
Consilio Manuque: The learning organization paradigm and the problem of unity

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Abstract (Article Summary)

This paper draws on literature in the fields of organizational studies, industrial relations, and industrial sociology to attempt to address 'new paradigm' managerial initiatives that espouse sentiments of unitarism in their discourse from a UK perspective. The specific focus of this theoretical investigation is the output of the proponents of the 'Learning Organization'. It is argued that in such organizations, employers attempt to control and induce behavioural change in employees through the use of reorganization and instrumental discourse. Managerial commentators and theorists have written much about what the implementing agents' expectations are of the outcomes of such organizational initiatives. Among these expectations is that the new initiative will bring about a radical change in attitudes in the workplace and that unitarism will prevail. However, an as yet underdeveloped area of study is what happens when the subjects (i.e. employees) receive the initiative, the potential for counter-ideology and resistance to the initiative, and the forms resistance may take. It is these latter two issues that this paper concentrates on. Ultimately, the paper seeks to present a conceptual investigation of pluralism within, and the nature and implications of resistance in, the Learning Organization. An allusion to Beaumarchais' 'Figaro' is used to illustrate the arguments.

Full Text (8,652 words)

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INTRODUCTION

In Beaumarchais' play *The Barber of Seville* (the original form of the now more famous Rossini opera of the same name), the motto of the picaresque hero Figaro is "*Consilio Manuque;*" literally "by stratagem or manual endeavour." The cunning Figaro uses his wit and industry to pursue his own schematic agenda whilst giving the impression of loyalty to the Count under whose authoritarian and feudal - but rather pompous and less than competent - governance he is employed. The seemingly archaic Figaro allusion may appear to have little relevance to contemporary organizational theory, but the intended point it is used to make is an appropriate one if considered alongside recent trends in scholarly approaches to the study of work and organizations. The hegemony of management and organizational objectives is assumed to be unchallengable in the face of the rhetoric of turbulence, 'new paradigms,' shared visions, and more empowered, satisfying work. Environmental forces have contrived to alter production methods, economic processes, and social attitudes in an equivalent manner to those that moulded modernity at the time Beaumarchais was writing. Revolution and innovation brought about capitalism, mass-production, and to a certain degree democracy. The new set of societal relations that resulted, according to some extremely influential scholarly thinking, rendered class conflict inevitable and a principal theatre for this conflict was the workplace (Hobsbawm, 1975; Hyman, 1975; Marx & Engels, 1996). At the dawning

of a new century, overt industrial conflict may be less a part of the landscape of the world's developed economies (Kelly, 1998), but one should not necessarily assume that peace has broken out.

Commentators as diverse in nature as Boje (1994), Clegg (1990), Drucker (1988), Toffler (1980), and Zuboff (1988) *inter alia* have suggested the possibility (although not unanimously the reality) of a 'paradigm shift' in the latter quarter of the 20th century that is having dramatic effects on the workplace. On the way out is the industrial era of mass production for the accumulation of surplus capital, and in comes an era of intense competition and complex product diversification where the learning and knowledge of members of organizations are the key to commercial success. The contemporary managerialist critiques of modernist means of production make an intriguing counterbalance to the more radical polemics of Fordism, scientific management, and bureaucracy offered by the likes of Braverman (1974) and Gramsci (1971). However, the phenomenon of employee resistance, recalcitrance, and counter-ideology appear to be absent from much of the new managerial literature (see Coopey, 1996; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995), but it is unlikely to have disappeared. Rather, two key issues arise: firstly, that so-called 'post-Fordist' managerial initiatives are not as potent as their proponents may think at eradicating pluralism from the workplace (Bacon & Blyton, 1999; Kelly & Kelly, 1991; Sisson & Storey, 1990); secondly, that even if a fundamental shift in the employment relationship has, in some cases, resulted from management initiatives, 'new paradigms' of work organization may lead to 'new paradigms' of worker resistance (e.g. Huzzard, 2000; Knights & McCabe, 2000; May, 1999; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). In other words, although Figaro was a product of the late pre-modern era, had he been around at any time in the modern era or in the new paradigm that organizations are said to have entered in the recent past, regardless of the regime, it is unlikely that his capacity for insubordination and mischief would be curtailed.

This paper attempts to consider one such emancipatory managerial initiative of the new paradigm – the learning organization – and consider the capacity of it in conceptual and practical terms to dispel pluralism and nullify resistance. It firstly provides a background to the epistemology of recent managerial thought and attempts to offer a critique from a UK perspective, hopefully providing a wider audience with an overview of some of the useful critical British writing that has emerged and how it can be used with that of North America and elsewhere. It then considers the learning organization in a critical light, concentrating on its notions of unitarism and shared values. From this critique, a typology of unitarisms is proposed. Ultimately, this paper attempts to move towards a development of Boje's (1994) conceptualisation of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern approaches to work and organization from which it is hoped that a useful critique of contemporary discourses of unitarism can be presented. The conclusion is reached that while managerial technology such as the learning organization can be classified as a new paradigm or post-modern approach to work, the expectation that such discourses can negate tensions in work place relations – especially in the context of post-industrial Britain - is a problematic one.

THE CONTEXT: STRUCTURE, STRATEGY, AND SPIN?

In the last two decades, structural shifts in the political, economic, social, and technical environments of the UK and the USA, amongst other phenomena, have contributed to the establishment of a perpetual phase of managerial innovation (Godard & Delaney, 2000; Hyman, 1987, 1988; Kelly, 1998; Marchington, 1995; Ramsay, 1996; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995; Thompson & O'Connell-Davidson, 1995). These managerial innovations have taken many forms: e.g. JIT, TQM, Quality Circles, 'Excellence,' HRM, BPR, HRD, and the subject of this paper, organizational learning and the learning organization. This has especially been the case where it has been suggested that due to structural and political changes, managers have been able to seize the opportunity to – as they see it – regain control of the shopfloor after years of Government supported trade union domination and restrictive practices (Guest, 1995; Metcalf, 1993). Part of this reassertion of the managerial prerogative has been the attempted implementation of discourse based managerial technology or 'HRMism' as Keenoy (1998, 1999) terms it. It is arguable that these innovations have been spawned to a considerable degree by the 'Japanization' phenomenon, whereby the apparently successful techniques employed by Japanese industry have captured the imagination of western managers and scholars and prompted them to attempt to reconsider organization forms (see Clegg, 1990; 176-207).

