if difficult and dangerous one. The fact that it involves compromise, and is at least partially undermined and threatened by domination and power, is an inevitable feature of the task. It does not undermine the task itself but, rather, reinforces ambivalence as a ‘realistic’ attitude towards the tensions and dangers involved in such initiatives.

Secondly, the critical theories of ambivalence document the existence of verbal irony amongst the organisational actors that they study, and observe situational ironies in the way in which some of these actors misinterpret their own conditions and end up achieving unintended results or outcomes. In their
study of organisational actors’ use of irony, Fleming and Sewell (1991), for example, use the term to refer to a kind of ironic attitude. On the one hand, this is identified as equivalent to cynicism e.g. ‘the self is detached from the normative prescriptions of managerialism through irony and cynicism’, and it is the ‘subversive logic of irony and cynicism’ that they support. On the other hand, they use the term more specifically to refer to a dimension of ‘flanneling’ – a Socratic kind of dissembling, critiquing authority by appearing to mean one thing but actually meaning something else. Kunda (1992) similarly uses irony in two senses, but slightly differently. Firstly, he uses it to refer to the organisational performance given by organisational actors i.e. they are being ironic in the sense that they display a ‘committed self’ at one point in time, but a more ‘distanced’ self at others. Secondly, he refers to the condition of many of these actors as being akin to the ‘unstable irony’ identified in literary criticism i.e. where ironical deconstruction is applied not only to the object but also to their sense of self. In their analysis of such ‘ironic’ actors, both Kunda (1992) and Fleming and Spicer (2004) use an ironic narrative style in a traditional ‘stable’ sense in their documentation of the unintended and unwitting results of the actions of those being studied or talked about e.g. for Fleming and Spicer observing that “when we dis-identify with our prescribed social roles we often still perform them” – sometimes better, ironically, than if we did identify with them.” with cynicism becoming an ideological force, “ironically, because we are under the illusion that we are not victims of ideological obfuscation.”

These studies do not, however, extend their study or use of irony to their own interpretation of the activities of the organisational actors that they are studying, and the goals of the organisations and programs that these actors are involved in. While, in different ways, the actors being studied exhibit a degree of ambivalence and reflexivity in regard to the value of the actions they are undertaking, these studies exhibit no such ambivalence or reflexivity in regard to their own actions – their disciplinary ambitions, analyses and evaluations embedded in their analysis of these ambivalent actors. In this sense, despite an awareness of arguments for forms of post-modern reflexivity in academic analysis, they appear quite unreflexive and unequivocal in their own analysis. Kunda (1992), for example, is strongly committed to a critique of the problems that a dramaturgical ironic self poses for the stable and mature formation of the self in modern organisations – a commitment that is, arguably, attributable to the anti-Zionism that he ‘confesses’ to. Fleming and Sewell (1991), on contrast, appear favourably disposed to an ironic Svejkian debunking of organisational authority and goals, but, on their part, assume an un-questioned negative and critical stance towards such authorities and goals. Moreover, their praise is reserved for dissimulators – what the Europeans call the ‘Oeurspiegel’, the dissembler, the charlatan – those who actually have no commitment to the organization but merely act this out. In contemporary ironic terms, it is arguable whether such Svejkism is truly ‘irony’. Is this not merely cynicism and mental withdrawal accompanied by pretense?

This lack of irony in their analysis may be illustrated by contrasting their work with that of Rorty on ‘liberal irony’, or earlier ‘humanistic’ and ‘skeptical’ views of sociology’s ironic detachment from simple commitments to ideological causes. In the work of liberal or humanitarian ironists such as Rorty, and earlier Berger (1963), there is not only a belief that cultures may be more or less ironic, but also that sociology is an inherently ironic discipline. It addresses the unintended consequences of social action, the cultural ‘doping’ of people by the local life worlds that they occupy, the unrecognised or half understood patterning of individual lives by broader social conditions etc. – a phenomenon that applies to their own lives and analysis as well as to those being studied. A recognition of these conditions, an absence of too strong an attachment to one set of ideals, a more relativistic world view, and recognition of the inherent drama of society is, they argue, of value. It involves, in Rorty’s terms, an awareness of the lack of foundations for ‘final vocabularies’ (including one’s own), tolerance for and commitment to the expression of alternative ‘vocabularies’, condemnation of the cruelty that comes from fanatical commitment to values and groups and rejection or domination of others in their name etc. They also hint at enjoying the fullness, the humour and the witticism of the ironist.

