

## Guest Editor's Introduction: Re-Imagining Change

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### INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the phenomenon of change; about the complexities of change and about the challenges that 'change' poses for business and for society more generally. Indeed practising managers (civil servants and politicians[1]) have been subject to an avalanche of information and exhortation, which warns that:

- The 'old days' of 'comfortable stability' have passed.
- A new era of 'revolutionary change' fostered by such things as business globalization, economic deregulation and technological development has dawned.
- Managers must learn to master the competitive dilemmas and contradictory imperatives of 'change' spawned by adjustments in the wider environment of business (see Kanter, 1985, 1989; Hammer, 1990; Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Whittington and Mayer, 2002; Whittington, Mayer and Smith, 2002 for but a few examples of this recurring motif)

Now while most of us would probably acknowledge that there is some kernel of truth in these statements – after all developments in technology have made existing products cheaper; have enabled the development of entirely new products and have facilitated new forms of competition - there are at least five problems with the accounts of change and change management, which have been prepared by the 'Sloan Rangers'[2].

Notably these accounts:

1. Offer an under-theorised account of

'change', which (despite notions of revolutionary change and development) is assumed to be *an outcome* and *an exception* to the norm of stability (Chia and King, 1998; Collins, 2001a; 2002).

2. Offer a 'thinly-sliced' (Clark, 2000) account of organization and management, which extracts (and so abstracts) 'change', organization and management from their wider socio-economic and historical contexts.
3. Suggest that special individuals – senior managers acting as 'transformational leaders' – may come to master the forces of change such that individual and organizational destinies may be rendered manageable.
4. Assume that change may be made to unfold in a linear and predictable manner (Collins, 1998; Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000).
5. Ignore the important social and political consequences of organizational change management policies. Indeed we might suggest that the 'Sloan Rangers' render unmentionable that which is truly unspeakable (see Moore, 1997; Monbiot, 2001; Ehrenreich, 2002; Schlosser, 2002, 2003).

Reacting to the determinist and often prescriptive missives of the 'Sloan Rangers' a number of authors (see for examples Pettigrew, 1985; Dawson, 1994, 2003a, 2003b) have suggested that there is a need to 'rethink' the problems and processes of change. Thus Pettigrew and Dawson (among others) have argued that the problems and processes of change must be viewed in their wider contexts if we are to appreciate the complex, messy and political nature of organizational change management.

While applauding these efforts to 'rethink' change, this special issue of *Tamara* suggests that these attempts at reconceptualisation continue to limit our ability to appreciate the processes of change *and* our ability to render these complex processes meaningful for both readers and participants. Indeed the contextual/processual accounts of change management mirror and reproduce to some extent the accounts of the 'Sloan Rangers' insofar as they tend to suggest that:

- Change is the result of the complex interplay of external and internal contingencies, which may nonetheless be identified and adequately summarised by critical scholars versed in appropriate research methodologies.
- Critical scholars have the ability to see through 'the fog of war' to construct *an authoritative account* of the processes and problems of change, which should be acknowledged as being *the definitive account of what actually happened* during the change process.
- Academic observers can provide managers with advice and guidance on change management that is objective, valid at a general level and of practical significance to a core group of senior, male managers!

Reflecting concerns over the limitations of these 'critical' attempts to 'rethink' change, this special issue of *Tamara* has invited contributors to 're-imagine' change. While the 'Sloan Rangers' and the critical-processual scholars have (albeit in different ways) turned the spotlight on managers and managerial practice, this attempt to provoke a 're-imagining' of change focuses attention on the (academic) contributions, which have shaped our understanding of the processes and problems of change management. In this regard the contributors to this special issue have 're-imagined' rather than re-thought change because they have been prepared to discuss 'change' in an honest, open and reflexive fashion. Crucially each of the contributors to this special issue recognises that any attempt to reconstitute our understanding and appreciation of

'change' must, of necessity implicate both authors and their subjects in a reflexive form of engagement and analysis.