The innovations named above can differ quite radically in content: compare the 'obliteration' (Hammer & Champy, 1993) of BPR with the more soft and humanist approaches of aspects of HRM (Storey, 1987) and HRD (Redman & Grieves, 1999). However, they do have a number of things in common. In the first instance, most of them have been heralded at their inception as *panaceas* or 'magic wands' (Marchington, 1995) with which the 'turbulence' facing Western enterprise, such as global competition and technological innovation, can be addressed. Secondly, that they represent an alternative to orthodox pluralist industrial relations as a means of addressing the workforce 'problem,' i.e. that the demands of the workforce may be incompatible with the objectives of enterprise, thus apparently presenting a potential threat to 'competitive advantage' and/or efficiency (Guest, 1995; Kochan *et al.*, 1986; Metcalf, 1993).

These new forms of organization are presented as attempts to move away from adversarial collectivist industrial relations to a more unified commitment-based employment relationship (see Kochan *et al.*, 1986). Within this new psychological contract, the intention is that conflict is nullified as shared values and high-trust become regulating factors. It has been suggested that the metaphorical imagery used to describe management employee relations has shifted somewhat from that of "trench warfare" to "a journey together into uncertainty" (Dunn, 1990; Keenoy, 1991). Furthermore, 'team' and 'family' analogies have become prominent in organizational discourse (see Legge, 1999; cf. Ramsay, 1975). With specific reference to organizational learning, the term "communities of practice" has been coined (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991), conjuring up imagery of idyllic harmonious interdependence (cf. Symon, 2000).

The Learning Organization is just such an innovation of the post-industrial era (Symon, 2002): one intended to bring about sustained organizational success through

discourse based manipulation of the behaviour of the human resource in an apparently dynamic, high trust, and rewarding work environment (see Marquandt, 1996; Pedler *et al*, 1996; Senge, 1990). It has greatly captured the imagination of managers in the UK in both the private and public sector, where it has been heralded as the panacea for Britain's multi-symptom ailment, including lack of competitiveness, poor industrial relations, and lack of skills (Keep & Rainbird, 2000). Indeed, the vast majority of the literature and managerial eulogising on the learning organization presents an idealistic image of co-operation, harmony, flexibility, and fulfilment. A rather less well-developed area is the concept of resistance in the learning organization (cf. Findlay *et al*, 2000; Huzzard, 2000), despite the findings of many authors of the school of its genesis concept organizational learning that a major part of the concept is dialectically and democratically based (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt & March, 1988). The fact that the learning organization - in both its conceptual writings and the attempts at practical manifestation in the world of work - is underpinned, but assumptions of a shift from pluralistic or adversarial workplace relations to harmony and shared visions is problematic. It is to this issue that this discussion now turns.

THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION: IRRESISTIBLE?

The Learning Organization as a concept has captured the imagination of many scholars, management gurus, and policy makers in the spheres of public and private employment. The rudimentary discourse presented by the proponents of the learning organization is that changes in working practices and organizational structures and processes are necessitated by macro-environmental turbulence in the shape of intensified competition and the rapidity of social and technical change. The very existence of large, stable, bureaucratic organizations will be under threat due to their lack of innovation, flexibility, and dynamism (Drucker, 1993; Handy, 1989; Moss Kanter, 1990).

To summarise, the concept of the learning organization has thus arguably evolved from three principal sources:

- (1) an atavistic rediscovery of Burns & Stalker's (1961) 'organic' organization (as opposed to 'mechanistic') (cf. Morgan, 1986; Peters & Waterman, 1982).
- (2) a development of 'double-loop' organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Bateson, 1973) which involves participative challenging of organizational assumptions, courses of action and objectives, as well as learning from the exchange open dialogue in formal and informal contexts.
- (3) the post-industrial axiom that an organization's ability to gather, share, and process knowledge will be or is of greater importance to organizational success and prosperity than industrial capacity (Drucker, 1968,, 1993; Leavitt, 1972; Zuboff, 1988), a phenomenon from which the more sophisticated technique of 'knowledge management' has been derived (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

As well as changes to processes and structures, a re-alignment of attitudes and values is

professed be necessary on the part of the members of the would-be learning organization (Nonaka, 1996; Senge, 1990). As with other managerial initiatives, the focus of the employment is diverted away from confrontation to unitary notions of shared values and teamwork as the realisation is rammed home that the very survival of life as we know it is threatened by the aforementioned turbulence. Thus, a greater attribution is required on the part of the employee (du Gay, 1996; du Gay & Salaman, 1996; Legge, 1998, 1999; Thomson & O'Connell-Davidson, 1995). The trade-off for this greater attribution is not generally discussed in the literature in terms as vulgar as more cash, but rather in the post-Fordist terms of empowerment, satisfying work and the further reward of opportunities for continuous self-improvement.

With the 'new paradigm' or 'high performance' waves of management thinking that materialized circa 1980 onwards, the managerialists got to work on devising an anti-bureaucratic, flat, lean, responsive, adaptive, flexible organizational model with devolved decision-making and a string sense of shared purpose. The 'loose-tight' of Peters and Waterman's (1982) 'excellence' model was followed by Morgan's (1986) 'brain' metaphor with the term "Learning Organization" being fully inaugurated in the work of Garratt (1987) and Handy (1989). 1990 saw the publication of what has proved to be - in a global sense - the most influential learning organization texts and, indeed, one of the best-selling business texts of recent years, Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*. In a European context, the concept has perhaps been most influentially articulated in the *Learning Company* of Pedler *et al* (1988, 1991, 1996).

