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## **The Fetish of Change**

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### **Abstract** (Article Summary)

This paper is a polemical critique of the current orthodoxy that the world is changing at an ever faster rate, that organizations must adapt to this change in order to survive, and that change management techniques enable organizations to do this. There is no basis to evaluate the proposition that the we face unprecedented rates of change, and change is not something to which organizations must respond, but is instead an outcome of organizational actions. Change management initiatives are largely failures, and the usual explanations for these failures are inadequate.

### **Full Text** (10,993 words)

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In this polemical paper I aim to interrogate prevailing assumptions and practices in the field of organisational change and the management of such change. I argue that change has become such a key part of our taken-for-granted understanding of organisations that we have made it into a 'fetish.' Just about every organisation scholar, manager, and management student seems persuaded that we live in times of unprecedented change, that organisational survival depends upon change, and that the work of managers is centrally concerned with change. Against this orthodoxy, I want to subject the notion of change to critical scrutiny.

After discussing in more detail the ubiquity of the concept of change, I will proceed in three main ways. First, I will discuss the general proposition that we live in times of unprecedented change, stressing the partiality of such a view. Second, I will examine understandings of organisational change, with particular attention to the invocation of organismic and Darwinian metaphors. Third, I will consider change management, casting it as a perennial failure, and identifying both the normal explanations for this failure (inadequate implementation and resistance) and the most common panaceas for avoiding failure (strong leadership and consultation). I conclude by offering some tentative explanations for the apparent dominance of change discourse (by discourse, I mean the ensemble of ways of representing change).

The purpose of the paper is to point to flaws, inconsistencies, and paradoxes within the discourse of change and change management. It is not, therefore, about proposing alternatives. This is partly for reasons of space, but also because change discourse is so intimately bound up with broad political and social matters that it would have to encompass far more than the issues of organisation and management with which I am concerned in this paper. It should also be said at the outset that the argument is sketched on a broad canvas, reflecting the breadth and diversity of ways in which change

and change management are deployed as concepts. In so doing, I inevitably deal rather superficially with a whole range of concepts and debates, each of which has a substantial literature and history. My justification for this is precisely that: to grasp the meaning and impact of change discourse, we must focus on its extent, rather than to seek refuge in the traditional academic habit of a cautious narrowing of focus to a point where, in saying something very precise, we end up saying very little at all. Indeed, it is my view that organisation science has a greater responsibility than it normally discharges, both to address the broad terrain of organising which affects so many people's daily lives, and also to do so in a way which challenges, rather than confirms, established wisdom (cf Chomsky, 1969). Perhaps this is what defines the 'critical, postmodern' organizational science to which this journal is devoted.

If the target I aim at is rather broad, then so too are the theoretical resources which I bring to bear. These have already been implied but, in brief and at the risk of pretension, I would characterise my overall stance as one of 'radical scepticism.' Scepticism has a long philosophical heritage, dateable to at least Pyrrho of Elis in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC. In its more modern incarnation, it is to be found in the critical traditions arising out of the Enlightenment which urge us, as Immanuel Kant did, to use our own reason rather than to accept the authority of traditional wisdom. I believe that, despite the tendency to distinguish modern and postmodern thought, that same sceptical critical reason is apparent in many of the ways which postmodernists seek to disrupt established conceptions of truth and reality.

However, for me, radical scepticism entails more than simply the generalised questioning of established wisdom. It is a stance which welds together some rather disparate elements, foundational of which would be an understanding of reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). That does not mean, as is sometimes imagined, a view that there is no reality, but rather a view that reality exists through, and not independently of, our collective representations and practices. It does not mean, to take a standard seminar room example, that a physical object such as a football would cease to exist in the absence of people. It does, however, mean that that which we take to be a football only makes sense within a framework of shared understandings, or rules which define footballs, and invest them with meaning, as against air-filled spherical bladders. This emphasis on rules marks an approach to social science articulated by Winch (1958), which draws upon the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein to see meaning as inseparable from social context or 'forms of life'.

That kind of free-form social constructionism is overlaid by an interest in the post-structuralist work of, in particular, Michel Foucault. This is hardly the occasion to rehearse the import of foucauldian ideas for management and organization theory (see Knights, 1992), but what I take in particular from his work is an interrogation of the habitual (or socially constructed) categories of thought and action. Foucault does two very interesting things. First, he resolutely works to shift our point of view away from the taken-for-granted towards seeing just what an *accomplishment* it is for things to be so taken: an accomplishment of history, politics, mind and, although he didn't have much use for the term, ideology. At the heart of his work is an aspiration "to resituate the

production of true and false at the heart of historical analysis and political critique” (Foucault, 1981: 9). The second feature of Foucault’s work is his insistence on the significance of the mundane. It is the daily fabric of our lives – our bodily gestures, the things we don’t contest or think about much (that which is produced for and by us as true) which should excite the interest of the analyst.

Change seems, just now, to have precisely the character of a solid social construction, a thing plainly in the domain of truth rather than falsity. It is its very taken-for-grantedness that seems to me to be of interest. And yet, in addition, there is a third strand informing this analysis. If, as Wittgenstein tells us, forms of life – or lived experience – matter; if, as Foucault tells us, the mundane – or everyday experience – matters; then, this is to point to the primacy of experience. What is at stake when we theorise about management and organizations, or when we do any kind of social science, are not words, but the way people live. Just now, under the assumed truths of a certain particularist discourse of politics, organizations, and society which emphasises such things as globalization, re-structuring, and change, people *suffer* from what the late Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘the weight of the world’ (Bourdieu, 1999). The radical scepticism which informs this paper is that which says ‘things could be different’ - the first and most profound insight of almost any form of politics. Indeed, ironic as it may seem in a broadside against the notion of change, the contribution of radical scepticism is to envisage a different world. This paper questions prevailing notions of change in this spirit.

