Organization

Travelling Theory/Nomadic Theorizing
Nick Perry

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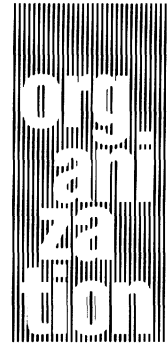
Travelling Theory/Nomadic Theorizing[1]

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Abstract. *The production of theories and the reception accorded to them are shaped by context. But under conditions of globalization both theories and theorists now travel. This paper explores the implications of this cultural situation for how the texts of organization might be understood. This is undertaken through a comparison between travelling theory and nomadic theorizing, a comparison which draws upon the writings of Geertz, Kondo, Said and Spivak, and which makes use of the contrast between differentiation and* differance. *The significance of this contrast for organization theory is illustrated via an analysis of the meaning of McDonald's hamburgers.*
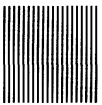
Walter (1988:18) notes that the word 'theory' is from the Greek *theoria*—to see the sights or to see something for yourself. He goes on to suggest that the first theorists were 'tourists' for whom *theoria* implied a complex mode of active observation—a perceptual system that included asking questions, listening to stories and local myths—and seeing the sights. From such a perspective the epithet that the cognitive basis of anthropology is 'mere' travellers' tales (Louch, 1966) begins to lose its opprobrium.

Yet in our time it is not only tourists but theory itself which travels, routinely cast free from its geographical point of origin and inflected and refracted through and by its adherents. In the process, theory's readers and writers construct their own fictionalized territory in a fashion analogous to the imagined communities described by Anderson (1983: 39–40) as characteristic of modern nationalism.

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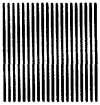
For theory to travel successfully, however, it must be in accordance with the tacit and emergent rules of the associated community of practitioners—practitioners who are at once geographically dispersed, discursively interdependent and intermittently nomadic. What then would a tourist in the land of theory look for and what would a tourist guide to theory look like? What are the implicit principles of structural selection and the preferred modes of cognitive practice within and around which such practitioners organize themselves? What aspects of theory get to travel legitimately, what gets smuggled through and what gets left out? Under conditions of globalization what are the characteristic forms of slippage between the circumstances which produce theories, the objects of theoretical inquiries, the texts which realize those theories and the readers who recognize them?

The development of the contrasts and contacts between travelling theory and nomadic theorizing is one way into such questions. As employed here, it is more nearly an analytic distinction than an empirical one. Among the major guides to this terrain are Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Clifford Geertz and Dorinne Kondo.

Theory not only travels to unexpected destinations: it may also be put to unexpected uses. This is not to say that patterns of theoretical reading and interpretation are to be understood as random or idiosyncratic. On the contrary, the specific ways in which theory collides and/or colludes with the meanings which circulate in the milieu that it enters are thoroughly social and highly structured processes. Thus, what Edward Said (1981) highlights is the theme that, whenever theory travels, its movement from one place and time to another is never unimpeded; both its mode of representation and its pattern of institutionalization are different from those characteristic of its point of origin. This is shown, for example, by the way in which recent French theory both signifies and commodifies differently, as between the USA (Lamont, 1987) and Australia (Murray, 1992).

Thus, at a time and in a field of study in which theoretical activity is manifestly disparate and pluralistic rather than socially integrated and cognitively unified (Whitley, 1984), the exhortations of custodians of 'the' theory of organizations cannot be made to work. Theories and theorizing continue to flourish, but whether as grammar, as narrative or as text, the idea of 'the' theory has become, in every sense, an indefinite article. Under these conditions, therefore, it is by recourse to some such notion as Said's concept of travelling theory that the limits, possibilities and problems of theoretical work can best be explored. Martin Albrow's (1970) study of the concept of bureaucracy can be read as just such a recording of shifts in the meaning of a favoured and familiar term (see also Kamenka and Krygier, 1979).

Said's own account is a sketch of the trajectory and transmutation of 'reification-and-totality' as a theoretical idea and form of critical consciousness. He begins with its particular formulation by Georg Lukács in

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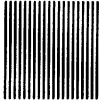
Budapest in 1919, going on to chart its post-Second World War migration to Paris via Lucien Goldmann, and its eventual appearance in Cambridge, England, in the 1970s through Raymond Williams's response to Goldmann. The result is a metamorphosis from Lukács's adversarial act of political insurgency 'in language bristling with ... metaphysics and abstractions' (Said, 1981: 233), to Goldmann's muted and accommodating tragic vision, to Williams's cordial, but coolly distanced, awareness of the theory's tactical uses and systemic limitations. The substantive shifts in meaning thus correspond to formal changes in use: theory as politically committed and insurrectionary; theory as the scholarly means of fusing detail and *Weltanschauung*; and a measured borrowing from, but resistance to, theory as closure. Said's own text can, in turn, be read as the attempt to keep each of these three conceptions, and the tensions between them, continuously in play.

