Making Meaning, Governing Change: Wittgenstein meets Humpty Dumpty

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the notion that when words are successfully imbued with certain meanings and these meanings become manifest in organizational practice, a particular form of social actuality is generated. There is little evidence that the deeply embedded relations of power, characteristic of contemporary capitalist society, serve all citizens equally and that a tolerance of inequality of outcomes is assumed. Such a suggestion brings into question the often simultaneously espoused values of equality or egalitarianism implied in commitments to democratic ideals. It is suggested that by re-crafting the language surrounding capitalism and recalibrating meanings of words such as freedom, efficiency and effectiveness we contribute to the enhancement of wellbeing of generations to come.

Keywords *Transformational language*, *social actuality, capitalism, Wittgenstein.*

Introduction

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all" (Carroll, 1996, p. 124).

When words are imbued with certain meanings and these meanings become manifest in organizational practice a particular form of social actuality is established. As a practice becomes embedded, a taken-for-granted understanding of social reality is achieved. The meanings of words and the ways of working associated with those meanings become normalized. It is through the ability to change the meanings of words that organizations, communities, and nations can choose to change, be led to change, or have change [surreptitiously] imposed upon them. Paying attention to the connotative processes of meaning-making provides insight into processes of organizational change – consciously chosen and agreed upon change or, perhaps changes in direction that are (initially) barely perceptible by those who are to be affected by them.

Connotative Meaning

The process of connotation involves emotive and symbolic manipulation. I call this the Humpty Dumpty phenomenon. Words, seemingly, can be made to mean whatever we want them to mean – if we have the power to do so, that is. The ability to influence meaning is a source of personal, social, political, and economic power for as Foucault argues power does not exist apart from its application.

To connote is to impute, project, or read meaning into words. Such meanings may be extended beyond the commonly held understanding of such words to incorporate the perceptions, beliefs and emotions or political intent of those who are seeking to use these words in a way that is new or subtly different from previous common usage. Blackburn (1996) explains *connotation* as the "abstract meaning or principle or condition whereby something is picked out as denoted by the term" (p. 76) and *meaning* is "whatever it is that makes what would otherwise be mere sounds and inscriptions into instruments of communication and understanding" (p. 235).

Every word in every language is endowed with meaning. The usability of a word in a language relies on the concurrence (or compliance) among users to a roughly agreed upon meaning, even when the interpretation or the political effect of the words may vary. Russell (1992) suggests that "in practice language is always more or less vague, so that what we assert is never quite precise" (p. 8). This very inexactness or fluidity also characterizes the flexibility of words in the creative endeavours of human beings.

Wittgenstein (1994) observed that specific words may share a commonality in their form, in how they are spelt or how they sound, or both. He uses the word 'green' as an example: "Green is green". The first use of Green expresses a person's name. The latter use of the word is used as an adjective. Both words sound the same but not only do they have totally different meanings, they are

in fact different symbols. The latter 'green' is open to a range of interpretations, from an assumption that Green has tinted her body green, that she is envious, or that she is ill. All interpretations would make sense. The meaning intended by the speaker, however, can only be taken from the context. According to Littleton, Arthur and Rousseau (2000, cited in Howell 2006 p. 14) this multiplicity of meaning provides for a "multi-layered richness" (p. 1). Humphries-Kil (1995) goes further and argues that this flexibility of meaning represents a source of power whereby ambiguities can be exploited for personal and political gain. Lyotard (1984) and Kuhn (2000) also agree that the language game is first and foremost a game of power.

The imputation of meaning into sounds (words) and their ordering into meaningful statements is a communal action with both implicit and explicit rules and constraints. Both Wittgenstein (1994) and Kuhn (2000) use the metaphor 'language game' to examine the rules and processes by which words may be used to express, endorse or change meaning. Wittgenstein (1994) suggests that we are generally oblivious to the tremendous diversity of everyday language games because "the clothing of our language makes everything [seem] alike" (p. 213). People with a common ontological preference may sanction and perpetuate a particular form of social understanding through the [unwitting] endorsement or embellishing of facilitative expressions of their preferences. My interest lies in the way market-driven principles, dressed in the garb of democratic ideals, are disseminated the world over.