## **THE UBIQUITY OF CHANGE**

Change provides a kind of 'meta-narrative' in many of the discourses about management and organisations - a kind of overarching rationale and assumption, which provides an explicit or implicit justification for specific change programmes. So ubiquitous is the invocation of change in recent literature on management and organisations, and so crucial is it to the claims which follow, that it seems reasonable to describe it as a fetish. Grint (1997: 35) refers to the fetish for change in an analysis of management fashions and fads, but its significance goes beyond these. Change is a notion which is drawn upon in a largely unthinking, but very significant, way so that it takes on an almost magical character. Change is like a totem before which we must prostrate ourselves and in the face of which we are powerless.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the change fetish is the way in which it figures as the contextual, introductory, and taken-for-granted. So obvious are they taken to be that they typically take the form of rushed assertions at the outset of any particular treatment of management. Thus, for example:

*"We live in remarkable times ... Information not industry rules our lives ... We are one world, with a global economy ... This world needs a ... form of perception ... that accepts change as a part of everyday life ..."* (Henry, 1991: xi)

Or again:

*"In a changing world the only constant is change ... the reality is that the stability which seemed to characterise the corporate world in the 1950s and 1960s has given way to increased and global competition, technological innovation and change, limited resources, deregulation, privatisation of public sector organisations and change in much more besides."* (Carnall, 1995: 1)

Open just about any book on management written in the last 20 years and, in one form or another, you will find a similar formulation - almost always on the introductory page<sup>[1]</sup>. This is partly because many of these texts feed off each other: referencing each other, drawing ideas off each other, looking to each other for supporting evidence. This does not invalidate them, for all discursive formations exhibit this kind of interlocking structure, but it does create a remarkably unchallenged consensus about the 'fact' of change.

And it is not just within management textbooks that notions of unprecedented change are invoked. What really marks out the power of the change fetish is the way that it figures in just about every magazine and newspaper article about business as a background assumption, as well as in training courses and seminars. Whenever I teach groups of managers, for example, I find that, almost without exception, they produce the same mantra: the world is changing at an ever-faster rate, and organisations must change in line with it. There have been - recently - a few texts questioning facets of the fetish of change (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Grint, 1997; Collins, 1998) but only a very few. Certainly, at least for the time being, such questioning is not reflected in the wider literature, still less in popular management texts.

Of course, to describe a world in change might be no more than a rather self-evident comment about the character of human existence. Heraclites of Ephesus, the Ancient Greek philosopher, suggested that all things are in flux, albeit at different rates, famously pointing out that when you put your foot in a river it immediately ceases to be the same river. Simply by virtue of being in time, change is occurring. But the fetish of change goes much beyond this. First, it conceptualises current rates of change as unprecedented. Second, it ascribes change not to the ineluctable character of time, but to certain determinate features such as technology and globalization. Thirdly, change is envisaged as something amenable to interventions rather than as a spontaneous flux.

These kinds of beliefs form the background to what has for some years been a 'buzz term' - the management of change. The notion of managing change typically refers not to attempts to manage the wider changes of the economy and technology, but to attempts to manage organisational responses (whether 'reactive' or 'proactive') to these. In other words, change in management thought refers to attempts by organisations to change themselves in response to actual or predicted environmental change. And such responses are not thought of as being optional: organisations which do not respond adequately to environmental change will not survive in the face of, in particular, competition.

Of course, the judgements about which *types* of change must be made in

organisations, and the methods of achieving these changes, will vary according to situation. In some cases, it will be a matter of developing new products or marketing existing products in a new way. In other cases, it will be investment in new technologies; vertical or horizontal integrations; geographical re-locations; or any number of other things. Despite this diversity, one of the common themes of organisational change in recent years has been changes in organisational design, broadly conceived - by which I mean changes in the structure and culture of organisations. In particular, recent change management has been in the vanguard of the various practices associated with 'post-bureaucratization' (Heckscher, 1994), implying the radical redesign of organisations so that they become flatter in structure, flexible in procedure, and responsive to change.

It is unlikely that there is anyone who has spent any time at all studying organisations or, for that matter, working in them in recent years who has not been exposed to the assumption that change is getting more rapid and is vital to organisational survival. This, I suggest, has become a central part of the common sense and taken-for-granted knowledge about organisations in both the academic and the practitioner world.

## **A WORLD IN CHANGE: SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS**

I want now to suggest that there are a number of reasons to be sceptical about common sense in relation to change and change management.

The first issue is that the belief that we live in times of unprecedented change is one which is found in many ages, and perhaps every age. In retrospect, the past seems more stable than the present because it is familiar to us, and because we experience the past in a sanitised and rationalised form. Yet, it is possible to point to any number of periods in the past when, for those alive, it must have seemed as if the world was changing in unprecedented and dramatic ways: the collapse of the Roman Empire; the colonisation of the Americas; the Renaissance; the Reformation; the Enlightenment; the Industrial Revolution; the World Wars. The shift from religious to secular conceptions of the world over the last four centuries has, and continues to have, massive ramifications throughout the world, beside which any issues of globalization and technical change experienced in recent years, even accepting these at face value, seem fairly limited.

There is no reason to think that the present time is one of greater change than in the past, nor that we are the first people to experience change as being unprecedented. Or, to put it differently, and perhaps rather better, there is no *basis* upon which it would be possible to sustain or evaluate such claims. Who is to say that the changes associated with the microchip are faster or more far-reaching than those associated with the printing press? What dimensions of change are we talking about? For whom? Is it possible to attribute causation to particular technologies anyway, given that these are part of a network of social relations which are part and parcel of the inventions and discoveries to which they give rise?