He therefore challenges the presumption that such transformations are just instances of misinterpretation and misreading. For the purposes of evaluation this is much too blunt a critical instrument. There are wholly discrete pressures and limits attendant upon politically engaged writing in and for Budapest in 1919, an expatriot's historical scholarship in and for Paris in 1955, and reflective cultural criticism in and against Cambridge in 1970. Just as Albrow's exploration of the definitions of bureaucracy is explicable as a cautionary tale against attempts to establish the definition, so too can Said be said to eschew any notion of the interpretation. For the concomitant of any such movement towards closure is either a regression into the cognitive conceit that it is somehow outside of culture and history, or an expansion of the political condescension that it is the only culture and history that counts. This is most manifest in theory which is tacitly or explicitly supportive of the totalizing forces of globalization. But what Said can be understood as emphasizing is that a purportedly critical theoretical tendency which is reluctant to theorize its own situation may thereby also become complicit with the very forces to which it is otherwise substantively opposed.

Said himself is therefore effectively a practitioner of what can be called nomadic theorizing, a mobile, process-oriented practice which does not just consciously foreground the social location from which it speaks, but just as consciously employs such awareness for theoretical purposes. It matters that he is at once a Palestinian intellectual and a distinguished professor of comparative literature, based at an elite university, located in the heart of New York: a named star in a star system. The associated contradictions are what allow him to be fully responsive to Lukács and Goldmann and Williams, and to the differences between them. They provide the context out of which he writes, but it is important to insist that neither he nor what he writes can be reduced to them. It does, however, sensitize him to the presumptions and the presumption of theory understood as a kind of universal template or a form of global cartography. This latter form of theory seeks, as in Barthes's (1973: 143)
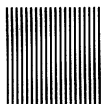
pithy summation of the role of mythologies, to 'establish blissful clarity'. It does so by requiring the subjects of its inquiry to lie still (and think not of England, but only of the mode of production ... or multiple regression ...), albeit after those same subjects have been suitably organized through and within categories whose conventionality has been naturalized and whose origins have been effaced through the recourse to abstraction. Given this kind of perspective on theory, then, 'local variations' can both be acknowledged and rendered residual, fixed by/in/difference, since they, unlike abstraction, do not travel. For such theory prejudgement is the very condition of its elaboration; it is neither consciously designed nor culturally equipped for understanding that *terra incognita* which its own expansion nevertheless requires it to map (so that, by contrast with the prioritizing of mobility which is characteristic of the nomadic mode of theorizing, this form of theory might be said to put the cartography before the horse). Yet because such theory is constituted as universal and abstract, as against local and particular, its form at once facilitates its circulation amongst (spatially dispersed but discursively interdependent) co-practitioners and exemplifies its claim to cognitive efficacy.

Against this, Said can be understood as arguing for the cognitive necessity of acknowledging or uncovering the institutional embeddedness of theoretical practice itself. There is thus a double movement involved: a recognition of the effect of context not just on the object(s) of theoretical inquiry but on the site(s) from which investigation proceeds. The overall effect of such a move is to deconstruct the universal–local and abstract–particular oppositions and the associated privileging of the first terms in these and related couplets. Theory always comes from a somewhere, a somewhere understood not as an actual place but as a complexly mediated social location and an enabling discursive positioning. Theory which presents itself as if coming from nowhere/anywhere is not so much concerned to escape its origin as it is at pains to essentialize it, and thereby to defend and disguise itself against what is understood as the threat of dispersal, fragmentation and plurality.

By contrast, and precisely because he is both positioned by and scattered across disparate discursive and social locations, Said uses theory in order to articulate the processes of such positioning rather than to elide them. This latter mode of theorizing is impelled to 'travel' between a plurality of sites by the conditions of its practice. As such, it is equipped both to reveal the parochialism of a cosmopolitanism which effectively depended upon a door-shutting contrast with the local, and to resist being marginalized as 'merely' local knowledge. And by making the foregrounding of its own practice a general precondition for the interrogation of others, it is also resistant to being marginalized as 'merely' subjective knowledge.

Furthermore, one of the ways in which theory has traditionally sought to signal its efficacy has been by way of the conceptual elimination of the theorist (albeit only from the body of the text, and not, of course, from its

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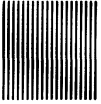
head). The writing of (a different conception of) the theorist into theory therefore involves the obligation to rewrite theory itself. Against the essentializing demands of theory's categorizing imperative, dispersal is re-evaluated as enabling. It becomes a 'place' from which to mount a critique of the conceit of theory which does not (care to) know its (own) place (Perry, 1992) at a time when this latter is itself undergoing change under the impact of globalization. This provides the conditions for theorizing as a process that is both mindful of its own contingency yet responsive to its own provisional possibilities; a privileging of theorizing (now elevated to strategy) over theory (now understood as tactic), a practice thus attuned to and critical of attempts to naturalize the arbitrariness of concepts.