Habermas provides a useful focus for a deep examination of our commitment to the principles of human liberty and justice or the extent to which we have been co-opted or duped to serve the neo-colonial interests of 'The Empire' (Grice and Humphries 1997). Are we, as researchers, at risk of losing our depth and breadth of being through the encroachment of a narrow instrumental logic understood by scholars to be an outcome of the dualism arising from Cartesian thought, a way of being we appear determined to more deeply embed among ourselves? Habermas calls this encroachment the colonization of the lifeworld. It is a colonization of all that we are to each other with the mandate and ethos that serves the limited purpose of accelerating economic growth at a pace the emerging sustainability agenda may not be able to balance. The technical rationality, or the techniques of economic rationalism, have come to over-ride all else we might yet be to each other.

Academics and practitioners have opportunities to bring the use of particular words and their implication under the scrutiny of our peers, our readership, our students and the people with whom we work. By examining the theoretical constructs surrounding a particular word or phrase researchers have the opportunity to ask questions about meaning, relationships, and validity of posited phenomena. Brodkey (1989) claims that theories are the "rhetorics of possibility…[surrounding] speculative and persuasive claims" (p. 179). She provides us with a reminder that even the most embedded theories, the theories with the most believable currency as a truth-claim, are still only theories. Their manifestation in organizational practice is a political act requiring the elevation of one theory over another. Keith and Cherwitz (1989) credit Kuhn with the view that disagreements over theory are "disagreements about the meanings of the terms shared by competing theories" (p. 200). Brodkey (1989) describes theory as "an acquired taste" that is contingent on the "social and political arrangement that define scholarly practice" (p. 164).

Differences in theoretical constructs of scholarly work help explain variation between one school of thought and another because, according to Brodkey (1989), the application of theory "defines the work of those who speak it" (p. 180). The tolerable variation among scholars in the western academy, we argue, is so superficial that a deeply embedded compliance with 'one truth' is obscured in our consciousness by the appeal of that seeming diversity of thought. Each line of the score endorses the symphony. We are at risk of believing our own fabrications as unassailable truth. It would seem that despite the onslaught of generations of critical theorists and community activists, patriarchy and capitalism are still solid companions and that democracy is their handmaiden. Both are safe from more radical readings. How might such imposition and compliance, such contradiction of ourselves as free and democratic beings, be unmasked?

According to Simons (1989), Plato was concerned that blurred understanding of meaning allowed the skilled use of rhetoric to pervert 'truth' and to use ambiguities of meaning to favour some to the detriment of others. Keith and Cherwitz (1989) claim that in this way, "rhetoricians have tried to probe the possibilities and the flexibilities inherent with language" (p. 202). By exploiting the "resources of ambiguity in language" (Burke, 1969 cited in Simons, 1989, p. 3) the rhetor may take the opportunity to form discourses tailored with a particular audience(s) in mind. By exploiting the ambiguities in language rhetoricians (political, academic and religious elite) exploit the opportunity to infuse words with meanings that slant truth creation in their favour.

When words are imbued with certain meanings and these meanings become manifest in organizational practice a particular form of social actuality is established. As a practice becomes embedded, a taken-for-granted understanding of social reality is set into place. Thus whole worldviews, 'truths' no less, are formed and acted upon, further entrenching such meanings as truths. Those truths, to retain currency must be made palatable to those who are to be subject[ed] to them. I will take as my examples the words 'flexibility', 'quality', 'efficiency', and 'effectiveness'. These are words with demonstrably malleable meanings and in this paper I discuss their harnessing to various world-wide rhetorics of 'crisis' and 'salvation' that have been used to re-organize organizations and whole societies, including New Zealand, since the mid 1980s.

Neo-liberalism embedded

According to Ezzamel and Willmott (1993) and Matheson (1997), the neo-liberals were able to reshape what came to be experienced as social reality along their preferred lines of reasoning. Despite there being little evidence that their faith in the market would deliver the promised well-being for all, despite the continued insecurity for most employees and significant pain for the most vulnerable, their arguments are still in vogue. My applied example comes from my study of the imposition of neo-liberalist principles to New Zealand as macro-directives by which all organizations were disciplined.