In contrast to Kunda’s blanket critique of ‘dramaturgical’ and ‘unstable ironic’ cultural ethics, Rorty and Berger are arguably supportive of such an ironic stance and cultures that are based on such values. In contrast to Fleming and Sewell’s equally blanket anti-authority stance in their praise for Svejekism, however, Wrong (1999) reproduces Rorty and Berger’s themes in arguing that ‘the sceptical sociologist is more than a debunker. It is sometimes hard to draw a clear line between corrosive cynicism and a tragic sense of the vanity of human aspirations, a stoical awareness of how pure intentions and lofty ideals produce consequences that are travesties of what they sought to realize.” (Wrong, 1999: 12). Irony arguably involves recognition of the gap between hopes and achievements, and an involvement in the tragi-comic drama of embrace and distancing towards a human condition that inevitably embodies such a gap (Badham, 2004). To eliminate the gap by identifying hope with achievement is to enter the
realm of the fanatic, the doctrinaire and the zealot. To eliminate the gap by giving up on individual or collective hopes is to enter the realm of the fatalist, the withdrawn, the negative cynic. The ironist is one who recognizes and embraces the fundamental paradox of human existence – that our strivings do not end up achieving what we want but that the struggle is still worth the candle. In terms of the goals pursued by actors within organisational settings, this means not a blanket critique of any involvement in the pursuit of collective organisational goals but, rather, a reflective distance from their uncritical acceptance.

If it could be found that the ambivalence of organisational actors is, at least sometimes, embedded in a recognition of real uncertainties around degrees of codetermination, then it may be that their analyses are more sophisticated, and their actions dealing with more complex choices, than is given voice by academic observers and critics. In addition, the ironic stance adopted by organisational actors may not be as negative, ineffectual or undermining as many of these critics suggest. Drawing on an established liberal sociological heritage, well represented in Coser’s (1974) classic work on ‘greedy institutions’, the need for organisational actors to recognise a plurality of different commitments and life worlds, and inevitably adopt an unstable ‘balancing act’ in dealing with these conflicting demands, is something that, arguably, ‘mature’ individuals recognise as an inevitable feature of contemporary ‘open’ societies. As Rorty (1989) extends it, this also means a recognition of the inherent uncertainties of social life and the limited nature of foundational concepts and ethics prescribed by different groups and cultures. If an ironic stance towards organisational commitments is embedded in a self-reflective awareness of such dynamics, this may provide positive and constructive narratives of the self that are not grasped by the restricted stable ironic analyses of negative irony that have tended to predominate. It may also inform a more reflective, self-critical, unstable ironic analysis by academic observers of their own certainties in analysing ambivalence and irony.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to extend the analysis of ambivalence and irony amongst organisational actors to explore such ‘engaged’ forms of irony through a description of the stance towards cultural change adopted by 3 organisational actors in the case study plant (Cokemaking Oz). How do such organisational actors respond to ambivalence and grapple with the tensions and anxieties that this creates? Rather than prematurely closing off our understanding of such ironic actors, by providing one-dimensional interpretations and evaluations, the aim of the analysis here is to capture more of the issues and complexity. The purpose is to open up this area of organisational life for further examination, and address some of the issues that it raises for academic research on organisational culture and change.