This goes beyond the kind of critique which the historian E.P. Thompson (1965, 1978) made of Althusserian theory, but it rescues what is of most value from that confrontation. In insisting on 'the peculiarities of the English', Thompson did not just set this against 'the peculiarities of the French', but saw their contrasting patterns of historical development as vindicating wholly discrete methodological precepts and modes of cognition. The intention may have been to reinforce the traditional distinctions between experience and theory, culturalism and structuralism, history and sociology, but the consequence was to draw attention to their contemporary interdependence. This latter is a theme evident in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's more recent writing, in which he amplifies tendencies that were effectively embryonic in his elegant advocacy of the method of 'thick description' and the pertinence of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983). Geertz's reworking of local knowledge had been constructed across the distinction between the necessity of (a necessarily partisan) translation and the methodological imperative of (an even-handed) conceptual pluralism. His characteristic emphasis was on how to combine a clarification of the (presumptively) exotic with a problematizing of the thoroughly familiar (often making use of three cases and thereby providing some kind of defence against binary readings). For Geertz (1988: 147−8) now the pervasiveness of global processes and the pervasiveness of local differences have become so jumbled together as to threaten the conceptual stability of such terms as 'the English', and the interests and points of view that those terms are held to imply. The problem becomes one of constructing an intelligible discourse across the resulting divisions and connexions (Robertson, 1992: 180−1).

Thus, as Stuart Hall (1991: 59−61) has recently argued, a transgressive film like Stephen Freers and Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Launderette* is unmistakably and peculiarly British, but nonetheless is concerned to pull out all of the props which sustain received notions of personal and national identity with respect to oppressor and oppressed alike. More generally, within contemporary fiction in English, the best and the brightest (a list which would include Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Ondaatje) are commonly those for

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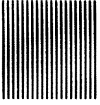
whom the principle of dispersal has not just become, but has been made, enriching rather than inhibiting. Edward Said's writing—and the responses to it—can be seen as a theoretical and critical expression of this wider tendency. As such, it both marks the entry to a route along which the practitioners of a nomadic organization theory might journey, and effects a link with some remarkably astute and perceptive fellow travellers.

What is implicit in Said becomes explicit in Gayatri Spivak. She therefore approvingly singles out Said's response to being commended for his patriotism. Said had replied 'that he was working for the Palestinian state to establish itself so that he could then become its critic' (Spivak, 1987: 125). Spivak recognizes the disciplinary privileging, the (3000 critics') ideology that is at work 'in Said's conviction that the literary critic rather than the other human scientists are the custodians of socio-political interpretation' (Spivak, 1987: 126). But what she finds praiseworthy is Said's willingness to interrogate the terms of a choice that is tacitly constructed as being between cosmopolitan and local, between either 'world citizen' or 'indigenous nationalist'. The point is not just that such a construction works to close off the very notion of being both by construing it as a theoretical impossibility, when it is precisely the existential correctness of such a response which is so pressing an imperative for Said. The point is also that this variant on the universal–particular contrast is political through and through, achieving its effects by defining and valuing the first terms by way of contrast with the second.

Having described herself as 'a practical deconstructivist feminist Marxist' (Spivak, 1990: 133) and 'the post-colonial diasporic Indian who seeks to decolonise the mind' (Spivak, 1990: 67), Spivak knowingly eschews both theoretical purity and political correctness. She chooses rather to make something of the disciplinary predicament into which she has been written by history, deploying it as a resource for writing/answering back. 'My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by the Marxists as too codic, by feminists as too male identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western theory. I am uneasily pleased about this' (Spivak, 1990: 69–70). Her work thus acquires some of its impetus from her vigilant resistance to categorization. The point is not (or not only) to shrug off all such attempts at definition, but rather to use them so as to open up the links between the theoretical work that such definitions routinely perform and the interests that they actively constitute or tacitly serve. Thus:

> The putative center welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin. And it is the center which offers the official explanation; or the center is defined and reproduced by the explanation it can express... By pointing attention to a feminist marginality, I have been attempting, not to win the center for ourselves, but to point at the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations. That would not merely reverse but displace the distinction between margin and center. But in effect such pure innocence

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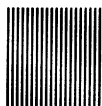
(pushing all guilt to the margins) is not possible, and paradoxically would put the very law of displacement and the irreducibility of the margin into question. The only way I can hope to suggest how the center itself is marginal is by not remaining outside on the margin and pointing my accusing finger at the center. I might do it rather by implicating myself in that center and sensing what politics make it marginal. (Spivak, 1987: 107)

It is in Dorinne Kondo's (1990) account of a Japanese factory that the themes and tactics characteristic of such nomadic theorizing are gathered together and their pertinence to organizational analysis is made most explicit. Both substantively and formally, her *Crafting Selves* (1990) is an innovative work. It is knowingly informed by a way of writing which serves to deliberately blur and problematize the boundaries between the subject(s) that the text investigates, the concepts on which its construction depends, and the author who reflexively organizes its narrative realization. The book is based on the empirical investigation of a small, family-owned factory (rather than a large corporation) and focuses on artisans and women part-time workers (rather than salaried men). The personal and the political are here combined, not as a tired and tiresome slogan, but in the very choice of subject and the manner of writing. Thus the text persistently foregrounds complexity, power, contradiction, discursive production and ambiguity both in its subjects and in its own ways of telling. The work is explicitly conceived in opposition to 'the insidiously persistent tropes that constitute the phantasm "Japan" in the contemporary United States: not only Organization Man and automaton, but submissive subjugated Japanese Woman, domineering sexist Japanese Man, Japanese despot, or perhaps most basically "the (undifferentiated) Japanese"' (Kondo, 1990: 301). Hence the text refuses, or rather one should say interrupts, those narrative conventions of fixed identity and essential meaning which sustain such a discourse. The small-firm focus is not designed to support any larger claim, but rather is intended to act as a counterweight to the literature's dominant emphasis on large corporations (cf. however, Friedman, 1988; Weiss, 1989).