Writing broadly on administrative reform in Australasia, Britain, and the US, Aucoin (1988) claims that ideas or models that are used to frame the issue that rises to the top of a government's to-do list can be described as paradigms. These paradigms "tend to combine both intellectual and ideological dimensions" (p. 116). Politicians, he suggests, welcome ideas or models that they can use to motivate or to support change for their desired political interests. While such models or ideas may

appear to describe reality and offer an explanation for the same, they are actually used to "prescribe ways to change in desired directions" (ibid). The models are presented in terms that are simple and easy to assimilate with simple causal inferences and simple believable and voter friendly solutions.

The rise of the neo-liberals to global influence is one example of how the powerful elite sought to expand their reach through the subjugation of governments and its citizens, and the domestication of public and community sector organizations. Their dominance has been achieved through the skilled imputation of their preferred meaning into established words and phrases. Words such as 'freedom', 'empowerment', and 'efficiency', 'increased productivity' and 'the reduction of cost' are fundamental and seductive phrases in the neo-liberal lexicon, all with malleable meanings. These key phrases became the mantras of government policies, research and teaching programs and public management agendas.

The skilled manipulation of language helped to enable, over the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the imposition of neo-liberalism in New Zealand, a country that apparently voluntarily experimented with this form of economic directive more rapidly and more widely than any other western economy at this time (Kelsey, 2003, 1995). This makes the experiences of New Zealanders in the achievement of change (at the level of the organization, the community and the nation) worthy of attention. Neo-liberal economic and political directives in New Zealand have harnessed and constrained social thought in this country for more than two decades (Boston *et al.*, 1996; Easton, 1997; Kelsey, 2003, 1999, 1995; Treasury, 1987a, 1987b; Treasury and Reserve Bank of New Zealand, 1984).

The paradigm shift by New Zealand governments since the mid 1980s serves as a thought-provoking example of how the voting public and sleeping masses were cajoled, bullied, and manipulated into the redirection of the State and the privatization of much hard earned public wealth. This feat was achieved through the pejorative articulation of prevailing state/voter-driven social democracy to a commitment to the principles of neo-liberalism. While this was a trend sweeping the world, often under pressure from external bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), New Zealand voluntarily applied the principles of neo-liberalism more widely and rapidly than any other country (Bale and Dale, 1998; Kelsey, 1995). By the late 1980s neo-liberalism was well established (Larner, 1997a) and calls were made to change the existing mode of public sector governance towards modes of governance more commonly found in businesses operating in the private or market sector. A particularly limited conception of a business model was also introduced to all forms of government organization (Spicer, Emanuel and Powell, 1996).

A key aspect of this commitment to a neo-liberal paradigm entailed the transfer of ideas about efficiency and effectiveness developed in the private sector both to the public sector and, more recently, to the community sector (Kelsey, 2003). Shepherd, Turk and Silberston (1983, cited in Williams, 1990, p. 149) suggest that "the concept of efficiency is not objective, but is value-laden" and as such can be harnessed to further political agendas. Matheson (1997) claims that "as practice and belief are imbedded in language…New Zealand [underwent] a wholesale language change…[where] words were chosen in the light of the main set of ills to be cured" (p. 167).

Larner (1997a) observed that at the time of the reforms in New Zealand there co-existed "at least two different understandings of efficiency" (p. 20). These two understandings had been generated from two very distinctive political schools of thought. One understanding can be traced directly to neo-liberal ideology, the other to the ideology of social democracy. Subsequent to the public sector reforms of the late 1980s, both understandings overlapped. The former understanding was promulgated by Treasury officials (Larner, 1997a) who viewed efficiency as the allocation of resources to what they judged to be the most profitable areas. The latter understanding was used to serve the Labour party's political leanings in order to appeal to egalitarian ideas among the voting public. Efficiency in this sense was associated with the maximizing of community benefit in accordance with the Labour party's espoused egalitarian ideals. Larner (1997a) observed that the two understandings of efficiency ultimately overlapped as each stakeholder (Treasury and the Government) sought to influence the economic policy direction of the country.