**Cultural Change at Cokemaking Oz**

The conversation with Garry outlined at the start of the paper came at a significant time for Cokemaking Oz. The plant appeared to be at a cross-roads. Garry had taken over as plant manager four years earlier. Senior management saw the plant as a problem with high levels of industrial dispute, overmanning, one of the worst health and safety and environmental records in the plant, and working conditions that led many to proclaim the plant to be the ‘arse end’ of the steelworks. Significantly, the unions had negotiated with management that there were to be no forced transfers of employees to the plant! Garry claimed to have found confirmation of this view within the plant. In his initial talks with managers and employees, they gave voice to a more or less widespread dissatisfaction with the nature of work and conditions in the plant. Garry then proclaimed his intention to transform the culture of Cokemaking Oz, from a low trust, rule driven, dependent, paternalistic culture to a high trust, value based, independent, energised and involved culture. What followed was the type of classical cultural change program outlined by Kunda (1992), a great deal of attention to developing, articulating and disseminating a new organisational ‘ideology’ for internal consumption, the embedding of these ‘ideological’ principles in specific managerial policies to modify and reduce the significance to traditional command and control bureaucratic systems, and complementing this de-emphasis on traditional bureaucratic controls by creating new practices, structural gatherings and rituals designed to build up and reinforce the new set of values and behaviours.

Now, however, after four years, Garry openly voiced his discontent with the speed of change, expressed considerable frustration at the apparent inability and lack of desire of middle managers to really drive the cultural change, and was under growing pressure from senior management to further improve environmental performance and achieve promised, but not yet realised, productivity benefits from organisational restructuring. Despite a reduction in personnel from 500 to 330, without forced redundancy or industrial relations dispute, some evidence of an improvement in workforce satisfaction with their work activities and relationships, significant improvements in health and safety, as well as improvements in environmental performance, Garry perceived the change process as having ‘stalled’.

The change process initiated at Cokemaking Oz was a highly normative one designed to create a
value-based' organization, committed to developing people and the organization by establishing a culture and facilitating structures supporting openness, honesty, trust, participation, and responsibility. The Jacques philosophy appeared to many to threaten this. It re-emphasised the importance of hierarchy (rather than community), formal structure (rather than informal culture), role clarity (rather than living with complexity and ambiguity), and accountability (rather than participation). It was also strongly linked to a hard line, low trust, confrontational approach to unions adopted by its main exponent in Australia – the mining company CRA – in contrast to the established paternalistic and corporatist company-union strategy that had prevailed in Steelmaking Oz for the previous decade. As a result, many in Steelmaking Oz in general and Cokemaking Oz in particular viewed this as 'the winds of change changing in Cokemaking' (Ross). In the words of the secretary, now answering the phone as Cokemaking Oz (previously named 'CoalandCoke'Oz), 'we now sing a different tune'.

Three Versions of Events.

What follows are three interpretations of these events by the senior manager in the plant (Garry), a middle manager (Dennis) and a shopfloor operator (Joe). Each of these actors had revealed a degree of ambivalence towards the cultural change program overall, adopted different forms of ironic engagement with the initiative, and now had varying interpretations of the new events.

Garry: ‘Manna from Heaven’ and Cosmic Irony

"lots of parts of the organization went ‘Oh shit’ here we go again, another reorganisation. Then I sat here and thought, another opportunity has turned up. Because one of the issues that I was wrestling with was that we had stalled in our change process, it had become very flat I had made a mistake of believing that the superintendents had the capability of defining the role clarity and not having it imposed on them because people had a view that they did not want imposition.let us sort out how we are going to manage this… and then I suppose, like manna from heaven, here was an organisation that says that role clarity was a key to this and you thought ‘hallelujah’…I think it is the answer of the next stage of improvement here”

Over the previous 3 years, Garry had expressed a consistent, committed and almost evangelical commitment to ‘the journey’, to his vision of a safer and more caring, sustainable, satisfying and profitable place to work. While joking references were made by the workforce to his ‘train’ and ‘ship’ metaphors, with more than a few references to the ‘Titanic’, his change process had resulted in marked documented improvements in the social relationships between people at work as well as increased performance in regard to occupational health and safety and environmental performance.

Garry was, however, feeling the strain. In a sense many of his comments in company meetings, as well as formal interviews, revealed a form of ‘360 degree ambivalence’ – an unstable blend of hope and disappointment, attraction and antipathy, towards the attitudes and role of his superiors, colleagues and subordinates in the change program.