Although the texts of Senge (1990) and Pedler *et al* (1996) both offer prescriptions for the creation of successful learning organizations (or 'companies' in the case of Pedler *et al* for reasons explained in their book's opening chapter) and focus on similar fundamental principles, they differ slightly in their style and substance. Senge offers an anecdotal but awe-inspiring opus of pseudo-philosophical proportions; indeed, he claims not only to have the key to the transformation of one's working life but also of one's outlook on life in general (hence the relevance of the 'hands, hearts, and minds' critique [du Gay, 1996; Warhurst & Thompson, 1998]). Pedler and his colleagues offer a more positivist, systematic, and pragmatic account based on their initial work on behalf of the now defunct UK Manpower Services Commission (MSC) in 1988. The Learning Company model, which consists of eleven 'characteristics' as opposed to Senge's five 'disciplines,' is constructed from the findings of an investigation of best practice and innovation in UK workplaces, and offers a model of utopian commercial endeavour: successful, dynamic enterprises and satisfied, co-operative employees.

Additionally to the above, and indeed with more focus upon the objectives of this paper, the works of Senge and Pedler *et al* differ in one fleeting but nonetheless crucial way. Senge falls into the trap in which almost every other management writer of the 'new paradigm' school falls: the utter conviction that their model is so appealing to employer and employee alike that old adversarial mindsets will be cast aside and all members in the organization will happily give themselves body and soul to the goal of organizational success (Pruijt, 2000; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Pedler *et al* manage to cling to the edge of the precipice of sociological credibility with a perceptibly

grudging acknowledgement that a residual pluralism *may* exist in a *Learning Company*. Here they discuss the role that trade unions might play:

There is a great developmental potential in any alliance of adversaries, working from their respective concerns to challenge and transfer existing assumptions and methods of working. The ability to organize for productivity and well-being depends upon our ability to think creatively, and dialogue with those with whom we have differences helps to break up old positions and thinking. Any Learning Company initiative in a unionized company must confront this question of partnership... trade unions have great strengths in both supporting and blocking.
(1996: 160)

It is thus implied that the creation of the appropriate conditions to become a *Learning Company* may involve a process of negotiation. Indeed, it has been well established by other authors that trade unions can be instrumental in the implementation of productivity enhancing measures such as communication and training (Claydon & Green, 1994; Stuart, 1996). While Pedler *et al* deserve credit for their acknowledgement that a pluralism of interests can exist, even after the implementation of the self-professed panacea high-performance organizational paradigms, many managerial writers (presumably on purpose) ignore the concept of resistance and pluralisms. Indeed, an ideology has emerged in the last, 20 years that has appeared to marginalise 'labour' as a concept (Hyman, 1987, 1988; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995).

The marginalisation of labour as a significant actor in industrial thought appears to have come about as a result of economic, demographic, political, and technological shifts (Streeck, 1988; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). In addition, or perhaps as a result, managers have realised a new-found confidence to assert their prerogative, fuelled by the writings of gurus, the prescriptions of consultants, and lack of significant opposition from relatively weak trade unions (Godard & Delaney, 2000; Huczynski, 1993a, 1993b; Ramsay, 1996; Thompson & O'Connell-Davidson, 1995). Thus, we have arrived at a profoundly unitarist position in management ideology. Unitarism, however, although espoused widely in the rhetoric of gurus and managers, is a complex entity, and those that do espouse shared visions, values, and commitment should perhaps adopt a slightly more critical focus if their musings are to be taken seriously in an intellectual context.

UNITARISM AND MANAGEMENT THOUGHT: THE NEW PARADIGM?

Unitarism as a concept comes in various guises in contemporary (and indeed historical) management literature in general, and in the learning organization literature especially. The learning organization is one such discourse that claims to have the answer to the problem of conflict in the workplace. Depending on the subjective position, sensibilities, and sympathies of the commentator, unitarism can be approached and interpreted in a number of ways. The view of what would now perhaps be termed archaic thinkers such as Andrew Ure, Henry Ford, or F. W. Taylor would conform to McGregor's (1960) "Theory X," that workers are inherently lazy and wayward and have to be disciplined and controlled by whatever means that are at an employer's disposal. Furthermore, such

action by employers would be fully legitimate in the context of the pursuit of surplus capital. Contrast the 'unenlightened' position with that of the human relations orientated writers who contend that workers, as human beings, have a complex array of 'irrational' and non-remunerative needs that it is in an employer's interests to address.

Any analysis of the dynamics of the employment relationship is further complicated by the contribution of the political and social theorists, especially those in the Marxian tradition (e.g. Beynon, 1973; Braverman, 1974; Hyman, 1975; Tilley, 1978), who see the employment relationship as a manifestation of the class struggle. It is the Marxian perspective that, arguably, some unitarists claim has either never been valid or, as others may contend, is no longer relevant due to the unifying nature of their discourse (Drucker, 1968; Handy, 1989; Kochan *et al*, 1986). Thus, employers seek to negate resistance or recalcitrant behaviour in the workplace; be it by brute force, stealth, compromise, or rhetoric, it can be argued that generally a unitarist ideal (although not necessarily realistic expectation) underpins their actions. In the case of the learning organization, which we have suggested is heavily laden with the discourse of unitarism, these tensions are apparently resolved by making work varied and rewarding, improving one's relations with colleagues and managers through open dialogue and sharing of knowledge. However, in order to clarify further the context, it may be useful to attempt to classify types of unitarism.

From the organizational and management literature of the twentieth century, as well as the work of social theorists from the wider disciplines of sociology, political economy, and philosophy, it is possible to draw up a taxonomy of four broad types of unitarism. As will be seen, each of these types has profoundly different connotations and, therefore, for a guru or employer to speak to unitarism as something universally understood and virtuous is highly problematic. The types in the taxonomy, which will be discussed in turn, are as follows:

1. 'feudal' unitarism
2. 'hard' unitarism
3. 'pragmatic' unitarism
4. 'humanistic' unitarism

'Feudal' Unitarism

'Feudal' unitarism relates to the Western world's social order of the pre-modern era as defined by Boje (1994). It emerges from a society and economic and social relations that are governed by variables that include custom, culture, and deference and servitude to those born to into a perceived higher social order. As the pre-modern era is generally recognised as preceding, industrialization, standard definitions of the contract of employment do not apply. However, work was done and labour was utilised. This, after all, was the era of Beaumarchais and our hero Figaro. Pre-Revolutionary France with its aristocratic arrogance and decadence and millions of suffering peasants. In Weberian terms, the type of authority being exercised in this instance is 'traditional,' an

unquestioning deference to assumed aristocratic superiority (Weber, 1968).