What we do know is that there is a tendency to look back to the past as a 'golden age' now lost by the travails of time. For example, detailed research on the history of

fears about crime (Pearson, 1983) shows how there has been a recurring pattern of beliefs that 'twenty years ago' we lived in a period of stability, order, and morality. In terms of management and organisations, there seems to be a belief that there has been a fundamental shift from the 'good old days' of stable bureaucracies and mass markets of the 'first industrial divide' (Piore and Sabel, 1984) to the present turbulence of 'crazy ways for crazy days' (Peters, 1994). Recent research has identified the phenomenon of 'organisational nostalgia' (Gabriel, 1993), whilst some of the laments for bureaucracy (du Gay, 2000) seem to forget how the growth of large bureaucratic corporations after, especially, 1945 brought forth many contemporary critiques of the changes they wrought (e.g. Whyte, 1955).

Indeed, in many respects one would hardly classify the post-war order as one of stability, whether economically, politically, or technologically. The received wisdom of post-war stability (which usually seems to mean from 1945 until the oil crisis of 1974) rather conveniently ignores, *inter alia*, the space race; development of computers; the Cold War; the arms race; de-colonisation; the Korean and Vietnam wars; the feminist movement; major waves of immigration and emigration; major shifts in youth culture and the relations between generations. It is not clear that these constituted a 'stable environment'.

Let me shift the analysis for a moment from the general to the personal – and these are by no means separate realms, for the one invariably constitutes the other. In 1945, my father was an agricultural labourer in Britain. In 1948 he had travelled thousands of miles to work in large-scale mechanised agriculture in Canada. By 1952 he was up to his neck in mud fixing tanks in Korea. Around the same time, my father-in-law was fleeing the Bulgarian secret police, hanging beneath the Orient Express from Sofia in mid-winter. After various periods as a prisoner in Tito's Yugoslavia and International Camps, he escaped to France, an illegal immigrant with no money, no friends, and barely any clothes. I don't think that either of these men would recognise the picture of post-war stability found in the textbooks.

Even the jewel in the crown of the change fetish - increased globalization - is by no means as clear-cut an issue as is commonly supposed. Hirst & Thompson (1996) expose claims about economic globalization to rigorous and sceptical scrutiny. Comparing the ratio of trade to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for example, they find that this has dropped in most industrialised countries over the course of the twentieth century (Hirst & Thompson, 1996: 26-27), and, using a range of measures they claim that "unequivocally ... openness was more in the Gold Standard period than even in the 1980s" (Hirst & Thompson, 1996: 28). With slightly less confidence, they argue that migration (of people) has been substantially less in the twentieth century than the nineteenth, certainly as a proportion of the world's population (Hirst & Thompson, 1996: 23). Overall, they conclude that "the international economy was hardly less integrated before 1914 than it is today" (Hirst & Thompson, 1996: 196-197).

None of this is to say that change does not occur. However, what is at issue is how change is apprehended within particular cultural and historical settings. The key

point is that if we collectively construe our times as being characterised by rapid change, then we are likely, through acting on that belief, to render it self-fulfilling, so that the discourse of change is real in its effects. It is necessary, then, to understand the perspectival nature of change: what matters is how we see it, and that depends on from where we look.

## **ORGANISATIONS, MANAGEMENT AND CHANGE**

In management and organisational thought, we look from, or through, a number of metaphors which have the effect of legitimating the fetish of change. Perhaps the most longstanding is the mechanistic metaphor of the organization as machine. This, as I will discuss later, licences a vision of the change manager as an engineer. But in terms of the *justification* of change, the more important metaphor is organismic (see Morgan, 1986 for a now classic discussion of these and other metaphors). This stresses first the idea of the organisation as distinct from the environment, and second the necessity of adaptation of the former to the latter. There are numerous such articulations (see Baum, 1996 for an overview).

Such debates leave untouched the fundamental assumption of an ontological boundary between the inside and outside of an organisation. But where is this boundary? Is it that of the physical premises of an organisation? Plainly not, because, for example, networks of supply and distribution affect and are affected by the organisation whilst lying outside its physical boundaries. Is it the people employed? Plainly not, because what about customers, shareholders, and so on. Insofar as any boundaries can be discerned between an organisation and its environment, these are defined through socially and historically specific conventions.

More specifically, organisational boundaries are defined through the deployment of certain bodies of expertise such as law or accounting (see, for example, Hines, 1988). Yet these are contingent. An organisation may be able, legally, to regard the locality and community around it as external so that the social costs of laying off workers or polluting the environment (in the ecological sense) are not borne by the organisation. However, there is no necessity in this line - it is not 'natural' - since companies could be made to account for externalities and held liable for various effects.

As well as conceiving of organisations as distinct from their environments, common sense, backed up by conventional organisational theory, configures the relationship between the two as a Darwinian one in which those which adapt to the environment survive whilst those which do not are doomed. The Darwinian metaphor is perhaps particularly associated with the population-ecology model of organisations (Aldrich, 1979), although it has come to be used far more widely, and imprecisely, as part of the general vocabulary of management. Interestingly, the strict interpretation of the population ecology model would suggest there is no scope for management to influence the success or failure of an organisation's fit with the environment, and hence its survival (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) since the environment 'selects' organisations. However, the more general impact of structural contingency and strategic choice theory suggests that a

'fit' between organisations and their environments is something that can be, and is, achieved managerially (Child, 1972). Certainly, the latter is the *core* assumption of all management of change ideas, which are necessarily predicated upon the belief that organisations can be managed in ways which 'make a difference' to the capacity of an organisation to succeed in its environment.

But I am anticipating what will be discussed more fully later. Returning to organismic metaphors, these are unhelpful because they conceal the sense in which organisations and environments are mutually constitutive. Plainly, the environment of any organisation (call it organisation A) consists of other organisations, and each of those organisations operates in an environment of which organisation A is a part. Organisation A is, therefore, not just part of the environment of *other* organisations, but also part of its *own* environment. This is not to be confused with the proposition that organizations and environments are interdependent: rather, it is to say that positing the very notions of organization and environment is misleading.