On numerous occasions he was praising of the CEO and his strategic vision, hopeful and optimistic about the skills, abilities and heart of his direct reports who voiced commitment to the change process, and equally supportive of what he saw as the workforce’s basic desire to make the organisation a better place to work for themselves and each other. However, while praising the strategic vision of the new CEO, he was also critical of his ability and success in shifting his ‘old lieutenants’. He observed that senior managers in the Steelmaking Oz, both those immediately above him and the other plant managers at this level, continued their ‘dependent’ relationship with their superiors and did not ‘read the books’. When challenged by the CEO to be more strategic in orientation, and ‘lead’ rather than ‘manage’ their employees, these managers still requested detailed instructions from him – a matter that Garry explicitly raised as a problematic reflection of traditional dependent ‘non-leadership’ behaviour when it came up in a strategic management retreat to introduce the Jacques system. He laughingly shared with the researchers, the results of his own personality and skills evaluation by the Jacques Program consultants – ‘they advised me to ‘fuck off’!’ His strategic thinking and ability to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty was diagnoses as far superior to those of his colleagues and the requirements of his job level within the organisation.

Similarly, he questioned the commitment of the middle managers below him, the ‘keepers of the culture’. As he recounted it in his ‘tomato sauce’ incident,

“We agree on something in the meeting. Everyone has their jobs to do. Then when we meet up again, no-one has done anything. I said to them, ‘You stare me in the face, and say you will do it. But then What do I need to do? Get you to sign it in blood? There would need to be tomato sauce all over the room.’
Was it active resistance, a lack of skill and capability, a disabling insecurity or anxiety about their new ‘leadership roles’? Garry remarked that his problem with them, and they with their reports, was nothing new. ‘Things haven’t changed in 3000 years. It is still the Roman officer trying to motivate and lead his men, and the skills are roughly the same.’ In this task, he saw the ‘superintendents’ below him as still being too technical in orientation, and not really believing in teamwork. Moreover, he pointed to a general lack of persistence in change. Using a golfing metaphor, he commented that their approach was still ‘drive for show, putt for dough’,

“We have many people who can drive to the green, but then they all 3 putt, and we don’t want to have 64 and then 80, we want 67s and 69s all the time.”

In regard to the general workforce of 500, Garry pointed to problems with both their short term orientation and embedded resentment against management. As he put it,

“Maslow’s hierarchy may be passé but how real it is. I go with everybody wanting self actualization. Some want a good job for today to pay the bills for today, yet you are making assumptions about what people want in life and what is good for them. 500 individuals with agendas for themselves and difficult to manage. They are like vampires sucking the energy out of you, and then I have no energy left for my family, and I don’t want to deal with their problems. I have negotiated all day. I don’t want to negotiate any more.”

“As things fail, there are many people who will come up to say that Dad was wrong, and rub his nose in it I spend time with the workforce to get them to encourage their superintendents to change, not to jump up and down when they do something wrong, but to support them. What I see now is a delight amongst the workforce to find us wrong. As I said, what do you want from us. Do you want us to lie down naked, and you shit all over us and flog us with papers. They want their pound of flesh for everything that has been done to them. So don’t lock them up in their pen, and put shit on them. So I want the operations forum to help the superintendents’ change, but if you process engineers and others take delight in seeing the superintendents fail, then we have a problem. If you want your piece of flesh then we have to work out how to manage that.”

On the one hand, Garry had leapt enthusiastically into the new Jacques Programme. He used the extra resources, expressed delight at criticisms of the consultants ‘making it up as they go along’ because it allowed his plant to ‘shape the agenda’, and drew on the more strategic leadership dimensions of the Jacques Programme philosophy to emphasise that its role clarity and command and control focus was intertwined with and subordinate to a broader strategic cultural reorientation. However, on reflecting on the programme, he saw many of the problems in implementing it to be similar to what he had identified as the barriers to his earlier cultural change initiative – the inability of managers at every level to devolve ‘management’ downwards and take up more strategic ‘leadership’ roles. Senior managers remained too short term cost focused, middle managers too concerned about their careers, and the workforce about their pay-packet. As Garry remarked ‘everybody has a today income and out there you are trying to build a tomorrow.’ His enthusiasm for the ‘manna from heaven’ was countered by a cosmic ironic pessimism about the intrusive effects of unreliable Gods – particularly autocratic managerial decision making.