Superstition and religion are also used as controlling factors. Thomas Carlyle, although active in the era of modernity, was an affirmed feudalist, readily citing the Benedictine adage “*Laborare est Orare* (work is worship - *sic*)” (1843; 172). The working man’s mission in life was to work, not complain, and be thankful for that work. However, Boje (1994) does point out that the feudal era was one where craftsmen were more powerful, formed guilds, and had absolute control over their means of production – the ideal of Marx. The craftsmen were ‘empowered’ in this sense. However, since industrialization and mass enfranchisement, feudal unitarism has been largely obsolete in the Western world (Boje, 1994). Ultimately, the profoundly normative assumptions underlying ‘feudal’ unitarism were not enough to sustain the situation in the Western World, and the post-Enlightenment era of modernity was proceeded with its more rational underpinnings. The discourses of the learning organization would appear to have little in common with feudalism: the learning organization is a place for empowered and knowledgeable participation. Arguably, knowledge was a major commodity denied to the masses in pre-modern era, as they would arguably be easier to govern if kept in ignorance. However, Figaro - although a humble servant - was far from ignorant, using knowledge to great advantage to achieve his ends. It is perhaps no coincidence that the feudal *ancient regime* in France was crumbling at the time Figaro was created.

‘Hard’ unitarism

This is the unitarism of Taylor, where the managerial prerogative is paramount and absolute. This is perhaps similar in nature to Mussolini’s concept of *Totalatori*, where the state was everything and anyone outside the state was against the state – for ‘state’ read organization. However, even the most strict of corporate regimes and rationalist of managerial thinkers cannot reasonably take things to this extreme as Thompson and Ackroyd indicate:

... reasoning of this nature makes even the trivial breaking of attendance rules, the temporary disabling of a machine to get a rest, or cutting corners to make work easier, qualify as acts of sabotage (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995: 616).

It is perhaps rather obvious to state that this type would be at an extreme pole of a continuum of organizational ideology dynamics, but it is far from irrelevant. As with HRM and ‘HRMism’ (Keenoy, 1997, 1999), corporate initiatives such as the learning organization are adopted as a means to achieve ‘competitive advantage’ in market conditions (an ideology to which even the UK public sector lost its immunity during the Thatcher era [Flynn, 1997]). Thus, Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ becomes the dominant force in shaping corporate strategy, and as under the new paradigm human resource initiatives such as HRM and the learning organization are integrated with corporate strategy, this puts the employees in the firing line (Armstrong, 2000; Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 1995).

The ‘hard’ unitarist situation could only be realised if labour was rendered powerless, i.e., unable to exert any influence whatsoever on the ‘bargaining’ process. For an intriguing insight into the phenomenon of the market and ‘bargaining’ power, we can turn to Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*:

In the long run the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him, but the necessity is not so immediate (1933: 59)

Therefore, we see the sort of logic that inspired Marx about how the capitalist market creates a distinct hegemony (cf. Braverman, 1974; Hyman, 1975). However, the sort of impotence that could allow ‘hard’ unitarism of absolute managerial prerogative to exist is perhaps unusual in developed economies in the current economic and political climate. Indeed, Giddens explains that in power relations in social systems, “no matter how imbalanced they may be in terms of power, actors in subordinate positions are never wholly dependant and are often very adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction of the system” (1982: 32).

Admittedly, sentiments of absolute power and dehumanised prerogative are generally absent in an explicit form from the learning organization literature. Indeed, the apparently progressive and inclusive rhetoric of the learning organization seeks to distance the concept as much as possible from the unsavory aspects of hard capitalism (see Pedler *et al.*, 1996; Senge, 1990), although Boje (1994) has exposed these discourses as highly problematic. Furthermore, ‘hard’ unitarism would logically render resistance of some degree inevitable, as its authoritarian nature would be the impulse for injustice-induced mobilisation (Kelly, 1998).

‘Pragmatic’ unitarism

‘Pragmatic’ unitarism is perhaps the most semantically problematic of the four in the typology, as it arguably is not unitarism at all, but rather could be considered as verging on *pluralism*. What is here termed ‘pragmatic’ unitarism is at the fuzzy point in the continuum where the unitary frame of reference and dualism meet (cf. Fox, 1973). Although almost three decades old, Fox’s (1973) influential treatise on pluralism probably remains the most engaging conceptualisation of the fundamental dynamics of the employer-employee relationship. In his work, further developed in his lengthier volume of 1974, *Beyond Contract*, Fox outlined the complexity of the social and economic factors implicated in the employment relationship, and that the rational view of the legal contract of employment was not sufficient to understand or deal with the problem of worker recalcitrance and, furthermore, the nature of a worker’s approach to his (*sic*) work.

Fox’s thoughts were born of his work as a member of the Donovan Commission of 1965-1968 (Royal Commission, 1968), which was charged with finding solutions to the UK’s perceived “industrial problem,” i.e., trade-union administered worker unrest

resulting in poor productivity. Fox, in recognising the inherent dualism in contemporary industrial society, was no militant Marxist; rather, he, along with fellow Commission members Flanders, McCarthy, and Clegg, was part of a moderate liberal group of Oxford labour economists. Ultimately, rather than either the extreme measures of worker control or the draconian enforcement of the managerial prerogative, a highly regulated system of co-operative collective bargaining where the trade unions could realize that they were stakeholders in the economic well-being of the United Kingdom was proposed (Fox, 1966, 1968; cf. Hutton, 1996). Hence, the *pragmatism*. The recommendations of the Donovan Commission were for numerous reasons never implemented with any degree of conviction.