As a Japanese-American woman, Kondo brought to the study assumptions which shaped everyday life in the community in which she grew up. What counts as experience is therefore recognized as not something apart from theory but understood as a product of discourse. Conversely, what counts as theory is recognized as differentially understood and valued according to subject positioning. For Kondo the relevant assumptions included 'the eloquence of silence, the significance of reciprocity, the need to attend closely to nuance, subtlety, ellipsis' (Kondo, 1990: 300). That such orientations were so often at odds with dominant cultural modes not only spoke to her conviction 'that no account of Japanese-Americans could even begin to understand "us"—this essentialist collective identity itself a strategic assertion and a site of multiple contested meanings—without lengthy acquaintance and a sensitive appreciation of the ways "we" define "ourselves"' (Kondo, 1990: 301). It also reinforced,

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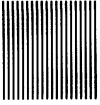
powerfully because experientially, a methodological commitment to appreciate and respect the Japanese subjects of her study.

This is not to say that such a maxim is unusual amongst anthropologists (it was, after all, evidence of Malinowski's deviation from it which made his diaries a *succès de scandale* within the discipline). Rather, what gives Kondo's work its edge is that for those self-same subjects she herself was a conceptual anomaly and a living contradiction. Thus their endeavours to minimize dissonance for themselves by striving to recruit her to their pre-existing cultural and discursive categories had the effect of increasing dissonance for her. Their strategies for consolidation of their identities were predicated upon the fragmentation of her own. This leads her to a conception of identities as constructed oppositionally and relationally, of selves as multiple and shifting, as context-bound, rhetorical strategies rather than (more or less) fixed entities. Selves inseparable from context are selves inseparable from power, and this is understood by Kondo in a broadly Foucauldian sense, in which discourses cross-cut and contradict one another and dominant idioms such as 'company as family' are differentially mobilized and deployed in ways which undermine their unproblematic operation. Her part-time women workers are both structurally marginal (an economic buffer zone) and discursively crucial (as both the objects and the audience for masculine discourses). Their gender positioning and their links to the home are at once a powerful constraint and the basis for asserting a claim to centrality, such that their enactment of themselves as women is in context both affirmative and yet a reinforcement of their structural subordination. Kondo's attention to the internal differences within the Japanese workplace thus goes beyond Rohlen's (1974) account of a Japanese bank, which had taken as its leitmotif the contradiction between 'harmony and strength' (the bank's own motto). And at the same time, her relational conception of selves also goes beyond those constructions of a gendered self and critiques of the whole subject made by western feminists (which remain wedded to individualism).

Kondo's study thus offers more than a methodological corrective to prevailing western images of the self and of the Japanese workforce. She employs it as a means of unravelling the theoretical assumptions and narrative conventions which guide such images. The self that writes the text is multivocal, tacking back and forth between vignette and theoricity; the narrative alternately circling around its subjects and back upon itself in a making and remaking of its own rhetorical strategies. By thus doubling and problematizing its own subject, what is thereby inscribed into the body of the text is that conception of selves which the text itself describes. These disturbances in the text thus correspond to the disrupting of a bounded, unified concept of self and to a subversion of theoretical categories understood as fixed, stable and culturally invariant. This allows Kondo to stress the constituting of selves as of a piece with the organizing of work, and to construe identity as a process rather than an object (see also Knights and Willmott, 1989).

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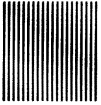
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The nomadic theorist who emerges from this mode of representation is disrespectful of boundaries and resistant to categorization; with the concomitant scattering of theoretical identity, theory is hybridized, mongrelized, customized, made promiscuous, invested with voice; not local, not lost but rather found elsewhere, in places where conventional theory does not (and cannot) travel.

Nevertheless, traditional theory, with its officially approved and organized routes for visitors, both contrasts with and criss-crosses (the acquisition of) that tacit knowledge of unmarked pathways upon which nomadic theorizing depends. One way to illustrate the tensions and interdependencies between these approaches is by showing how their adherents may (sometimes) share the same well-worn tracks but not the same journey; may (sometimes) see the same reassuring and familiar signs but read them very differently.