“I say trust me, I can deliver, but I am part of an organization, I am not an island, things come in, and destroy the trust.”

**Dennis ‘Ending the Talkfest’: Cynical Irony**

“I suspect that what we were experiencing was that 20 people would get around a table and talk about something and all feel satisfied that they had had a say but then no one would take the responsibility to go and achieve something out of that activity It had a real danger of becoming a huge talk fest.”

Dennis, a supervisor, similarly, saw benefits in utilising the new initiative, yet for him this was as a means for removing the illusory pretensions of many democratic supporters of the cultural change initiative, and restoring a channelling and focusing of change through the ‘real change leaders’ – the more innovative supervisors. During the culture change period, he was sharply critical of his middle management colleagues, who he saw as modelling a new form of behaviour that they did not believe in. He was generally critical of the whole participatory nature of the program, through representatives sitting on advisory and design groups, and disliked ‘HR’ or ‘organisational development’ people coming into the plant and making his work difficult by imposing general job categories, training, and measures that, according to him, were not locally understood, negotiated, crafted and appropriate. However, he had begun to work with Garry in attempting to improve the
skills, capabilities and flexibility of his colleagues and the workforce, a strategy that Garry had encouraged as he thought that it was better to have Dennis ‘pissing out rather than pissing in’! When the Jacques Programme came through, Dennis also saw the opportunity to take out of the program elements that he thought were crucial – a renewed focus on the development of the relationship between supervisor and employee

they now find they have got a manager who is standing beside them, working with them, someone they can talk to, someone who seems to be interested in them and so my initial reaction to that has been that to engage directly one on one certainly early signs are ‘yeah it seems to be pretty special’ compared to this remote engagement via representatives that always seems to leave people out on a limb.

In previous years, Dennis had always taken a ‘devil’s advocate’ position in the face of introduced changes. When commenting on one initiative in the cultural change program, and raising what he saw as potential problems, he said ‘I don’t want to be difficult...’ To which his immediate superior quickly shot back ‘Yes you do!’ In many ways he saw himself as playing the traditional role of the Greek cynical philosopher i.e. to ‘bite at the heels of authority’ to undermine its pretensions, stupidities and pomposity. At the same time, however, he revealed in his statements an enduring commitment to those who worked for him and the emotional life of the plant at large – trying to get the organisation to follow Garry’s leads in being more open and honest about the emotional undercurrents that often undermined the effectiveness of their everyday business activities. He also became a significant champion of the Jacques Programme principles, although unable (and unwilling) to remove his simultaneous sense of cynical distance. As he commented on seeing his colleagues complain about being misled about getting a $1,000 bonus for introducing the new programme,

‘Here they were, supposedly in the heyday of the ‘zealot’ phase of this new fad, spending most of the afternoon haggling and arguing over a small financial payment It makes you think.’

Similarly to Garry, therefore, Dennis engaged with activities, and proposed improvements, in the plant, but combined this with a critical sense of distance – particularly in regard to the hypocrisy of specialists ‘who claim to be there to help you’, colleagues who ‘grandstand’ their commitment to a new managerial initiative while not ‘buying in’, and shopfloor employees who just take any proposed financial inducement yet don’t deliver on their promises, ‘there’s a huge avoidance around all of that. In real life most of them [shopfloor employees] just get the five hours pay for nothing and then work out all kinds of de facto systems for not being here. One of my senior guys was saying to me the other day, ’you know we do less work now’

Underlying Dennis’ negative critiques, however, was an enduring concern for and interest in the welfare of his immediate reports and a number of his colleagues, and an unflagging belief in the organisational value of challenging the pretensions of authority and personal courage in making such arguments in the kind of large semi-public hierarchical in which such criticisms threatened both his popularity and career security.

Joe: ‘It’s Not My Problem’

Irony of the Dispossessed

“Unfortunately we can’t meet this week as I am off to Jamberoo on a team bonding/what more can you do for less/can we fuck you up the arse and will you still love the baby?? type conference with all the coal and coke day shift electrical people. Still, they reckon the foods good.”