The market may be a dominant force, but as Adam Smith and numerous others since have suggested, the workers can have the potential - however extensive or limited - to exert influence on the theatre of operations by a variety of means. This influence can be perceived to be merely following the course of rational and arguably legitimate self-interest, albeit often in a collective sense, but can obviously be very damaging to the prosperity of an organization, and thus the well being of the workers as employees of that organization (Fox, 1968). The issue here is that of trying to align the interests of employer and employee, and the consensus is that the best way in which to do this is open constructive dialogue. This dialogue could be in the form of co-operative collective bargaining (Flanders, 1967; Fox, 1966) and the more recent concept of Social Partnership (Ackers & Payne, 1999; Couper & Stevens, 1998), or in the sense of learning and understanding from interaction developed by many of the writers on organizational learning and the learning organization (e.g. Levitt & March, 1988; Pedler *et al*, 1996; Senge, 1990).

The issue of ‘alignment’ is an interesting one as that is exactly the terminology that Senge (1990) uses (cf. Huzzard, 2000). Senge suggests that one of the keys to developing a successful learning organization is the alignment of the direction and visions of teams and how this can be achieved through dialogue. However, Senge merely seems to believe that the only reason for the non-alignment of teams could be lack of effective guidance, and that their “mental models” are perhaps undeveloped; it does not seem to occur to him that fundamental ideological divisions may exist (Coopey, 1996). Indeed, Coopey (1996) – using the frameworks of Giddens (1979) - suggests that politicized behaviour is inevitable in organizational settings that are experiencing macro-environmental turbulence, and that this pursuit of diverse and frequently conflicting interests is contrary to the assumed climate of a learning organization. Coopey continues:

Pedler et al. acknowledge plurality but only as regards learning [cf. Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt & March, 1988]; essential differences are an important element in the framework of a learning organization’s internal market, any conflicts which arise are to be settled via constant dialogue. Collaboration based on trust rather than competition in search of advantage is the essence, enabling conflict to be used constructively... Despite the rhetoric the learning organization seems to be placed within a unitarist framework of relationships, a utopia to be ushered in through the pursuit of shared goals in a

climate of collaborative high trust and a rational approach to the resolution of differences (Coopey, 1996: 353, emphasis added).

So Coopey would appear to be reluctant to abandon the institutional channeling of conflict, and is rather dubious of the ‘magic-wand’ rhetoric that will miraculously have everyone ringing the same song in harmony. It seems that even in the post-modern paradigm, profoundly modernist concepts such as workplace bargaining and pluralist democracy would appear to have their place.

The issue of ‘democracy’ is one worth considering in the context of ‘pragmatic unitarism.’ In the context of a democracy, there is provision for a pluralism of legitimate and reasonable interests and ideologies (e.g. Mencken, 1926; Mill, 1991; Pateman, 1970). Indeed, democracy is often used in an industrial context in many developed economies (Schuller, 1985). Pedler *et al* (1996) actually use the term ‘democracy’ in their work, and the framework discussed by Argyris and Schon (1978) has its roots in notions of quasi-participatory democracy. To paraphrase John Stuart Mill (1991), the logic of the managerial writers who allude to democracy would appear to be that if the employees have nothing to do with the organization (i.e. they do not actively engage in the pursuit of the concern’s goals) “they will not care for it;” it is thus intended that commitment and identification are generated by creating a sense of ownership. This sort of participation has, of course, been a significant phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, whether in terms of financial participation (e.g. employee share ownership) or involvement in decision-making (e.g. quality circles) (Ackers *et al*, 1992).

Democracy can be something of a red herring when considering the learning organization, or indeed, organizations in general. One should consider Ramsay’s tour de force on “Cycles of Control” (1977), where it was suggested that historically, incidences of industrial democracy and worker participation could be charted with reasonable accuracy against periods of macro-adversity (e.g. recession, war). It was concluded that during these phases, employers wanted to avoid industrial unrest, but at the same time were unable (or unwilling) to concede to worker demands. They therefore appeased the workers with the establishment of various participation programmes to, in Flanders’s words, “regain control by sharing it” (1970: 172; cf. Acemoglu & Robinson, 1999). However, Ramsay argued that the control gained by the workers often amounted to little more than concern with trivialities such as “tea, towels, and toilets” (1977: 482). The ‘democracy,’ therefore, was merely a means of ‘manufacturing consent’ (Burawoy, 1979).

To summarize the issue of ‘pragmatic’ unitarism, if both employers and employees are to be realistic, it is perhaps the best solution that they could hope for. In terms of the learning organization, it fits neatly beside many of the elements that are espoused in the concept – the dialogue, compromise, understanding, and sense of mutual vulnerability. However, as ‘pragmatic’ unitarism is not strictly speaking unitarism in the biblical sense (i.e. while it may entail an alignment of goals, there may still exist a dualism of ideologies), it may require concession on the part of one or both the actors. Furthermore, as the scientific analysis of Axelrod and Hamilton (1981) shows, of the

parties engaging in co-operation, it is likely that one will have to concede more than the other (c.f. Giddens, 1979).

Humanistic Unitarism

The 'humanistic' brand of unitarism listed above is perhaps the most problematic from the point of view of the social scientist. Conversely, it is the type on which the gurus eulogize and is most attractive to employers (Ackers, 1994; Ramsay, 1996; Thompson & O'Connell-Davidson, 1995). This is arguably for two reasons: it provides the power and control over the devoted workforce that 'hard' unitarism would provide, while not necessitating, the degree of concession that 'pragmatic' unitarism would require. The best of both worlds would be achieved: absolute control coupled paradoxically with absolute commitment (du Gay & Salaman, 1996; Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 1995). Therefore, in the context of the capitalist society, 'humanistic' unitarism exists in work organization whereby subordinates absolutely and willingly defer to the authority of their employer and align their goals with those of the organization. Any prospect of resistance or recalcitrance is thus apparently nullified voluntarily.