Wherever neo-liberal policies were adopted, the public sector was restructured to reflect a commitment to create a market-orientated society and a preference for privatization of what were once deemed public goods, services, and assets (Spicer, Emanuel and Powell, 1996). Under this regime government bodies that escaped privatization were reorganized into government-owned business units based on a private sector business model deemed to be the most effective and efficient form of organization. The State Owned Enterprises Act 1986, for example, provided a clear and explicit commercial objective: "The principal objective of every State enterprise shall be to operate as a successful business and, to this end, to be – as profitable and efficient as comparable businesses not owned by the Crown". [16] However, promising enhanced well-being for all (Humphries, 1998) the directives to a neo-liberal foundation for New Zealand society have in reality diminished the conditions of employment and exacerbated poverty for the vulnerable (CPAG, 2006).

I am interested in the way in which the subtle use of market concepts, such as 'social capital' and 'social investment' indicate the extent to which an instrumental orientation is already so deeply embedded in our common understanding that it barely needs explanation or justification. The encroaching of instrumentality in all forms of self expression is readily made visible in our actions. Such consequences are rarely discussed openly. Even in those organizations mandated to serve communities in the areas of the common good (e.g., education, health and welfare) government ministers commonly call for evidence of 'return on investment' (Boston, Martin, Pallot and Walsh, 1996). It is a one-size-fits-all approach to the provision of all forms of activity, whereby governance of these reshaped organizations would be cast in a uniform template.

Public sector management underwent a radical make-over to mirror the image of the corporate sector. Goods and services were no longer to be viewed as simply 'public goods' but rather viewed in terms of inputs and outputs. Matheson (1997) claims the use of such words was to "help change the traditional mind-set" (p. 167), supporting Gross (1989), who recognised that rhetoric is "an essential component in social change" (p. 102). Matheson (1997) holds that once New Zealand's public sector reform rhetoric was firmly in place the language change "metastasise[d]" (p. 167), so that the reform could progress from "its philosophical phase to its technical implementation phase" (p. 167) and another wave of words and phrases were created or re-interpreted.

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[16] http://www.treasury.govt.nz/legislation

Ezzamel and Willmott (1993) argue that the public sector received a political directive to begin emulating the market model by shifting or supplanting established modes of governance in favour of governance by market principles. The privatization of some services and the construction of quasi-markets for those services that remained the responsibility of the government were to be governed by such market principles. These principles were promoted as the rational way to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in a 'modern market-orientated state' and formed the basis of the attempt by political and business interest groups to legitimize the widespread reform of the public sector.

In order to construct such quasi-markets for the delivery of public services it was necessary to create a normative structure, whereby the public sector 'ethic' of providing public goods and services could be replaced with the supposed impartiality and efficiency of the 'hidden hand' of the marketplace. Larner (1997b) argues that while supporters of the market model for the public sector portrayed this change as apolitical and impersonal, market modes of governance are not neutral but are value-laden processes through which political power struggles are played out – a point the previous New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark now concedes (Clark, 2004).

The general trend toward neo-liberalism in New Zealand and many other western countries meant radical changes have been imposed on incumbent public servants. Spicer, Emanuel and Powell (1996) noted in their series of case studies examining the process of transforming government enterprises into successful businesses that those "managers who actively resisted change were moved aside…and a number of new managers were brought in" (p. 126). Furthermore, they found that the new generation of managers was recruited and trained on the premise that the corporate business model would efficiently and effectively deliver goods and services to the New Zealand public. The difference in responsibilities and accountabilities between market and public sectors is significant; therefore, a purely corporate model of governance may not be appropriate for public bodies. At the time of the imposition of neo-liberalism in New Zealand however, the ideological assumption was that it would be. A normative structure was devised and imposed - public servants could either comply or would be removed from office.