Consider, for example, the sight of McDonald's yellow arches and the prospect of a Big Mac. For those travellers who are most at home with traditional theory, there could hardly be a better indicator that they are not just on the right track but also on familiar ground. For McDonald's is both a metaphor of organization and an icon of globalization. The franchisor (and its products) might now be said not just to signal the continuities between these two complex terms but to serve as a rhetorical symbol of their integration. Yet even here, on terrain that is so conducive to the claims of traditional theory, there are persistent anomalies, signs of disturbance which display an irritating intractability. For tourists in the land of theory, a Big Mac proves to be resistant to a single reading.

This notion of 'hamburger as text' sounds suspiciously like an academic joke. It could perhaps be a permutation on Jonathan Miller's memorable description of airline meals as 'printed food'; or a parodic extension of Marvin Harris's (1979: 188–90) waspish critique of Levi Strauss's structuralism as 'the raw, the cooked, and the half-baked'; or maybe a postscript to Andreas Huyssen's (1984: 32) sardonic characterization of European social theory as 'frankfurters and french fries'. Aphorisms of this kind are a part of the academic's stock-in-trade, the *lingua franca* of faculty gossip. As (ideologically) sound bites, they are the secular signs of an occupational communion.

Given this acerbic pattern of conduct, the very idea of a Big Mac seems to be an invitation, an opportunity to overindulge in such linguistic games. The symbolic possibilities of fast food are not, however, limited to, or by, the cultural idiosyncrasies of academic taste. And with around 12,000 outlets in some 66 countries, McDonald's is manifestly no joke. Whenever and wherever a McDonald's retail outlet is established, the marketing of the product (right down to the carefully orchestrated impression of an abundance of french fries) is designed into the Fordist-style assembly-line system. Under McDonald's arches, the demands of customers thus articulate directly with an overarching system of technological control and its attendant low level of employee discretion and highly

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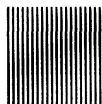
formalized training of store managers (Levitt, 1972). Standardized products and standardized methods are wedded to a modal conception of the experience of consumption and are represented through a distinctive advertising style (Boas and Chain, 1976). With the development of what Ritzer (1991) calls the McDonaldization of society, these processes become a metaphor and an organizing principle for the wider social order. More generally, McDonald's has come to be seen as exemplifying the combination of a fully routinized and invariant production system with the expanding uniformities of a global culture.

In practice, such an interpretation serves as no more than a first cut, or perhaps a limiting case, for what is at once a more general theoretical tendency and its more nuanced empirical application. For to trace the trajectory of McDonald's growth is also to document its links to the emergence and development of franchising as a business system, and franchising, in its turn, was closely connected to developments in transportation. Beginning with US automobile dealerships in the 1890s, the franchise system extended from them to service stations and subsequently to fast-food outlets, a process which was powerfully reinforced by the construction of the US Interstate highway network in the 1950s and 1960s (Patton, 1986: 187–206). Read one way, therefore, the context within which 'fast food' evolved was unabashedly Fordist, a pattern in which assembly-line principles of production and marketing were applied to the service sector. Read another way, however, franchising is exemplary of a distinctive form of capital formation—one which permits flexible accumulation but eschews flexible specialization. For the franchisee it offers entrepreneurship in a package, ambition-by-numbers, capitalism in kit form; for the franchisor it gives access to capital without ceding control, reconciles integrated administration with entrepreneurial motivation.

Or read yet another way, as, for example, by Zukin, the meaning of McDonald's is filtered through her account of the transformation of urban centres. In her more general framework, McDonald's forms part of an emergent 'landscape of power' in which such landscapes are understood as the symbolical and material mediation of 'market' (with its implication of the socio-spatial differentiation of capital) and 'place' (which suggests the socio-spatial homogeneity of labour). This theme is set and developed through her contrast between Detroit and Disney World. McDonald's is seen as closer to the postmodernist latter than to the modernist former, whilst yet epitomizing the connexions between an international urban form, globalized production and consumption and a concomitant displacement of localized craft production (Zukin, 1991: 43).

Yet despite the refinements which come with elaboration, what sustains even the most developed manifestations of such theorizing is a kind of axiomatic reflex. By this is meant the predisposition to see cultural phenomena, whether in the form of beliefs, practices or objects, as more or less determined by social or economic relations (Wolff, 1991).

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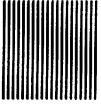
With varying degrees of ingenuity and sophistication, i.e. by the deploy-
ment of varying levels of relative autonomy, the realm of culture is
allowed some space in which to play, albeit within the limits provided by
these structural constraints. As applied to the McDonald's example, this
is one way to preserve the continuities between the received organiz-
ational meaning and the positions that the resulting products occupy
within the development of processes of globalization. It seems all too
obvious that McDonald's is a clear-cut case of such institutional and
structural determination—hence the expression 'McWorld' (*Business
Week*, 1986; Barber, 1992).