Accordingly, this special issue offers a challenge both to the 'thinly-sliced' accounts of change and their critical/contextual-processual challengers as it attempts to provoke a 're-imagined' world of change: A world where change is understood not as an exception to the norm of stability; not as an outcome that is known in advance and discussed in retrospect; not as something that can be made to unfold to the rhythm of 'clock time'; but as the defining character of organization; a fuzzy and deeply ambiguous process, which implicates both author and subject in a quest for new and different ways to understand one another. In this endeavour, we have been guided by the work of C Wright-Mills on the 'sociological imagination'.

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Writing some decades ago, Wright-Mills (1973 [1959]) argued that the sociological academy had, paradoxically, lost touch with society because in its quest for 'high theory' and large data sets it had made itself aloof from the day-to-day concerns of the population(s) under study (see Fine, 1994 for a more contemporary analysis). The academy, he argued had ceased talking to the concerns and ambitions of everyday people and had instead embarked upon a quest for knowledge that was – in the pejorative sense – of academic interest alone. Thus Wright-Mills argued that the *subjects* of sociological inquiry had become *objects* of purely academic interest. Indeed he suggested that much modern academic inquiry had an anti-social character because in its failure to reflect or inquire about the problems and dilemmas faced by 'ordinary' folk it acted to confine men (and women) within limiting orbits. Thus Wright-Mills prefaced his account of the sociological imagination by noting that:

*'Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling they are often quite correct: what everyday men are directly aware of and what they*



*try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood; in other milieux they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel" (9)*

Observing that academic, sociological theorising had developed a tendency to spring (if not set) the traps of this confining domesticity, Wright-Mills proposed a distinctive mode of analysis. He proposed the exercise of the 'sociological imagination' - an analytical approach designed to allow ordinary men and women access to the tools and understandings they would require in order to forge linkages between their private troubles and larger public issues. This is a point taken up by Fine (1994) in her treatment of 'self' and 'other' in qualitative research.

In an essay which attempts to unpack notions of scientific neutrality in order to 'imagine' (71) new ways of weaving complexity and struggle back into academic texts, Fine notes that academic research has a tendency to side-line and subjugate its respondents. Accordingly she argues that there is a need to reconsider the ways in which we as researchers both engage with our respondents and articulate these engagements. Thus Fine suggests that our texts should be redesigned 'to rupture the laminations within which Others have been sealed by social scientists, to review the complicity of researchers in the construction and distancing of Others and to identify transgressive possibilities inside qualitative texts' (71).

In making a call to 're-imagine' change we have encouraged the transgression of normal academic conventions and boundaries. We have, like Wright-Mills sought to provoke contributions from those who would be (and would allow their subjects to be) something other than spectators of change. And it is with great pleasure that I introduce three distinctive, yet as we shall see linked attempts to 're-imagine' change in a dynamic and reflexive fashion.

## ANCHORS AND STABLE STABILITY

In the first of the three papers reproduced here, Steve Taylor of Worcester Polytechnic Institute asks us to consider the 'anchors', which we use to fix our understanding of the world in general and of the nature, processes and problems of change in particular. Taylor begins by observing that our appreciation of the nature of change has been limited by an implicit assumption, which suggests that 'change' should be understood as a transition; an exception to a more stable norm. Highlighting the ways in which this stabilised understanding of change 'anchors' us to a linear, distorted and ultimately unhelpful account of organization, Taylor suggests that much of the writing on change management is limited and limiting. Noting that many accounts of 'change' demonstrate a preference for and a prior concern with stability, Taylor argues that our appreciation of change management has been 'anchored' by an abstract, rigid and ultimately unimaginative predisposition. In short, he argues that much of the literature on change and its management has a 'stable' character. Indeed, he argues that these stable 'anchors' are so familiar and are so deeply ingrained that our attempts to conceptualise change, and our attempts to render the processes of change meaningful have become exercises in *unthinking* (see also Orwell, 1978 [1946]; Chia and King, 1998; Chia, 1998a, 1998b).