Drawing from the literature of many of the general management gurus (e.g. Drucker, 1988; Handy, 1989; Moss Kanter, 1990; Peters & Waterman, 1982), as well as those concerned specifically with the learning organization (Nonaka, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Senge, 1990), one can identify strong culture with values controlled by discourse and symbolism as being the dominant themes in the creation of humanistic unitarism. Interestingly, we can perhaps look to Weber for illustration in this instance, as much of the contemporary managerial writers talk of the need to strip out bureaucracy in order to be flexible, innovative and responsive. In Bismarck's Germany, Weber wrote of the dangers of "uncontrolled bureaucratic domination" (1968: 1435), and went on to discuss the merits of "charismatic leadership" whereby order could be maintained through cultural and value driven mechanisms. Furthermore, charismatic leadership, it is considered, must have a following, and the conditions must exist for that following to want to follow; perhaps a further argument for the insistence upon turbulence as a legitimating factor (Symon, 2002). This point should be qualified by the admission that responses to leadership issues in turbulent conditions are likely to vary between cultures (e.g. Jankowicz, 1999).

Leadership would appear to be an important concept in the attainment of a state of 'humanistic' unitarism. Furthermore, from much of the prevalent discourse, it seems that in order to understand this, it may be necessary to depersonalize 'leadership', although some writers, most notably Senge (1990) discuss the issue of leadership and its importance in a learning organization at length (see also Eraut, 1995; Marquandt, 1996). However, Senge's disciplines do not merely constitute a manager's 'toolkit' in the way that Pedler *et al's* (1996) 11 characteristics can be seen, but rather a more transcendental testimony almost verging on 'self-help'; indeed, Senge is apparently greatly influenced by the principles of Zen (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). Arguably, the guiding light in the case of 'humanistic' unitarism is something higher than the mere mortals who

manage an organization but, at the risk of being blasphemous, missions that acquire an almost religious stature (Ackers & Preston, 1997; du Gay & Salaman, 1996; Keenoy, 1999; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996).

Hence, in order to attempt to understand the impulse for the gurus' and managers' aspirations towards a hands, hearts, and minds' spirituality in the employment relationship, it is naturally wise to once more to heed Fox's (1974) advice and look beyond the legal contract of employment and even notions of work ethic. The concept of the employment relationship evident in the learning organization literature and consider the socially constructed nature of contemporary employment situation. Many aspects of current managerial thinking do not make sense. Of course, the rationalist in us considers that Marx had a point about the apparently irreconcilable nature of the interests of labour and capital, and that there is an abundance of rhetoric-reality dichotomies in management thinking, such as HRM, TQM, and indeed the learning organization. However, as several writers have recently established (e.g. Case, 1999; Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 1995; Watson, 1995), rhetoric-reality is not a straightforward means of approaching such constructs.

Many of the learning organization writers, as well as gurus of other persuasions, aspire to a state of 'humanistic' unitarism, which we have considered to be based on charismatic leadership. Yet these very same gurus assert that the learning organization is based on empowerment and decentralization, which suggest a 'weakening' of leadership and control. Hence, there are apparent echoes of Peters and Waterman's (1982) 'loose-tight' concept; a seemingly paradoxical and contradictory notion, but nonetheless brimming with influence and self-belief (Guest, 1992; Keenoy, 1999). To return to an earlier theme, this is perhaps the sort of thinking that does not account for resistance as a valid concept. It is a moot point whether this apparent ignorance of resistance is based upon 'sweeping it under the carpet,' a King Knutian defiance of the sea, or Nelson's blind-eye proclamation, "I see no ships". Whatever the arguments for 'humanistic' unitarism say, the assumptions of many of the gurus - especially Senge (1990) - appear to be on shaky sociological ground (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Interestingly, though, with particular reference to the UK and its current political climate and the resultant rhetoric regarding matters of public policy and administration, contradictions - or more appropriately *tensions* - such as efficiency, economy, and competitiveness against employee welfare are not seen as unresolvable. The "Third Way" (see Giddens, 1998) - the signature mantra of Prime Minister Tony Blair - espouses a message of combining a competitive and dynamic market economy with a strong, vibrant, and communitarian society; many critics see this as being paradoxical. The learning organization as a concept arguably espouses similar sentiments, and it is the "Third Way" attitude towards policy matters that has perhaps led to the UK Government endorsing the learning organization in glowing terms (Stationery Office, 1999: 56-57).

Mapping Unitarisms

The above typology should not be seen in terms of distinct types, but rather of ‘ideals’ that exist merely in the form of discourse. The dichotomous situation of ‘rational’ and ‘normative’ forms, placed against those forms based on ‘inclusive’ and those on ‘exclusive,’ allows the four point typology to be mapped on a continual matrix as illustrated in figure 1.

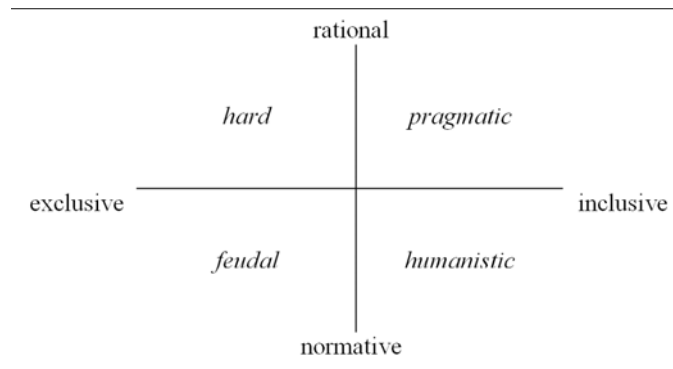


Figure 1 A Taxonomy of Unitarisms

A relationship between the quintessentially feudal form of unitarism and the discernibly post-modern humanistic unitarism is that they are discourses that seek to appeal to the normative sensibilities of their audience. The hard and pragmatic forms - associated more with modernism - are, on the other hand, pulled more to the rational pole of the continuum; they are more associated with the economic functionality of the capitalist state of modernity (see Marx & Engels, 1996). The second dimension to the matrix is the dichotomy between forms of unitarism discourses based on inclusion and those based on exclusion; i.e., whether or not the discourse permits the participation of subordinates. In this instance, it is the feudal and hard forms that are grouped together at one end, and the pragmatic and humanistic at the other.