On this view, the presumption that cultural meaning can be subsumed
under or subordinated to such factors needs little or no further justifica-
tion. It is in this vein that Turim gloomily refers to a recent McDonald's
television commercial in which 'Mack the Knife', Bertolt Brecht and Kurt
Weill's theme from *The Threepenny Opera* becomes 'It's Mac Tonight'
complete with an animation of a floating moon singer (Ray Charles). 'In
one short clip much of modernist culture is reincarnated as an emblem
that effaces any other purpose to or history of modernism except as style
of the urbane' (Turim, 1991: 185). Oppositional structures are thereby
incorporated into a single culture of commercialism by 'using the tropes
and structures of artistic resistance outside of their contexts and without
the notions of contestatory textuality that marked their earlier use'
(Turim, 1991: 185).

The (reassuring?) familiarity of this kind of analysis is not without
plausibility. Yet such an apocalyptic tone has come to seem wearily
formulaic, since the text in question was (in line with Weill's own
subsequent embrace of commercial values) long ago assimilated to the
realm of musak (by entertainers who are themselves now dead, such as
Bobby Darin and Louis Armstrong). It is, therefore, important to insist on
the tactical merit of approaching the cultural/economic/social relation
from another side, one which does not take the meaning of commodifica-
tion in general, and fast food in particular, as a theoretical given. If, under
the sign of global culture, we conceive of 'hamburger as text', then this
avoids subsuming cultural meaning under, or at best inferring it from, its
commodity status. It involves the recognition of a Big Mac as both a
product and a sign. Considered only as a methodological corrective
(rather than a methodological alternative) to the dominant form of
interpretation, the concomitant emphasis on the notion of cultural repre-
sentation (and thus on culture as constitutive) has the effect of fore-
grounding, rather than subduing, the contrasts between organizational
uniformity and cultural difference.

What makes McDonald's of interest to organization theorists is that
what is integral to the encoded (i.e. the producer's proffered and pre-
ferred) meaning of what they sell is the organizational system through
which they are produced. The methodological pertinence of viewing that
product as a text is that such an approach rests on a procedural assump-

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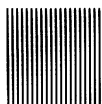
tion that cultural phenomena achieve their meanings only through their interpretation. Whether they are read with, or against, the grain of the encoded meaning(s), it is through recourse to the notion of text that a given cultural artifact and the processes of its recognition are combined.

'Hamburger as text' may therefore be a whimsy, but it is a whimsy with analytic possibilities. That an artifact that is purportedly emblematic of 'organization' is available for interpretation in this way, provides a way into the analysis of other (rather more obviously linguistically elaborated and cognitively oriented) organizational texts. Put another way, if (even) a globally standardized and presumptively culturally uniform (a.k.a. culture-free) 'Big Mac' can be shown to yield food for (different forms of) thought, then the problematizing of meaning associated with such a demonstration assumes a wider relevance. In serving as an allegory on how theories of organization are read, when they too are launched around the globe, it can also serve as a methodological preamble to a way of reading them that reflexively foregrounds the complex effects and interdependencies of globalization and indigenization.

One route into this territory is suggested by *The Economist*'s (1993) demonstration of the theory of purchasing power parity (PPP) through its use of the Big Mac as a currency index. The theory posits (a) that the exchange rate between a given two currencies is in equilibrium when the prices of the same bundles of traded goods and services in those countries are equalized, and (b) that there is a long-run tendency for currencies to move towards such parity. First introduced in 1986, the index is premised upon the Big Mac as 'the perfect universal commodity', thereby serving as a proxy for that wider bundle of commodities from which such measures are usually constructed. Using a four-city US average to establish the baseline price, the 1993 index effects a comparison across 24 countries. Whether a currency is under- or overvalued (against the US dollar) is then determined by whether the actual exchange rate is above or below the rate indicated by the PPP as calculated from the price of a Big Mac. The results of this exercise are identified as 'strikingly consistent' with those obtained using more sophisticated techniques. The Japanese yen and most of the EEC currencies are seen as overvalued against the dollar; the rouble and the Chinese yuan are undervalued; the pound sterling is slightly undervalued against the German mark, whereas the surviving members of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism are somewhat overvalued against it; and so on.

What is of interest is how this (lighthearted) use of the Big Mac as a benchmark for a rudimentary modelling of the operation of markets forms part of a discourse which can be seen to imply the conditions for its own elaboration. Even the most casual interpretation of the results depends upon the mobilization of supplementary knowledge and additional variables (mention is made of farm subsidies and interest rates as sources of variance). What remains intact, however, is the notion that there is, in principle, an invariate universal commodity (bundle) to which the Big

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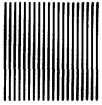
Mac approximates. What underpins the subsequent probing of variation is the theme that a Big Mac is everywhere the same. This predictability and standardization is emphasized in many accounts of the development and appeal of fast food, whether by the industry's own apologists or by its most gloomy and apocalyptic critics (Kroker et al., 1989: 119).