Noting that all anchors, including the anchors (or referencing conventions) we use to lash ourselves to the thoughts of others (see Latour, 1987) are to be regarded with deep suspicion, Taylor argues that we should assault the fetters that we use, both to cement our appreciation of (stable) change and to excuse our *unthinking*. In keeping with this philosophy we should note Taylor offers neither a reference list nor an abstract.

Echoing elements of Burrell's (1997) work Taylor concludes with the suggestion that we should challenge the 'implicit silliness' that underscores so many, existing approaches to change by adopting, self-consciously a strategy of 'explicit silliness' designed to unsettle that which we accept to be faithful and truthful. In this



regard his highly personal reflections and his deliberate transgression of academic convention should be read as an attempt to provide a space for 're-imaginings'.

### SETTING THE RECORD 'STRAIGHT'

The second paper in this collection is by Dave Buchanan of de Montfort University. This paper is similar to Taylor's in that it can be read as a challenge to the anchors that bind 'critical' studies of change management. In this analysis, Buchanan argues that while the 'Sloan Rangers' have indeed produced limited and unimaginative accounts of the processes and problems of change, the alternative accounts preferred by the academy's more 'critical' scholars remain problematic. Discussing the works of the critical-processual scholars, Buchanan notes that these writers have argued that the organizational change process is political, iterative and plagued by ambiguity. Yet despite this, he observes that these critical commentators protest that they have been able to capture the essence of the change management process within a narrative account that remains monological and is, in the final analysis, linear. Countering this rendered (see Schlosser, 2002) and depoliticising account of the process of change, Buchanan offers a qualitatively different appreciation of the political *processes of changing*.

Basing his discussion within an empirical analysis of an attempt to reengineer a major English hospital, Buchanan's paper is important in at least two ways. Firstly, his analysis of the processes of reengineering reminds us that there is a need to take management 'fads' – so-called seriously. Indeed Buchanan demonstrates that in spite of academic attempts to debunk reengineering (see Collins, 2001b; 2003a) major changes to our schools, to the apparatus of government and – in this case – to the management of our hospitals are being fabricated in the name of BPR. Secondly Buchanan's work argues succinctly and elegantly (a notable reviewer observed that this paper 'was a joy to read') that while the processualists and contextualists have conspired to get their stories 'straight', we would do well to

acknowledge the many different stories, which will persist despite the incentives to construct monological histories of organizational change. In an attempt to over-turn the single-voiced renderings of change produced by the contextualists and processualists, therefore, Buchanan argues that there is a need to generate analytic accounts of change that can reveal, understand and importantly sustain the competing narratives at work within and around change management endeavours. In this regard he asks us to throw off those 'anchors' which suggest that we can speak for 'the other' and can come to an objective understanding of the lived experience of organization/change as a singular reality. Importantly – given the nature (and mission) of this journal – Buchanan argues that this attempt to reveal the complex and polyvocal nature of organization has 'practical' benefits. Thus he suggests that his polyvocal and we might add, polysemous account of the intricate complexities of change has a liberating and (dare I use the term?) an empowering potential inasmuch as it encourages the understanding that each of us (even the hewers of wood and the drawers of water) has the capacity to generate distinctive yet viable organizational (hi)stories *and* future potentialities (see Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 2000).

### THE CARNIVAL OF CONTROL

Our third paper by Richard Badham and Karin Garrety of the University of Wollongong is somewhat longer than the papers normally accepted by academic journals. Like Buchanan's, this paper also offers an account of change that is based upon original research in the field. Indeed, this paper offers us an extremely rich (hence the length) account of the processes of changing. Noting the fuzzy and ambiguous nature of organization, Badham and Garrety have produced a paper that is, deliberately full of (mixed) metaphors. Thus the authors suggest that those who would craft, construct or just attempt to get through the processes of 'changing' must struggle to survive/ thrive in an 'organizational blender' that has been crammed full of hapless humans, political operators, 'dressing-up' boxes, elephants, turtles, sharks, Scotsmen, three-headed mon-



sters and (perhaps worst of all) academic researchers.