In less abstract terms, this means that as an organisation changes, it contributes to the rationale for change in other organisations, which in turn provides a rationale for change in the original organisation. Ultimately, this is likely to be futile: suppose an organisation implements, for example, Total Quality Management (TQM) for 'the first time in the world' (or for the first time in a particular industry), and further suppose that this yields competitive advantage. Other organisations then seek to adopt TQM and, assuming that all organisations are equally successful in their implementations, the end result will be that no organisation has competitive advantage. In short, I am suggesting that organisations collectively generate a 'treadmill' of change, which is then seen as a problematic environment to which an organisational response must be made.

It is indeed very obvious that TQM illustrates this point. The 'quality revolution' of the 1980s came to be seen in the 1990s as being inadequate by virtue of its attachment to 'incremental change'. A new 'revolution' was needed (Hammer and Champy, 1993) and instigated in the form of Business Process Reengineering (BPR). But BPR then became seen as 'limited' (Koch and Godden, 1996), and a new vision of 'post-management' if offered as the solution. We can ascribe this to faddism (Abrahamson, 1996), but it is a faddism which is the outcome of particular social processes of competitive emulation, rather than being absurd or whimsical froth.

Of course, an obvious objection to the treadmill view I am expressing here would be to point out that, although organisations generate change collectively, any individual organisation has little choice but to participate if it is to survive. It is here that the Darwinian metaphor comes into play - that survival is contingent upon adaptation, because organisations which do not change will lose business to those which do. Yet, there are surely reasons to doubt whether this is true. First, it cannot be assumed that organisational change does, in fact, lead to better or cheaper products (or to greater profitability), and if it does not, there is no reason to assume that adaptation will be commercially beneficial. Second, even if change does lead to better or cheaper products, it does not follow that customers will buy from that organisation rather than another. It

may be that a less good or more expensive product is compensated for by other considerations, such as a particular personal relationship between buyer and seller, or habit, or convenience, or principle. To put it another way, there are all sorts of reasons why consumers are not the rational utility-maximising agents of economic theory.

Anticipating another objection, it might be thought that currently, change programmes are often directed at giving the customer what s/he wants, including all of the 'non-rational' considerations I have just listed. However, changes conducted in the name of the customer may be very far from being the same as changes desired by the customer, and may even coexist with monopoly supply of vital services (Ogden and Anderson, 1995). Even where this is not so, many supposedly customer-oriented changes are, in reality, just the opposite. Consider the recent trend towards creating central call centres for dealing with customer enquiries in industries such as banking and insurance. Typically, they involve long waits in telephone queues, dealing with elaborate automated menus, and finally being connected with an automaton with no personal interest in or knowledge of the customer. In such cases, whilst change is justified in terms of the increasingly demanding nature of customers, the actual practices would seem more animated by a concern to cut costs.

In any case, the person of the customer cannot be dissociated from the person of the employee. Thus, organisational change programmes which, for example, remove staff in the name of the customer and organisational survival, are damaging the capacity of those staff to act as customers and, therefore, the prospects for survival of those organisations relying on this custom. This, of course, is merely another aspect of the simultaneity of organisations and environments.

My argument in this section is that far from being a natural environmental given to which organisations must respond, change is better understood as a construction effected by the interplay (and its unintended consequences) of organisations themselves. To say it is a construct is not to say that it is unreal, but rather that its reality is an effect of organisational practices, rather than a precursor of those practices. Yet, by constructing a changing world, organisations also create the apparent necessity to 'manage change'. It is to this that I now turn attention.

## **MANAGING CHANGE: SOME INANITIES AND INIQUITIES**

The most striking thing about change management is that it almost always fails. Despite (or, who knows, because of) the reams of worthy academic treatises, the unending stream of self-congratulatory 'I did it my way' blather from pensioned-off executives and the veritable textual diarrhoea of self-serving guru handbooks, change remains a mystery. And I do not think that the answer is just around the corner: rather, change management rests upon the conceit that it is possible systematically to control social and organisational relations, a conceit shared by the social sciences in general (MacIntyre, 1981). I will return shortly to this point.

Change management a failure? Is this just wild generalisation from an 'armchair

critic'? Crosby (1989) - a leading advocate of TQM - claims that 90% of such projects fail to meet their targets, whilst Stewart (1993) gives a failure figure of 50-70% for BPR. New techniques are announced with a great fanfare and presented as the unproblematic solution to previous problems, but disillusion soon sets in. Some of this is bound up with the marketing activities of consultants and gurus. But there is more to it than that. Managers responsible for particular change programmes are likely, for career and identity reasons, to describe them as successful. Yet, the everyday experience of people in organisations is that one change programme gives way to another in a perennially failing operation: nirvana is always just on its way.

In this context, the massive prescriptive literature of organisational change takes on an interesting aspect. On the one hand, it must always be pointing to the failure of change management (else why the need for *this* new book?), whilst on the other hand never admitting the illusory nature of successful change management (else why the need for *any* new book?). Much of the conflict stems here from the search for a formula or methodology which promises success in a wide variety of settings. For change management is predicated upon the substitutability of, or generalizability from, what has (supposedly) worked in one situation to another.

We can see here the social practice which underlies the observation made earlier about the way in which organisations adopting homogenous 'solutions' to problems in the name of competitive advantage must inevitably end up without such an advantage. For this is not just an anomaly, but an inevitable feature of change management. It is most evident in relation to the very common change management methodology of 'benchmarking'.

Benchmarking aims to measure and match an organisation's existing products and procedures with those of competitors and, in particular, those of organisations perceived to be field leaders. It is part of a process which institutional theorists have described as 'mimetic isomorphism' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) or, as we might more straightforwardly say, copying. Benchmarking, as a general preparation for the deployment of particular change management techniques in the name of 'best practice', is expressive of the underlying search for generalizability which characterises change management discourses.