The learning organization construct, although loudly proclaiming its post-modern humanistic credentials, can be seen to have aspects from not only one but three of the areas illustrated. For example, the post-Fordist rhetoric of a rewarding conflict-free working environment draws from the normative-inclusive sector inhabited by humanistic unitarism (Marquandt, 1996; Nonaka, 1996; Senge, 1990). The participative decision-making and dialectical aspects draw from the rational-inclusive pragmatic sector (Findaly *et al*, 2000; Huzzard, 2000; Pedler *et al*, 1996). However, most controversially, perhaps the strongest (but nonetheless tacit) voice of all is from the rational-exclusive sector. The learning organization is not merely a gratuitous piece of organizational theory aestheticism, as some would dismiss it; its discourse is there to ultimately ensure the instrumental aim of “competitive advantage” (i.e. increased profits and/or greater efficiency) in the face of seemingly unchallengeable economic determinist claims of business management goals: ‘hard’ capitalism (Hallier & Butts, 1999; Keenoy, 1999; Legge, 1998; Thompson & O’Connell-Davidson, 1995).

Challenges may be what the rhetoricians of the learning organization and unity seek to avoid. However, the discourses, especially those in the humanist camp, are far

from watertight. It is this that will now be explored.

VIVE LA RESISTANCE?

The Shift?

The point of departure for this section of the discussion is the rhetorical notion of the paradigm shifts that necessitates a radical change of attitude in approaches to work and organization. In much of the learning organization discourses and, indeed, that of contemporary management technology and some social commentary, attention is given to the concept of change and the dawning of a new era. It is variously described as post-industrial, post-capitalist (Drucker, 1968, 1988, 1993), the “Age of Unreason” (Handy, 1989), the “Third Wave” (Toffler, 1980), the “Runaway World” (Giddens, 1990) and post-modern (Boje, 1994; Clegg, 1990). In the developed world, developments in technology, political economy, and society are said to have brought about a shift as profound as that from the agrarian society (pre-modern) to the industrialised society (modern) (cf. Boje, 1994).

Discourses of change, uncertainty, and turbulence are evident in the literature on the learning organization, and are clearly identifiable as rhetorical legitimation for (often unpopular) managerial action (Thompson & O’Connell-Davidson, 1995; Webb, 1996). The scenario is painted as “change or survive.” Hence, the discourses of unity are presented, putting old differences aside and working and ‘learning’ together in a high productivity, high trust, high reward partnership. With ‘knowledge’ and the ability to learn becoming the keys to survival and success, the contribution of knowledge to an organization by its members becomes the new work process rather than the traditional rewarding of effort while extracting surplus value. Thus, notions of labour and the labour process are seen to be redundant, and Braverman’s (1974) commentary of employers’ efforts to deskill work is portrayed as being preposterous. Indeed, the learning organization is presented as a form of *upskilling*; empowering workers, and allowing them to fulfill themselves in the workplace with innovative, satisfying work and personal development.

The praxis of the new workplace and the context of the learning organization appears to present a different scenario. While few commentators will dispute the fact that the final decades of the 20th century are characterised by immense social, economic, and technological change, the paradigm shift thesis should be treated with caution. There can be no doubt that the economic restructuring of the last quarter of the 20th century has had an overwhelming influence on employment matters, handing the initiative to employers in terms of voice, control, power, and the introduction of mechanical and organizational technology (e.g. Godard & Delaney, 2000; Hyman, 1987; Streeck, 1988). In such a situation, employers are ideally better placed to elicit a more bountiful return from labour with the weakening of trade unions, decline in collective bargaining and restrictive practices, and accelerated implementation of new technology. Indeed, economists on both sides of the Atlantic have suggested that better economic performance is the direct result of this assertion of the managerial prerogative and the

accompanying sophistication of organizational restructuring (see Kochan *et al*, 1996; Metcalf, 1993).

The shift from pre-modernism to modernism was defined by - amongst other factors - the shift from a feudal society based on hierarchical obligation to one in which a wealthy elite, where the capitalist utilised mass labour to turn raw materials into a product to sell at a profit to accumulate capital (Marx & Engels, 1996). However, to suggest that in this post-modern era that a fundamental shift in the focus of the political economy has occurred should be qualified by the observation that most work continues to happen in a context of the selling of labour to employers whose aim is to make a profit, or at least achieve the organization's goals as inexpensively as possible.

The Intelligent Worker and Unity

One of the principal assumptions of the post-modern shift to unity is that with the decline of manufacturing and Fordism, workers will not be so alienated. The new economy based on knowledge is, apparently, one that will not merely serve the privileged elite, as was the case with pre-modernity and modernity. Rather, all workers (who are in a position to make the appropriate attribution) can share in the newfound intelligent prosperity of organizations and society.

Knowledge, as Francis Bacon and more recently Michel Foucault (1980) have observed, is power. If power is supposedly not an issue in the unified learning organization (cf. Coopey, 1996), the role of knowledge in such an organization is problematic. Foucault (1979) attempted to demonstrate that governance was achieved by knowledge, knowledge that came from subjugation and surveillance. Coopey (1996) argues that despite the humanistic rhetoric of the learning organization, processes of governance still occur as control must be exercised to utilize an organization's resources - human and otherwise - in the quest for competitive advantage. Therefore - controversially - it can be suggested that the important aspect of the learning organization that espouses the virtues of knowledge sharing and transparency can be anything but emancipatory. Empirical research (Lahteenmaki *et al*, 1999) has shown that in workplace situations where knowledge is a prime commodity, it is jealously guarded rather than openly shared. Furthermore, if knowledge is valuable, the workers who hold the valuable transferable knowledge will feasibly use it for the advancement of their own self-interests, taking it to the highest bidder. Neither of these scenarios can be described as unitarism, but rather a display of rational self-interest. In fact, in a UK context, the pursuit of rational self-interest has been suggested as a more potent motivation than any sense of loyalty, solidarity, or shared values with either employer or labour movement (Fox, 1985). Furthermore, whilst on the subject of the labour movement, it should be noted that it has been established that if the learning organization can be used as a weapon to combat adverse business operating conditions, it is, therefore, a weapon that can be used against the employer. Huzzard's (2000) analysis of organizational learning among workers at Swedish electronics plants shows that organizational learning, rather than serving the employers ends in socializing the workforce and creating unity of

purpose and values, consolidated the trade unions in resistance to the management.