Note, however, that it is not the actual product which gets to travel but the concept of it, and with it the system through which that concept is realized and the meal is actually produced. Hence the general form of interpretation which sustains *The Economist*'s index can be read as akin to that which sustained contingency theory in its heyday, with variations in price functioning as analogous to variations in the structural attributes of organizations. Money is, to be sure, the measure *nonpareil*. It thereby attracts a consensus which the scaling techniques associated with contingency theory could not hope to match, even with respect to such apparently commonsensical yet deceptively wayward and theoretically crucial characteristics as organizational size (see Kimberley, 1976). Despite such differences in performativity, technical complexity and concomitant levels of cognitive integration, a formal parallel between these instruments is nevertheless evident. The development of contingency theory dethroned the notion of an ideal organization structure understood as a particular configuration of administrative attributes. The concept of an optimal organizational form was nonetheless retained as an informing theoretical principle by construing it as that structure which is most efficiently adjusted to the cluster of contingencies characteristic of its *milieu*. It is as a conceptual approximation of the perfect commodity that a Big Mac becomes part of a theory which not only travels but is global in its reach. It was as a method of determining efficient organization structure that contingency theory got to do the same (see Donaldson, 1985, 1987). What *The Economist*'s Big Mac thus routinely accomplishes is the kind of methodological task which for (this and related versions of) organization theory remains an aspiration.

If, however, emphasis is placed upon a Big Mac as an indeterminate and complex sign rather than as a perfect(ly) simple commodity, then it is not standardization and uniformity which assume priority, but variation and difference. From such a perspective the price of a Big Mac is merely one aspect of what it signifies; and what it signifies slides promiscuously along and across the disparate (geographical, cultural, social and discursive) locations from which it is read. On this view, when it comes to hamburgers, the word itself is made fresh even as the world is made flesh. For example, Barry Smart's (1994) analysis of the Moscow McDonald's provides a schematic, but very different, account of the meaning of a Big Mac and its relation to putative developments and continuities in Russian economic organization. The 700-seat McDonald's restaurant in Pushkin Square is interpreted as a place of pilgrimage, in which the disjunction between the utopian future promised by western capitalism and its grim implications for the present is briefly bridged, so that:

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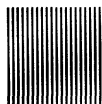
> For Muscovites a McDonald's Big Mac is now a luxury item: it has 'become a souvenir, taken back in its wrapper to show off to admiring friends in distant Siberian villages. "We had to come", says Yuri Tishunin, a postal worker from the Yemal Peninsula in the remote far north, "just to see if it's real"' (Moynihan, 1992: 13). '. . . Lenin, preserved in his black marble mausoleum, icon for a fast-fading socialism, to which people can now gain ready access by queuing for a mere 40 minutes or so, has evidently been displaced by the Big Mac, preserved as a souvenir in its red box, an icon of fast-feeding American capitalism, for which, ironically, it seems people are prepared to queue for hours' (Macdonald, 1990). It is the paradox of slow fast food that has allowed the hamburger hawkers to offer their services as surrogates in the queue for wealthier diners prepared to pay 200 roubles for the delivery of orders to their cars. And around the hawkers who are able to earn ten times the average monthly salary, hierarchies of minders and their bosses have gathered to collect their cut. (Smart, 1994: 27)

Both these specific social practices and the general freedom to record their presence are novel. But when such conduct is read against the record of the past, then notwithstanding the manifest unevenness of the relevant sociological archive, it is a pattern which comes to seem both familiar and expected. This is illustrated by Berliner's (1957) observations on how the very goals and incentives enjoined upon the centralized official system of Soviet factory organization and economic planning gave rise to the elaboration of extra-legal forms of intra- and inter-organizational linkages through which resources were (re)allocated. The name given to these illicit processes for the transfer of goods and services was *blat* and an individual who specialized in the development of such connexions came to be called a *tolkach* (the term for a supplementary locomotive which was located and employed on those stretches of the railway system where the gradient was too steep for the underpowered main engine to keep the wagons on the move). The institutionalization of these tendencies was obliquely expressed by the folk maxim that '*blat* is higher than Stalin'. If, by the 1990s, a Big Mac had become more revered than Lenin, then this hints at secular continuity as well as at religious difference. The economic activity around Pushkin Square seems rather more explicit, but no less organized, than its illegal and subterranean precursor in the command economy. It is a past and future image of the present: at once a signal of the determinate effects of an officially sanctioned transformation in Russian economic organization and a pointer to the material and pro-spectively consequential continuities in its underlife. Berliner had under-stood *blat* as a rudimentary manifestation of market mechanisms, an undeveloped and imperfect functional equivalent to the allocation pro-cesses of a market economy. Now it is the market which is officially sanctified. Yet the para-criminal hierarchies which cluster around its new icon hint at the rather different prospect of particularistic and pre- or non-modern patterns of organization playing more than a merely residual role in shaping the future of the Russian economy.