According to a Coopers & Lybrand survey of UK Top 1000 companies suggested that 67% of such companies engage in benchmarking (cited in Carnall, 1995: 5). By an amusing irony, the implication of this, in the context it is cited, is that since benchmarking is common in 'top' companies it should be adopted generally! Yet benchmarking embodies several obvious inanities, even within its own terms. First, there is the issue already alluded to that it can only (at best, assuming 'successful' implementation) lead to equality, not to advantage. Second, and relatedly, it might be thought that if competitive advantage is what is at stake, the thing to emulate would be the process by which an organisation comes up with an original basis for innovation, rather than its outcome. Thirdly, it seems well-established that today's successful companies are very often tomorrow's failures (consider the later fate of the majority of

those companies designated as 'excellent' by Peters & Waterman,1982). Yet, despite this, there is an insatiable demand for case studies and stories from such companies, and a quite myopic lionisation of whatever today's successes are.

But finally, and most significantly, generalizability and hence benchmarking are predicated upon the assumption that organisational settings are homogenous with respect to the relevant features. In other words, it is assumed that doing what another organization did with a different set of people in a different place at a different time will yield the same results as those claimed for the original implementation. And what do such claims amount to anyway? Let's assume an organization is successful in terms of (say) increased profitability following the introduction of (say) a new organisational structure. There is no way of knowing whether this success was because, despite, or coincidental with the new structure. It is not known, by definition, whether had another structure been adopted the organization would not have been even more profitable. There is no counterfactual.

Indeed, the counterfactual problem is an enduring one for change management, irrespective of the benchmarking issue. It is never possible to know what would have happened had a change programme not been introduced, nor which effects can be assigned to which change. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in practice, most large organizations run several change programmes simultaneously, and typically embark upon new programmes before the old ones have 'bedded down'. All this makes both success and failure slippery concepts, and whether or not a programme is seen as successful will be an outcome of organisational politics and the context in which the outcome is being debated (for example, organisations may be happy, for public relations reasons, to figure as 'best practice' examples in management texts - the internal perception may be quite different). Finally, on this issue, what constitutes success is crucially, and rather obviously, dependent upon how success is defined and by whom. A successful change management programme from one perspective might be degraded and intensified work conditions from another.

Not only is it difficult - and perhaps in principle impossible - to know whether a change programme has been successful, it is also, to say the least, questionable whether change can be regarded as manageable at all. Although there are innumerable change models, the issues in this respect are well-illustrated by classic Lewin model (Lewin, 1951) still used as the basis of thinking about organisational change by many consultants and managers. The basic premise of the model is that there is a balance of forces which keeps a situation stable, and that the task of change management is either to increase the forces for change or decrease the forces against change. Change management thus proceeds in the three steps of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing.

The dominant metaphor here is mechanistic: there are 'forces' which operate to stabilize or de-stabilize an organization. The organization can be unfrozen and refrozen at will. Yet, are organisations as amenable to control as (say) a block of ice? And, of course, this mechanistic view relates to the issue of generalizability. If the manager is a technician who understands the 'physics' of organisational force-fields and the mechanics

of refrigeration, then plainly this implies a reliable and transferable kind of knowledge.

Nowhere is this fantasy of managerial omnipotence more obvious than in the field of culture management. Here the dominant model, popularised by Peters & Waterman (1982) and the flood of 'excellence' literature that came in its wake, is one of top-down culture management. Senior managers agree on a set of values for the organization and, through recruitment, training and socialisation mechanisms make these values 'cascade down' the organization in order to create cultural homogeneity. Yet, it has been very widely questioned whether such 'top-down' models are valid (e.g. Smircich, 1983).

In a revealing case study of supermarkets, Ogbonna & Wilkinson (1990) show how culture management programmes designed to instill a customer care ethos had some effect at modifying staff behaviour, but a very limited impact upon the values of individuals. That behaviour was modified was unsurprising: staff who did not smile at customers, for example, were subject to discipline. But it is vital to culture management initiatives that values be modified, since their *raison d'être* is that employees should genuinely be committed to these values in the absence of supervision, thus yielding better customer service as well as saving on the costs of managing and monitoring compliance.

It should not be thought that this is an unusual case, nor that it applies to organisational culture change rather than to other sorts of change. For culture is not just one kind of change amongst others; rather it is implicated in most other change methodologies. Hence both TQM and BPR, for example, have recourse to cultural change as one element within their prescriptions. Talk to managers about a change programme they are implementing, and the chances are they will mention, along the way, how 'of course the culture will have to change'.

The reason why culture proves to be resistant to management relates back to the issue which has already been mentioned, namely the inherent uncontrollability of social relations. As Roberts (1984), drawing upon the works of the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre and the sociologist Anthony Giddens, explains, management typically assumes that systematic control of social relations is possible and, therefore, treats people as if they were simply objects, rather than also as subjects. In other words, people are assumed to be passive receivers of others' actions, rather than being themselves actors who can (and do) respond differentially to events, interpret them in a differential way, and deliberately or unwittingly obstruct and subvert these actions. People are capable of noticing and reflecting upon what goes on around them, and of acting differently as a result (one reason why predictive social science has such a poor track record).

The capacity (and necessity) of people to be both subjects and objects links much of what I have said in this section. It explains why mechanistic understandings of change (and management generally) are so inappropriate. For all the talk of forces and freezing, people do not act in the same way as atoms of water: they act in ways which are both unpredictable but, more importantly, which are subject to deliberate and intentional change on the part of the individuals concerned. By the same token, mechanistic understandings underlie the issues of generalizability and the counterfactual problem. If

the issue were simply one of freezing and refreezing atoms of water, it would be possible to say that given like conditions, which could readily be replicated, the atoms will behave in the same way. But in organisations, like conditions can never be specified or replicated.

None of this should be reduced to the trite observation that the problem for change management is that 'people are all individuals'. What is at stake here is that people exist within a range of meaning structures (including those of individualism that allow people to experience their agency as an individual attribute), of which the organisational is only one. These meaning structures are indeterminate and open-ended and, therefore, unpredictable in their effects and likely to give rise to unintended consequences.