Joe, an electrician in the plant, was immensely critical of the simplistic rhetoric of facilitators at such events and the deceitful dissembling of many of the participants. He pointed in particular to the managers and electricians who stated at this ‘hug a tree’ that they were ‘comfortable with change’, whereas it was clear back in the plant that ‘they weren’t’. These critical comments continued Joe’s persistent critical attitude towards managers in general, pointing out that they didn’t know what each was doing, there were too many of them, they ‘bred like rabbits’, defended each other etc. He reserved many of his more acerbic comments, however, for their incompetence and hypocrisy. In their promotion practices, they appeared to say ‘OK, you are good at nuts and bolts, you can become our people person’. Their commitment was questionable. He felt it was like ‘talking to deadwood, driftwood – even balsawood with 90% floating out of the water (the company) and only 10% involvement and contribution.’. But, in addition, they acted ‘holier than thou’ in dealing with the workforce, ‘up to their elbows in the cream cake, saying easy on the teaspoon.’. It was not too surprising, therefore, that he felt quite comfortable with the management restructuring focus of the Jacques programme. ‘The Jacques Programme? It’s not my problem…..Those bastards are having it done to them’
Joe was, however, also critical of the operators, who he saw as mainly ignorant and lazy, ‘monkeys pushing buttons for peanuts’ and revealing the ‘brains of a gnat’ on training days. He cited a recent incident of an operator causing $300,000 worth of damage to a machine through his thoughtless action, and continuing to ‘play his Game Boy’ while everyone around him was trying to sort out the problem.

In his earlier participation in a work redesign ‘working party’, Joe had been concerned that his colleagues, the electricians, would inevitably ‘get screwed’ from the change. He had picked up on and continued to labour a comment by the facilitator that there would be ‘trade offs’ in the change – asking on numerous occasions ‘who’ would be ‘traded off’, and treating with some disdain the response that ‘everyone will be cared for’. Pointing to a recent coercive top-down restructuring of the ‘coal processing’ section of the plant, the substantial demanding and work intensification that resulted, and crossing of demarcation boundaries without sufficient training, work redesign or career paths, he was concerned that the ‘same would happen to us here’. At one point he called in the electrical trade union organiser to talk strongly to the work redesign group about what would be unacceptable changes.

Despite such reservations, however, Joe had participated fully in the work redesign, spending long hours involving himself in calculations of reasonable pay for the giving up of overtime, and came to believe that management, as he put it, ‘is not that bad, once one works with them, there can be gains, they are humans after all.’ While he was critical of Garry and his vision (‘that fluffy thing’), and stated that you “Wouldn’t wanna follow Garry into battle, fuck, we would all be dead.”, he came to trust his competence and sincerity. This was so much so that when Garry left the plant as the manager, Joe still contacted him for help in personal matters relating to the plant.

Joe was also concerned that when Garry left, after they had given up traditional demarcations on the promise of better treatment from him as manager, they would be left at the mercy of a different type of manager. Despite these ongoing concerns, however, Joe had moved from a certainty about ‘getting screwed’ to a belief that it was important to ‘get one’s oar in’, and proceeded to stack the next round of meetings on work redesign with this electrical colleagues. At times, Joe even became more authoritarian about managing change than the managers he was working with. Contemptuous of the managerial ‘double speak’ that emphasised ‘participation’ while imposing situations on the workforce, he enthusiastically supported one supervisor’s joking comment that we needed to ‘smack them around’ to create a sense of urgency, saying ‘now you are coming around to my way of thinking’.

At the end of the change, however, Joe was uncertain about the effects of his efforts. He had a degree of guarded optimism about the improvements that had been achieved, stating that ‘things are getting better’ and ‘we can do this’. At the same time, however, he observed, “I don’t know if it would have been any different, management got what they wanted.” “Conditions may have improved” but “numbers have been cut”.