Analysing what textbooks would tend to refer to as a 'phased' or punctuated change model, Badham and Garrety offer an analysis, which reveals the on-going, complex, dynamic, fuzzy and enfolding experience of (what we might term) the changing process of changing. Through this dynamic account of 'life in the blender', the authors offer us important insights into the ruses, tactics and strategies (the 'Carnival of Control') employed by their change managing subjects. Yet this is no mere exercise in 'rethinking' change. Instead Badham and Garrety, like Buchanan and Taylor offer us a re-imagined account of changing, because they acknowledge and pursue the ways in which they, as researchers contributed both by omission and by commission to the 'carnival of control'. Indeed Badham and Garrety document in a colourful and graphic way (Tipper Gore take note!) the many ways in which they, as apparently neutral, outsiders have become implicated in, and anchored to, the lived experiences of organization in the Australian steel industry.

Taken together I believe that these papers offer an engaging and elegant contribution to the study of organization and management. Each has made important contributions to 're-imagining change' because each has made room for perspectives and for voices normally written-out of stories of change. As editor of this special issue I offer the contributors my congratulations and my gratitude. Yet it is important to point out that the papers in this special issue should not be considered as flawless end-products in some process of re-imagining change – this after all would be to return to a concern with (and for) stability and would tend to obscure the tensions and complexities associated with reflexive (or) co-research inquiry (see Fine, 1994). In what follows therefore I will offer a few observations on the limits of imagination (or should that be the imagination of limits?).

#### REFLEXIVITY AND CO-RESEARCH

Both the 'Sloan Rangers' and the processualist-

contextualists, as we have seen, have produced texts on change which demand the right to speak of and on behalf of 'the other' (Fine, 1994). In offering a polyvocal alternative to such renderings of change, the contributors to this special issue have avoided the deeper traps of 'othering' (Fine, 1994) because they recognise the complex, contested and polysemous nature of organization. Thus the papers reproduced here envisage and pursue 'transgressive possibilities' because they have sought not *the voice of the other*, but *the voices of others* and have, furthermore, attempted to ensure that these voices are wherever possible heard in their own words and on their own terms. Yet the conventions of academic authoring remain and the consequent need to *tell a story about stories* will, despite our best intentions, tend to reintroduce key elements of staging and direction (Latour, 1987) – even to those renderings that would rupture the laminations of the normal academic text. As an illustration let us consider what might be termed the casting process at work in our tales of changing management.

#### The casting of others?

Brecht has observed – in 'Questions from a worker who reads' – that stories and histories tend to be written from the perspective of societal elites. Indeed Brecht argues that history has tended to 'write out' those who built Thebes and those who erected Rome's triumphal arches. In an attempt to acknowledge the presence and significance of those who accompanied Alexander and cooked for Caesar, Buchanan and Badham and Garrety have attempted to allow us to hear the voices of those who are normally written out of stories of change. Yet such rewriting efforts remain fraught endeavours. Given the requirements of academic authoring, what should we do with, in Brecht's words – 'So many questions. So many reports'?

The short answer of course is that in the name of focus and coherence we are forced to make choices as regards the casting and direction of our tales. And these choices bind us however loosely, to particular orbits and experiences and to particular priorities. For example Buchanan



(through the review process) has observed that while we know the names of the key characters who swirl in Badham's and Garrety's blender of change, 'the electrician' who makes an important and forceful interjection has, in effect, been cast as 'an extra' or as part of 'the chorus'. Thus Buchanan reminds us that there is in Badham's and Garrety's paper an ordering, which remains implicit, that has decreed that this intelligent and forceful individual should be known to the world only as 'the electrician'. In a related fashion we might observe that while Buchanan is keen to tell stories of change, these stories are nonetheless rendered in a fashion that tends to rob the tellers of their own complex biographies.