In this sense, the problems encountered by change management are an aspect of the problems of social science in general. Indeed, most management theory derives from social science, albeit often in bowdlerised form. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the promise of control derived from social science is illusory. In relation to change management, I have already outlined some of the reasons why. But it should not be thought that going back to social science (even in some more rigorous way than managers have been wont to do) to get better models will solve the problem of control since, in this respect, social sciences are "almost or perhaps completely devoid of achievement. For the salient fact about these sciences is the absence of any law-like generalisations whatsoever." (MacIntyre, 1981: 88) [<sup>2</sup>].

These concerns rarely figure in change management discourse or, if so, only in the most cursory way. For example, on the issue of measuring the success of change programmes the problem may be acknowledged but discounted by reference to approximations and estimates. This is *not* because those interested in change management are ignorant or unintelligent. Rather, as already suggested, it is because the quest for prescriptive generality is inherent to change management. 'I don't know' and 'It all depends' are not promising materials for building influence and book sales, nor for gaining training contracts. And, in particular, they are unlikely to be viable responses for managers to make when faced with demands to implement change. The implication of the issues I have outlined, ultimately, is that the whole business of change management should be given up on.

In the absence of such heresy, what figure instead in change discourse are recurring kinds of explanation for the difficulties encountered in implementations, as well as prescriptions to overcome these. The two most ubiquitous of the former are the charges of 'imperfect implementation' and 'resistance to change'. The most ubiquitous of the latter are leadership and consultation. I will examine them in turn.

## **IMPERFECT IMPLEMENTATION**

The imperfect implementation response is an easy one to make in the face of the manifold reported failures of change management initiatives. It concedes nothing to the inherent limitations of change management assumptions and, indeed, it embodies all of

them: for example, it can never be proved that if only 'such-and-such' had been done, all would be well. Moreover it retains the same optimism about the controllability of social and organisational relations by positing that there is no problem with this proposition, it is just a matter of doing it right. Since the early days of management theory, imperfect implementation has been the stock defence of failures. Thus, Taylor ascribed the difficulties encountered by the introduction of scientific management in 19<sup>th</sup> century North America to a failure to fully implement his approach. Exactly the same case is made in relation to TQM, BPR, and so on.

It is worth pondering why, when so much effort and energy is put into change management - both doing it and writing about it - imperfect implementations continue to abound? Could it be that, even if it were to be granted that successful change management can in principle occur, there are necessarily problems in translating between settings?

When I discuss these issues with MBA students, for example, the issue of Japanese management methods often comes up, and it is readily acknowledged that the notion of transporting a set of ideas that seem to have worked in one setting into another is problematic. In this example, the obviousness comes from a perception that the cultural contexts of Japanese and UK or US Capitalism are different. Yet, the cultural contexts argument rather neglects the way in which Japanese management methods were, as is well-known, to some considerable extent derived from American ideas imposed in the post-war reconstruction that followed Japan's military defeat in 1945 (Locke, 1996). Therefore, the failure of transferability cannot be reduced to cultural contexts. Again, in the light of recent economic difficulties in Japan, it may be recognized that what 'works' at one time may not work in another. If these points are conceded, it is not clear that imperfect implementation can stand as anything other than a fig leaf for failure. For if the viability of a technique rests upon the time and place of its implementation, how can the notion of generalizable technique be sustained at all? Could it be that the perfect implementation is always just around the corner but never appears? Doesn't it give pause for thought that decades of work on change management have failed to give a single undisputed recipe for a 'perfect' implementation?

## **RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

Aside from imperfect implementation, the other main answer conventionally given as to why change management proves difficult in practice is that of resistance to change. Indeed, the two responses are linked, since resistance to change may be cited as explaining the imperfection of the implementation: resistance is presented as *the* major difficulty in implementing change, and much effort is devoted to finding ways of overcoming such resistance. In a highly typical formulation, Carnall (1995: 141-158) draws upon classic and influential work in change management (de Vries & Miller, 1984; Adams et al., 1976) to propose that resistance to change exhibits 5 stages:

1. Denial - there is no need for this change;
2. Defence - a realisation that change is going to happen, but trying to avoid it oneself;

3. Discarding - people begin to discard their attachment to the old ways;
4. Adaptation - both to the new system and in the new system in terms of fine-tuning;
5. Internalisation - the new way becomes routine.

Here we see again the tendency towards generalised models of change. These stages are to be expected in any case of organisational change, irrespective of context. Models like this are deeply problematic because they close off the possibility that change might be undesirable. They suggest that resistance is inevitable, but that it will equally inevitably give way to acceptance and even enthusiasm. Thus, the job of managers must be to 'get through' these stages. There is also a subtle stigmatisation of those who are against change as just 'afraid' - or, more damningly, 'obstructive'. These psychologisms are extremely powerful. Even at their most benign they suggest the individual is in need of help. Ultimately, the resister must be sacked, presumably.

The same logic - in less detail - figures whenever resistance is talked about in this context: people 'don't like', have a natural antipathy to, change. People cling to the familiar. But there is a simple way of exposing the fatuity of these generalisations. Suppose a manager announces one morning that there will be a 50% (or 10%, or even 1%) pay raise all round. Can we expect a cycle of denial-defence-discarding-adaptation-internalisation? Isn't it more likely that, other things being equal, people will be pleased and acceptant of the change?

The point is an obvious one: by and large people resist change because the change is damaging to them. And damaging not for psychological reasons of fear and uncertainty, but for quite straightforward reasons. I am not much given to economic explanations but, in this case, they do offer a tempting alternative to psychologistic ones: most change management initiatives entail, at least for some, more work, less pay, or no job. If they did not, they would probably not be resisted. It is true that this is a very multi-layered phenomenon, and it is possible to envisage a situation in which people resist a change, even when it is to their advantage. However, this does not give licence to the proposition that resistance to change is necessarily, or even often, a demonstration of an irrational refusal of what is to people's advantage.