Neo-liberalism was thus imposed through the skilful use of market jargon, a lexicon of words with malleable meanings. Thus, to return to Alice: "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things" (Carroll, 1996, p. 124). Indeed, it appears that we can!

Newman (1976, cited in Bolinger, 1980) states that jargon "serves as a fence that keeps others outside and respectful, or leads them to ignore what is going on because it is too much trouble to find out" (p. 135). But 'jargoneering deception' depends upon the ignorance of the intended recipients; seen through, it falls apart (Bolinger, 1980). That is, if recipients come to the conclusion that the jargon is essentially 'empty' words then their attention will be refocused on the issue(s) originally under scrutiny.

As a specific example of jargoneering deception, we focus on the term 'corporate governance', which appears to have been created in response to public and political concern over company failures during the 1980s. Research into the rise of governance and the roles of markets, states and partnerships led Jessop (1998) to state that this particular term became "a ubiquitous buzzword

which can mean anything or nothing" (p. 31). This view supports the findings of Davis (1993), Keasey and Wright (1993), and Cole (1998) that the term 'corporate governance' was a language tool that was developed during the recession to reassure the public that 'something' was indeed being done to prevent or minimise the chances of further company failures. Wright and Chiplin (1999) go further when they suggest that the creation of the term 'corporate governance' was a deliberate act to deflect criticisms made by shareholders about the governance of business during the 1980s recession.

Let us consider the reiteration of these governance directives, for a while articulated as a Third Way form of governance, as an attempt to deflect citizen concerns about both the suspected cost of neo-liberalism and the New Zealand government's ongoing commitment to a Free Trade agenda. This Third Way form of governance was achieved by acknowledging the pain that the economic reforms inflicted on many New Zealanders and by making a commitment to reward those who commit to employment. The promise of employment, however, continues to be premised on the perpetuation of the claim that a Free Trade agenda will serve all people of this land, a claim that sparked the discontent in the first place.

It is Habermas's distinction between 'the lifeworld' and 'the system' that can provide us with valuable insights. Lloyd (2005) explains that, according to the Habermas conceptualisation, the lifeworld is a storehouse of knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next, and where social and economic structures interpenetrate with action and consciousness. He holds that in contemporary western society, 'the lifeworld' and 'the system' are engaged in "a kind of tug-o-war…given the unyielding organisational principles of capitalist mediatized colonization by the economy and the state (money and market, power and bureaucracy respectively)" (p.16). Late capitalism, he argues, has become disconnected from the value system inherent in the lifeworld, at the same time it has been invading it. Thus, in the process of reifying economic activity we have lost touch with the deeper human needs of heart, mind and soul, and superimposed on those needs such notions as power, wealth, and self interest, with resultant and widespread increases in aggression and powerlessness. It is as part of these reification processes that the meanings of words are changed by the elite and the ways of working those words invite become 'normalised' in everyday life.

Even deeply committed advocates of neoliberalism have come to see its limitations. The previous New Zealand Labour government and the current New Zealand national government, for example, while still a harbinger of the Free Trade agenda globally, has been required to intervene in its outcomes (Humphries *et al.,* 2007). In her speech to the Labour Party conference in October 2006, then Prime Minister Helen Clark acknowledged that many New Zealanders were unfairly burdened and even hurt by this economic system. By February 2007, she was willing to associate the burden of the poor with the fallacious attribution of market-delivered justice. In her address to the opening of Parliament she announced that the "invisible hand of the market doesn't deliver a sustainable nation, as an earlier era of New Zealand politics showed only too well" (Clark, 2007). Neo-liberalism was now given a bad rap!

The call to solve social challenges of this country continues to be framed by a commitment to a 'free' market. This commitment, in which the eminently malleable word 'freedom' is heard

frequently, allows for the continued elevation of the Free Trade agenda while harnessing the social sector to ameliorate the consequences of our continued investment of trust in this fable. The fable is recounted in reassuring ways. The relationships between managers and workers, for example, are normative stories that explain how to harness employees into collaborating with the prevailing economic logic. What might be read as stories about the continued devastation to New Zealand jobs are re-told as examples of savvy management in the context of globalization. For example, the partial salvation of engineering jobs within Air New Zealand, which were initially prepared for export to Asia by the company, becomes reframed as a victory. Likewise, the export of financial services jobs from New Zealand to the Pacific is reframed as an opportunity for Fijians.