In the meeting to discuss the new Jacques Programme, about which Joe commented in the introductory quote, Joe was confronted by one of the facilitators because of his neglect of the proceedings while talking to a friend – ‘I hope I am not interrupting you’ was the facilitator’s sarcastic reprimand. ‘No, don’t worry, you are not interrupting me at all’ was Joe’s ironic reply before turning back to resume his conversation.

**Conclusion**

In a different form, each of these actors in the change drama, adopted a distanced yet committed attitude towards the sequence of organisational change programs. They reveal the existence of different proactive orientations towards exploiting opportunities for ‘co-determining’ and ‘co-constructing’ such programs in order to obtain communal benefits, while avoiding the illusions and dangers of an uncritical commitment.

For Garry, this took the form of a strongly ‘engaged’ form of irony, mobilising his troops in public to achieve change yet reflecting in private on the difficulties of dealing with multiple narrow-minded constituencies and the role of Fate in determining what ultimately occurs. For Joe, it was a far more ‘detached’ form of irony, his fatalistic antagonism towards management and sceptical authoritarianism in dealings with other groups of workers sitting uneasily alongside his partial cooption into the managerial arena of work restructuring and faith in the value of worker involvement. Dennis, in contrast, revealed more engagement with the defence of his relationship with his team of direct reports, and more detachment from the programs and aspirations of his superiors and colleagues. In part, Dennis’ ambiguity in this regard, was also reflected in the attitudes of Garry and Joe – Garry was more engaged with defending and promoting the cultural change within Cokemaking Oz than he was with the strategy of his superiors and colleagues towards the development of Steelmaking Oz, and Joe was more engaged with the defence of the interests of his electrical colleagues than he was committed to the overall workforce at Cokemaking Oz.

What made their attitudes ironic, however – rather than simply ‘committed’ or ‘distanced’ – was more...
than their use of metaphor, humour and satire in their conversations (‘verbal irony’). It was also their observations about the irony of the situations that they were in i.e. that while they were pursuing their particular collective goals, their own actions or events not under their control could twist the outcomes into something other than what they expected or intended (‘situational irony’).

For Garry, this involved a recognition that Fate and narrow self-interests could undermine his ‘journey’, and render him, as he confessed to his direct reports, a ‘Don Quixote’ style figure ‘tilting at windmills’. For Dennis, it was a scepticism towards senior managers, support staff and line management colleagues which, if correct, threatened to not only undermine his ability to meaningfully lead his work group but also render his repeated barbed criticisms of managerial pretensions meaningless, and perceived as the reactionary rhetoric of a ‘difficult’ manager. For Joe, it was a more pessimistic stance towards the overly-controlling, self-interested and incompetent nature of management, which, if accurate, made his attempts to achieve benefits for the workforce from ‘getting his ear in’ both illusory and ineffective. What was common to all three, however, and this is what makes it possible to classify their attitudes as ‘ironic’ in the classical more engaged sense of the term (Badham, 2004), was their continued commitment to the collective endeavours that they were sceptical about. They retained, rather than repressed, their ambivalence, and directly addressed, and voiced, the tragic as well as comic consequences of the gap between the aspirations that they were committed to and the effect of the actions that they undertook to realise these aspirations.

The nature, forms and value of these engaged forms of irony have not previously been addressed by those exploring ambivalence and irony in cultural change programs. There has, moreover, been little reflection on the synergies that exist between such ironic perspectives and the liberal ironic stance adopted by a number of sociological and philosophical critics. The purpose of this paper has, consequently, not been to provide a definite treatment of engaged irony in organisational change programs but, rather, to open this up as an area of inquiry. There is much to explore in, for example: the different types of engaged irony, in particular its more ‘ironically engaged’ and ‘ironically detached’ forms; the existence of contradictory attitudes and commitments and fluctuations between reflexivity and non reflexivity at different times, in different contexts, and in regard to different sets of organisational issues; the psychological and social factors that encourage or hinder adherence to an ironic attitude; and the value, or even the possibility, of retaining a consistent public, or even private, ironic stance in the face of its inherent instabilities etc. Such explorations are, however, the pursuit of a research agenda that is premised on recognition that an engaged ironic stance is, or can be, a meaningful and proactive stance to be taken towards organisational events and responsibilities.

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