And there is another point, too. It is not just that resistance to change may be well-founded in terms of its effects on those affected; it may also reflect the ill-thought out nature of the change itself. To see resistance as a defensive response to necessary change is to indulge in a fantasy of managerial omniscience. Yet, if the problem is often one of inadequate implementation, isn't it possible that some of the resisters knew what they were talking about, and were not simply defending their own economic and psychological interests?

In New Zealand recently, a newly privatised electricity company laid off so many staff that Auckland was blacked out for six months. In the UK, similar lay offs in the privatised rail industry have led to ongoing problems of safety and service cancellation. Privatised companies, in particular, are always subject to massive change management programmes as they 'change culture' in ways deemed appropriate to their new status.

Presumably resistance was also dealt with in an appropriate way. But maybe, if managers had not over-ridden this resistance, their companies would not have experienced the embarrassing and costly failures which subsequently occurred.

The failure to question, or even to raise as a possibility, that a particular change is necessary is not simply a failure of management of change discourse. Rather, it is an aspect of the all-pervasive notions of change identified at the outset of this paper. For it is the uncontested - and, for some, incontestable - background assumptions about the nature of the changing world which render the necessity of individual organisational change programmes taken for granted.

## **LEADERSHIP**

If the imperfect implementation and resistance are given a remarkable emphasis in explaining the failure of change management, no less remarkable is the ubiquity with which recourse is made to leadership as the solution to these problems. Interestingly, just as there are many reports of the failure of change management so too is there, at best, mixed evidence as to whether leadership is efficacious in the delivery of organisational performance (Thomas, 1987).

However, as with change management in general, this does not dampen the enthusiastic promotion of leadership as panacea. The right leader will mean that change initiatives from the top will inspire those lower down, so that conflict disappears. The right leader will bind together the organisations values and over-ride communication difficulties. The right leader will delegate at the right time to the right people. Implicit in leadership based conceptions of change is that change will come from the top, and will be fully controlled from the top. These are questionable assumptions, for reasons discussed earlier.

This is not the place to review the large, and depressingly tedious, literature on leadership which forms a staple topic in organisational behaviour and is discussed in all of the standard textbooks (see Bryman, 1996 for an overview). These point to a whole series of different approaches including those based upon the 'traits' or individual characteristics of leaders; those based upon an examination of the different 'styles' available to leaders, and those based upon the contingent 'situational factors' impinging upon successful leadership.

If all of this smacks of sober, earnest, academic enquiry, the kinds of leadership theorizations associated with recent conceptions of organisational change have a much more ebullient feel. Here the leader is conceptualised in terms of 'charisma,' 'transformation,' and 'vision.' Needless to say, these conceptualisations have their counterpart in the seemingly endless profligacy of confessions and biographies of famous business and political leaders.

Such breathless formulations of leadership are all of a piece with those of change. Indeed, the capacity to initiate change is typically held to be the dividing line between leaders and managers (Kotter, 1990). More generally, I sense that notions of leadership,

like those of change, are invoked as a kind of magic spell: no one really knows what it is, but they are sure that it is the answer. It fits with senior managers' own self-perceptions of being in control, and it is congruent with the highly individualised cultures of most Western societies. But, although in some ways ludicrous, the preoccupation with leadership has some serious effects.

The principal of these is that by honing in so relentlessly upon an individual, leadership tends to blind us to the complex and social nature of, particularly, large organisations. As Hatch (1993), for example, demonstrates, the capacity of a leader to be charismatic depends upon the ways in which he (of which more below) is seen by others and his actions interpreted. In other words, leadership emerges as an outcome of a relation between people than an attribute of the leader as such. This certainly has the effect of rendering a more social picture of the organization. But, at the same time, it fails to interrogate the relational basis of leadership in terms of the power asymmetries embedded within this relation. Leadership may be co-fabricated by a number of people, but not on equal terms. By this, I mean not so much that leaders have more power than the led (which of course would only replicate the problem of individualism). Rather, I mean that leaders are able to call upon a range of bases of social power including, most importantly, the language of leaders and the led, which invariably assigns an anterior position to the latter.

Moreover, these leadership formulations are unremittingly and unashamedly masculinist (Sinclair, 1998). Despite some recent talk about the feminization of *management* (Fondas, 1997), leadership remains configured in heroic, warrior-like terms. This does not mean that leaders are necessarily men (although this is to a large extent true), but that the dominant ideal of the leader is characterised by those attributes which are stereotypically masculine. It is true that leadership has recourse to notions of charisma which eschew some of the rationalism associated with such stereotypes. But that charisma takes the form of a flamboyant, dominant display and, as such, accords well with many well-established notions of masculinity, which might be summarised in the phrase 'strutting peacocks'.

## **COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION**

The second main kind of solution to the problems of change management involves the related concepts of communication, consultation, consensus, and commitment-building. To some extent these may be seen as attributes of a particular kind of leadership and, moreover, one which is somewhat different to that based on charisma and vision.

Although the terms are related, they are revealing of different strands of managerial thought. Whereas, communication implies keeping people informed about change, consultation implies a more active process in which those affected have an opportunity to share in the decision-making involved. In either case, however, the assumption is that some form of involvement in change will be more successful than change imposed by diktat.

Whether such an approach is used will depend upon many factors. Superficially, the main determinant will be whether the organization in question has a general style or culture of participation. However, the brutal reality is often that the extent of consultation in change programmes is a function of the relative power positions of those involved. This may be a matter of trade union strength, or that consultation is required by law. It may be an issue of the specialist knowledge or skills of those who will be affected by the change, so that consultation is more likely to be used amongst skilled workers and professionals, in line with the general tendency for such employees to be controlled using techniques of 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977).

What this should point to is that consultation and communication are aspects of organisational control and attempt to secure commitment. If what is at stake is employees being laid off, it is unlikely that consultation will occur with them (excepting negotiations with unions), nor is it clear what consultation could achieve. Having said that, it is increasingly recognised that the commitment of the survivors of downsizing will depend upon their perceptions of the fairness with which their erstwhile colleagues have been treated, and this may lead, if not to consultation, then at least to communication about the 'necessity' for the changes.