Unions will aid these transitions, even when this hurts some of their own members. In so doing, forces of resistance are dissipated. The underlying interests of capitalists have not been challenged. We adjust and come to accept the apparently inevitable. We are relieved if the changes do not harm us or those we love. For those who could not move out of harm's way, we have, in our neo-liberal line of reasoning a palatable explanation. They, the "other," made poor choices (Humphries *et al.,* 2007).

> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master –
> that's all" (Carroll, 1996, p. 124).

Critics of neo-liberalism, it seems, have been vindicated. New Zealand's current Prime Minister now leads the reflection on how we might bring this nation to sustainability. However, in this endeavour, this government remains committed to a Free Trade agenda, to a doctrine of economic rationalism and the pursuit of economic growth. Those academics attempting to bring any alternative form of social understanding to the minds of aspiring managers and organizational leaders are challenged from every direction. They have a particularly difficult job in inviting a critique of the neo-liberal viewpoint because that viewpoint appears to have become as natural to students and staff as the air we breathe (Humphries *et al.,* 2007).

Infusing or confusing preference with truth or necessity

According to Blackburn (1996), the main philosophical challenge for social researchers is to demystify meaning and intent, and then to relate such meaning and intent to what humans know or think we know of ourselves and the world. Indeed, the metamorphosis of "mere sounds and inscriptions into instruments of communication and understanding" (p. 235) is a complicated and active social process that requires constant negotiation. It is not simply a case of downloading facts, which in themselves are a product of interpretation and re-interpretation, into an empty file. This process of negotiating meaning involves both formal and informal participation on the part of the actors.

We should be arguing, that in the study of organizational change, it would be ethical to develop among citizens of democracies, an awareness of the malleability of words and an understanding of the imputation of meanings in the words they use (to shape or be shaped as 'selves' in and through organizations), and the consequence of believing in or merely tolerating any one meaning over others. In our participation as members of various organizations, be they market-oriented firms,

state or local body organizations, or community-based NGOs, we make, impose, tolerate or subject ourselves to meanings that generate the actuality of contemporary existence. Furthermore, these meanings may impose on future generations a form of truth that may be life-inhibiting, soul-destroying, and planet-decimating. We can and must invent new meanings. The question is 'How'? We turn to the work on connotative meaning in order to generate further applied research interests in the facilitating of organizational change by the skilled imputation of certain meaning into established words.

Habermas advocates the "ideal speech situation" in the context of "discourse ethics" so that citizens can freely and competently debate matters of public importance, and contribute to a thriving democratic public life. Markets, as are wars, are predicated on an instrumental ethic, an ethic of winning and losing, of using and exploiting. Like wars, markets have rules for engagement, along with rituals and customs to be adhered to. Regardless of how well one plays by the rules, these particular 'games' are designed for the instrumental harnessing of some interests over others. They are games in the Wittgensteinian sense of codes of circumscribed sense-making. They are games also in the more common understanding. In the context of western capitalism, they are competitive games, games of winners and losers, and games with very high stakes. The current, increasingly explicit solution to questions of peace, justice and regional stability is that we will harness the power of capitalism and attempt to under-gird it with values of human rights and responsibilities, and trust that it will bring well-being for all. Around the globe, 'the market' is proffered as the game-plan, the means of bringing riches, security and justice. We invite a re-think of this game, a game that is known to harm, maim and kill some people, even as it bring riches to others.

It is through the ability to change the meaning of words that organizations, communities and nations can change, be led to change, or have change surreptitiously imposed upon them.

> In phenomenological terms the lifeworld comprised that vast stock of taken-for-granted definition and understanding of the world that gives coherence and direction to our actions and interactions. The common good has been removed from this taken-for-granted status, gazumped by the economic rationalists (Lloyd, 2005, p. 22).