The emphasis on normative aspects of behaviour that is espoused in the learning organization literature uncovers a scenario where the potential exists for all the world to become a stage. A study by Turnbull (1999) highlights the complex nature of 'emotional labour,' where workers can find themselves 'play-acting' and hiding - or more worryingly suppressing and denying - their true feelings in the face of organizational authority (Turnbull, 1999: 128). The outcomes of such a scenario are either, as Turnbull (1999) found, increased stress and anxiety from the denial of the 'true self', or conversely a clever deception of authority by the worker for their own ends (e.g. promotion) in the manner of Figaro at the court of his master - the Count - as depicted by Beaumarchais. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, Figaro was intelligent and thrived on knowledge, but the knowledge was put to uses that did not benefit his employer.

Plus ca change...

As noted by Kelly (1998), post-modern and paradigm shift theses are problematic. The assumption that industrial conflict will be negated by changes in production methods and/or new forms of organization is a flawed one. It is questionable that the discourses of changing work practices reflect the experiences of those at work. The learning organization's ideals of empowerment, participation, sharing, and development are not generally evident in praxis. The preoccupation with discourses perhaps deviates from the road to more practical solutions to any problems facing UK industry. It is unlikely that poor industrial relations (Kelly, 1998) and an inadequately skilled workforce (Hallier & Butts, 1999; Keep & Rainbird, 2000) will be remedied by rhetoric alone. The industrial relations issue is one which policy makers, particularly notably around the time of Donovan (Royal Commission, 1968), have been trying to remedy since the advent of organized labour. New European directed legislation and a more progressive approach towards trade unionism may make a contribution in that direction. As for the skills issue, as Keep and Rainbird point out in the wake of their critique of the unitarist assumptions of the learning organization:

While interesting as a theoretical construct... the idea of the [learning organization] may be of limited value in serving as a blueprint for skills policies in the majority of UK organizations (Keep & Rainbird, 2000:190)

There is, therefore, a body of compelling opinion that suggests that the proponents of the new-paradigm learning organization have perhaps discarded modernist rationality rather prematurely. The need for proper 'know-how' technical skills (Hallier & Butts, 1999) and a more participative and consensual approach to the management of people (Coopey, 1996; cf. Jankowicz, 2000) still appear to have their place.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The dawning of a new era and the resultant need to change has been a central theme to

much, if not most, mainstream managerial theory. The negating of conflict, and indeed the incorporation of those members of organization that are prepared to 'play ball' and make the necessary attribution, is the promised result of 'change' which should not be resisted. The learning organization's discourses of unitarism are the quintessence of 'new paradigm' management theory. The unitarism inherent in new paradigm management theory discourses is of a profoundly normative and 'humanistic' nature – it preaches inclusion. This is contrasted to other perspectives on unitarism that are 'exclusive' or rational.

However, analysis of the discourses of learning organizations and new paradigms, and review of empirical studies of the impact of initiatives in practice, cast doubt on the extent to which any alignment of interests can be achieved. This, it has been suggested, is because although alternative discourses to modernism, Fordism, and pluralist industrial relations have been presented, as long as the paradigm of capitalist production and accumulation of surplus capital remains intact (a quintessentially modernist activity; see Boje, 1994; cf. Marx & Engels, 1996; Smith, 1933), dualisms will remain intact.

Furthermore, this paper has sought to demonstrate that the concept of 'unitarism' itself is by no means straightforward. Four contrasting discourses of unitarism are proposed above, which can be mapped roughly against what are generally recognised to be the stages of the three principal eras: pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity. It is apparent from the model of unitarisms that the discourses have evolved from the normative of the pre-modern to the rationality of modernity and then to the normative of the humanistic unitarism, where it is suggested that the proponents of the learning organization claim that their construct is situated. This atavism of the normative is an intriguing one; how the manipulation of symbolism and social construction has returned as the regulating factors of organizational life, supposedly replacing the obsolete conflict of rational interests associated with modernity.

An alternative way of looking at this new paradigm is in terms of the post-war quest by the management function to be regarded as a credible profession, plus the susceptibility of managers to trendy organizational techniques - especially those that appeal to their vanity (Case, 1999; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996; Ramsay, 1996). These have rather obscured the more tangible aspects of the course and evolution of industrial sociology (Hyman, 1987; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). To suggest that managerial discourse and new ways of organizing, such as the learning organization, can provide the impulse for a radical altering of behaviours and attitudes towards work is perhaps misguided. It has rather been potently suggested that workers are more inclined to make their own sense of their experiences of work (e.g. Goldthorpe *et al*, 1968) and furthermore, have a virtually insatiable appetite for deviant behaviour regardless of the circumstances (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). However, where these manifestly impotent innovations do gain importance is that they help build social constructions that are perhaps unwise to dismiss purely in terms of "rhetoric and reality" (Keenoy, 1999). In essence, there are a number of discourses about post-modernity, new paradigms, and the 'end of history'. Many are optimistic about the prospects for a new, rewarding,

conflict-free workplace (see *ibid.*). Others are blatantly pessimistic about the prospects for workers in this brave new world. It appears that the challenge that faces organizational researchers is to establish the nature of the synthesis of a 'trialectic' between post-modern shared visions, modern reason, and consensus and, perhaps after all this time, still the most compelling of all, the mischief of Figaro.

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