### The casting of self?

Having recognised that academics are implicated in the ordering of change. And having promised to ensure that 'others' retain and are allowed to use their own voices throughout the processes, which order and reorder change we must, I think, confront a problem not properly addressed in the rich histories offered here: When 'the others' speak they will tend to speak both to and about us, the author(s). But just what would we hear and what would we be prepared to reproduce in a public forum?

Let us consider a concrete example. Richard Badham is in my experience a thoughtful and decent man. He is, as a respondent's 'girl-friend' (note the casting again) observes, quite unlike the stereotypical image of a dusty old professor. But how are we to make sense of this observation and how are we to make sense of this casting of Richard in the context of the paper - given that this is one of a very few narrative statements not subject to dissent and/or rebuttal? *Did you get that Richard*[3]?

Yet these criticisms are not intended to damn either the authors or their papers. Instead they are meant to encourage a more active engagement both with the authors and their ideas for if we have learned anything it is that no one can make a rightful claim to 'the last word' on change. In keeping with the philosophy of Wright-

Mills, therefore, it is my hope that readers of these papers will become not just writers on change but re-writers of change. To this end readers/writers/ re-writers might like to view these papers (and my commentary) as useful, honest, yet slightly unreliable anchors for their own attempts to 're-imagine' other worlds of change. At the risk of straining the metaphor, therefore, I invite readers to haul up the anchors that secure these papers (and this introduction) in the hope that these labours might provoke subsequent 're-imaginings' of change.

### TOWARDS THE VERGE

Having rejected the notion that authors can lay claim to 'the last word' I must now find a sensible means of concluding this introduction. In an attempt to side-step my own analytical discussion I will not so much conclude as move towards the verge of this discussion. Since I can make no claim to a last word on 're-imagining' change I will instead acknowledge the context of this special issue as I pay my dues to the friends and colleagues who have contributed to this edition of *Tamara*. In particular I would like to thank David Boje for the invitation to produce this issue. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge those who in reviewing submissions gave freely of their time. Thanks especially to David Buchanan, Robert Chia, Alison Linstead, Steve Linstead and Ceri Watkins.

And finally... It has not normally been my practice to dedicate my work to individuals - normally the simple phrase 'Made in Kilmarnock' is offered as epigraph and as notification of place of manufacture. On this occasion, however I will make an exception. I therefore dedicate this special issue to two important individuals who have in their own ways done much to delay the production of this special issue. To my partner Katy and my son Jack I say, 'This is for you. You helped to make this happen'. Thanks for the trips to the park. Thanks for the summer afternoons filled with sunshine and laughter instead of Sun Tzu and Latour. Thanks for bath-times and broken sleeps; for the porridge up my nose and the Karvol on my clothes for, in their own ways, each of these



delightful delays and interruptions has provided the space, relaxation and inspiration; the *hope*, which Orwell (1986 [1937]) notes is central to creativity and to the exercise of the (sociological) imagination.

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## FOOTNOTES

[1] Michael Porter among others has lectured government officials and senior civil servants on the challenges posed by change. He has preached the message of deregulation and liberalisation to Governments on both sides of the Atlantic. Currently he is advising the main funding body for business and social scientific research in the UK.

[2] In Britain the term – Sloane Ranger – is used to denote a small group of wealthy, fashionable and style conscious members of Britain's upper class. This group is said to occupy (both physically and metaphorically) residences in London's Sloane Square area. In this paper the term 'Sloan Ranger' is used to denote the influence, which a small number of US business schools – Harvard, Sloan and MIT – have exerted on management thought over the past few decades. Elsewhere (Collins, 2003b) in recognition of the branded nature of this body of knowledge and practice I have referred to 'the Massachusetts Collection of Management Knowledge'.

[3] This quip makes reference to an exchange reported in Badham's and Garrety's paper.



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