The dynamics of power necessary to invite or impose such change is of particular interest to societies that purportedly commit to democratic values of participation and inclusion. Habermas believes that genuine participatory democracy by citizens has been supplanted by routinized political parties and interest groups. He criticises the process of modernisation, the growing intervention of formal systems in our everyday lives, and the development of the welfare state, corporate capitalism and the culture of mass consumption. He argues that these reinforcing trends have rationalised widening areas of public life, submitting them to a generalising logic of efficiency and control, and that consequently society is increasingly administered at a level remote from the input of its citizens (Dews, 1999). In an instrumental approach to organisations human beings are defined as a "means to an end" (Humphries and Martin, 2005). In an instrumental approach to government and the economy, institutions are seen as a means to an end, and capitalism (in the form of privatisation and trade liberalisation) is seen as an end in itself rather than the means to more sustainable, equitable, and democratic growth (Stiglitz, 2003).

As I write, thousands of people around the world are losing their jobs, and countless people have had their conditions of service intensified or reduced as their managers compete with regions offering more lucrative opportunities for investors. Hundreds of thousands of people in Asia, India, China and the Pacific are being invited or pushed to give up their traditional lives to feed this economic machine with their energies. They too are invited to take up economic rationalism as their salvation and, with it, the instrumental ethic that informs all our decisions – and puts all at risk. The skilful crafting of words into the rhetoric of compliance is endemic and a threat to the concurrent expression of democratic ideals.

Transformational language: The rhetoric of possibilities and praxis?

Humpty began again.

> *"They've a temper, some of them – particularly verbs, they're the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however, I can manage the whole lot! Impenetrability! That's what I say!"* (Carroll, 1996, p. 124).

Language may be used to transform the lives of individuals, organisations and societies. In critical circles, neo-liberalism has become both the cause and the scapegoat for much of the human and environmental trauma faced by humanity. However, with our eyes focussed on this extreme expression of an economic system, the instrumentalism of capitalism in general is left largely unconsidered. No matter what its specific characteristics at a given time, as a systematic frame for the harnessing of human endeavours, the fundamental values embedded in it continue to be imposed overall economic, social and political organization. Its rhetoric is largely impenetrable by the layperson. This imposition of capitalism as the only viable means to organise our human endeavours from trade to social services, entertainment and relationships, is most visible in the persistent refrain that 'the market' (perhaps a somewhat more disciplined entity than the 'free market') will serve the well-being of people and the planet.

The rhetoric of capitalism, in response to the now imminent economic and environmental crisis, urges the intensification of decade-old remedies of 'increased growth' and 'efficiency', to be gained through 'devolution', 'participation', and 'empowerment'. These remedies have, in fact, exacerbated the conditions of crisis. I contend that such words that promise salvation and emancipation are more likely to serve the elite as words for domestication of the citizenship. Uncritical uptake and functional competency in the systems that then materialise such rhetoric in systems of governance draws us into complicity. Where this rhetoric and complicity serves an elite at the expense of others we live well short of expressed democratic ideals. Where our participation has become unconscious, normalised, and even apparently naturalised, the conditions of hegemony have been established. Establishing hegemony is an active, intentional expression of power. Words harnessed to serve such power are the string of the puppeteer.

When the elite maintain their power through the strategic co-option of the words of participation, devolution and empowerment, it may be time to deliberate on the words of justice, emancipation and transformation. To do this, we need the courage to challenge The Empire. Emancipation will

not be granted without struggle: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at this own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1981 cited in Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1987).

Conclusion

We have not only nouns and verbs and adjectives to work with, but commands and imperatives that call us to action. In the rhetoric for organizational change we need to insert the words and actions for transformation. We can reclaim and rehabilitate those words to the service of genuine human emancipation and mutual responsibility for the well-being of people and the planet. Such a commitment would bring organizational change at the deepest levels. Words can be re-crafted to enhance the wellbeing of the current generation and of generations to come. We, as academics and practitioners, can participate in the making of meaning and bring about change that can impact on organizations, communities and nations so that we can promise a future for our children's children.

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