But even when redundancy is not at stake, consultation is likely to reproduce existing structures of power and control in organisations. Although having the appearance of an equal exchange there are at least two broad reasons to doubt this. The first is that consultation with, especially, lower-level employees cannot be separated from the more general ways in which they are managed. Thus if they are primarily treated as being motivated by simple rewards and sanctions it is unlikely that attempts at consultation will bring forth any great involvement and interest.

Moreover, the whole basis of the use of consultation as a change management *technique* is that what is at stake is the enrolment of individual employees into the existing aims and plans of senior management. To be sure, there may be some scope for negotiation on details, but the process is initiated by managers and to a managerial agenda (just as, in quality circles, consultation may occur over production processes, but not over shareholder dividends).

I don't mean to imply by this that consultation is simply a cynical charade on the part of managers - although that may be true on occasions. What is more to the point is that managers are unable to suspend the relations of power generally pertaining for the specific instance of consultation over a particular change programme. Moreover, their attempts at consultation may well be animated by a personal desire for equity and fair dealing. But to the extent that it is instigated with a purpose in mind, it is animated by concerns of formal rationality and instrumentalism. And this means that it suffers from precisely the same problems as change management is general, as suggested earlier. That is to say, it is predicated upon the attempt to control social relations. As such, consultation cannot be regarded as a solution to these problems. To put it another way, to the extent that consultation is animated by the instrumental intent to secure agreement, it cannot deal with the near-inevitability of disagreement.

## CONCLUSION

How are we to understand this contemporary preoccupation with change and change management? Given that many of the assumptions of the former and nostrums of the latter are, on examination, dubious does it follow that we are in the grip of some kind of collective hysteria? There may be elements of that, but I think there are other explanations. One of them is the social constructivist argument I rehearsed earlier: to some extent increasing rapidity of change is an outcome of our collective construction of it. We are actually in the process of making it true by our organisational enactment of change. To that extent, the 'solution' might well be attempts, on a social level, to reconceptualize change.

By this I mean not just to make heard the kinds of arguments articulated in this paper, but to confront some of the sillier claims being made about the contemporary world. I have in mind such things as the disjuncture between claims that we live in a networked, electronic age and the fact that around two-thirds of the world's population has never made a telephone call. Or the disjuncture between claims about the virtual economy and the brute reality of the physical artefacts which still require production, consumption, and distribution. This latter is put into sharp relief by the rise and fall of the dot.com hysteria. This was presented not just as a, but as *the*, way forward. Companies which stood outside were viciously punished by stockmarkets, notwithstanding the real value in their businesses. Companies with no business basis at all saw their value rise sky-high. Sceptics were portrayed as retrograde and luddite.

In many respects, the fetish of change reflects a myopia which organization science has repeatedly fallen prey to: the myopia of equating the experiences of a relatively small, privileged western elite with the experiences of the world as a whole. Just as there is a tendency to represent the post-war past as stable - perhaps because it was stable for many sections of the Western middle classes - so too is there a tendency to represent the current era as turbulent because it is turbulent for that same group.

Yet clearly there are other ways of explaining the fetish of change. If we ask what all the talk of change *achieves*, then at least one answer is that it operates as an unchallenged legitimation for the actions favoured by powerful players in organisations, and more generally. For change discourse typically leads to the proposition that 'there is no alternative': adapt or die in the global marketplace. Claims about change have a massive rhetorical power at the present time, and it is a power which acts to the advantage of elites. As organization science develops a more critical agenda, it seems to be incumbent upon it to speak in ways which do not simply reproduce the rhetoric which acts in the interests of such elites. In other words, we need to recognize that much organizational change is damaging to people's lives and to their communities. Rather than regard these effects as the price to be paid for profitability, the organization scientist needs to identify them as problems in need of solution. And the unquestioning celebration of the necessity and desirability of change seems to me to be a first stage in identifying these problems.

However, I am not arguing that change discourse is a 'lie' fabricated by some conspiratorial group. On the contrary, I suspect that for many who so enthusiastically articulate that discourse it is less a tool of 'exploitation' and more a way of sustaining a particular sort of identity. For change discourse offers the possible identity of a flexible, adaptive, future-orientated achiever - a sort of postmodern surfer, adept at riding the waves of change. There is nothing wrong with that, but it does simultaneously write others as rigid, dogmatic and stuck in the past.

In the introduction to this paper, I described it as being animated by a 'radical scepticism.' Such a stance focuses on the taken-for-granted and subjects it to critical interrogation. Inevitably, to do so is to disrupt some 'sacred cows.' The current relentless claims about change and its management in organizations seem to be the most sacred of cows, not just in organization theory, but in wider social and political discourse. In this sense, a full articulation of the case 'against' change discourse would be a massive undertaking. Yet, many recent prescriptions on radical change invite us to think the unthinkable. If we turn that nostrum upon change discourse itself, is it too fanciful to imagine that we will in the future look back on the fetish of change and wonder why so many were pilloried on its altar? And why what one might have thought of as more enduring human needs and desires for stability have been so comprehensively ignored or devalued in the late twentieth century? And why organization scientists did so little to speak up against it? "But that, again, is a larger tale, one that tells us a lot about the contemporary world: its social and economic realities, and the grip of ideology and doctrine, including those doctrines crafted to induce hopelessness, resignation, and despair" (Chomsky, 1999, p 85).

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note how these claims about contemporary organising recur. Thus, Parke et al. (1977: 172) comment that, "Two accepted clichés about contemporary societies are that they are experiencing unprecedented rates of change and that they have been drawn together by trade and mass communications into a global village." Jacques (1996) notes how many of the claims about a second industrial revolution in the late twentieth century are almost identical to those made in the early part of the century. Yet, those earlier periods are recast as being stable in later accounts.

<sup>2</sup> Clearly there are major issues about the nature of science, social science, and organization science at stake here, which I cannot discuss in this paper (see, for example, Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995).

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