Note that the very approach which encourages my indulgence in this

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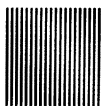
kind of large and speculative interpretative leap is also one whose empirical application would serve to discipline it. The relevant theme is institutional embeddedness, i.e. the presumption that organized economic activity is not to be understood as a series of approximations to a formal model, but as always grounded in a distinctive configuration of generic social forces and processes through which its present functioning and probable trajectory come to be constituted. Perrow's (1972) now classic account of the institutional school could be said to have first sketched the antecedents of this approach. Since then it has given rise to a line of enquiry whose paradigmatic formulation by Granovetter (1985) has been developed by Hamilton and Biggart (1988), Clegg (1990) and Whitley (1990, 1991, 1992) with respect to the 'puzzle' (for earlier approaches) of explaining Asian business organization. For present purposes, therefore, the significance of the specific details of the Russian case is that they serve to highlight a general methodological principle of respect for anomalies. These are not seen as residual features awaiting elimination by the unfolding logic of the long run. Rather they are understood as resilient and constitutive elements within a discrete, boundary-blurring matrix of inter-institutional relations. As such, they are resistant to demarcation by operationalist modes of definition. But it is important to note that not only is such an institutionalist perspective still grounded firmly within modernism, but that its accomplishment is to ground modernism more firmly.

Both *The Economist*'s and Smart's study move at the intersection between burgernomics and burgerology. But they also move across each other and thereby point to a more general contrast. The salient distinction is not, however, between comparative analysis and case study. Smart's essay is consciously comparative, and *The Economist* invokes either the teleological 'long run' or the residual ad hoc in its explanation of how individual cases deviate from the general model. What is dramatized by the juxtaposition of the two studies is therefore not different levels of inquiry but contrasting conceptions of theory. The opposition to which they call attention is between a theory which is firmly wedded to differentiation and theorizing which is loosely coupled to differance.

Permutations on the differentiation–differance couplet have become a critical marker in the modern–postmodern and related debates. A characteristic example is its employment by Martin Jay (1988) to argue that Habermas's acknowledged allegiance to differentiation/modernity is nuanced, refined and defensible. Differance is, of course, a no-longer-new neologism coined by Derrida. Each of these terms now bears the weight of an enormous amount of cultural freight. Each has therefore proved to be both awkward to handle and yet reassuringly robust. So if awkwardness as a characteristic points to the difficulty of recognizing just 'which way is up?' (see Connell, 1983), then robustness as a property suggests the resilience of this odd couple(t) when subject to the kind of *bricoleur* tactics and peremptory handling that they receive in this paper.

Such unprincipled scavenging amongst the detritus of high theory is a

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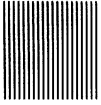
brief but necessary detour which points towards this paper's destination whilst purportedly journeying away from it. Thus Derrida's formulation of differentiation is here employed both as a description of *The Economist*'s Big Mac index and as a means of interrupting its confident forward progress. Differentiation, he argues:

> ... suggests some organic unity, some primordial and homogeneous unity, that would eventually come to be divided up and take on difference as an event. Above all formed on the verb 'to differentiate' this word would annul the economic signification of detour, temporalizing delay, deferring. (Derrida, 1973: 143)

Set off against such differentiation is the all-purpose subversiveness, fluidity, heterogeneity, lack of direction and irreducibility of differance, understood as that systematic play of differences, spacing of elements and traces of a radical otherness (Derrida, 1981: 38–9) which the homogeneity of the index s(w)erves to efface.

When this variant of the differentiation–differance antimony is passed through the ambiguities of the contrast between globalization and indigenization, it becomes subject to refraction and displacement. Although it is texts which provide the occasion for such practices, they are unable to control the manner of their own reception and use. No matter whether it is made manifest through the demotic Big Mac, through the arcane prose of French cultural theory,[2] or through the more conventionally academic but no less esoteric texts of organization theory, the distinction and conjunction between travelling theory and nomadic theorizing arise from this mode of doubling.

What this means is that for a cognitive tour of theoryland to survive in the contemporary cultural marketplace, it must both recognize and attempt to grapple with the need to cater to a variety of tastes—tastes which are at once flexible and specialized. Kondo's family firm made Japanese confectioneries. Clegg's (1990) exemplar of institutional embeddedness is the artisanal production of French bread. This author made a quick trip to McDonald's in order to sample their best-known product. The first of these commodities remains overwhelmingly local; the second travels, albeit selectively; the third seems to be almost everywhere. Our brief visit to their respective cultural sites strongly suggests that there is no single theory which might embrace the theories which have been constructed around such products, only what Foster (1983: xi) referred to as the 'anything goes' variant of postmodernism and Lyotard's (1984: 76) observation that 'Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture, one ... eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, (and) wears Paris perfume in Tokyo'.

Organizational analysis may be less exotic than Lyotard's illustration but it is no less eclectic; a theoretical hypermarket with globally organized brands and regional franchise holders, interspersed with ease-of-access high-volume discounters, local craft producers, enthusiastic recyclers,

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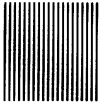
bricoleurs and the hucksters of snake-oil remedies. Whitley's (1984) characterization of the management studies field as a 'fragmented adhocracy' makes just such a point in a fashion that is at once linguistically more circumspect and analytically more developed.

As with the Big Mac, both organization analyses and their subject-matter are everywhere. But as with the Big Mac, they are everywhere complexly mediated, inflected and refracted through and by specific meanings, usages and interests whose full specificity resists standardization and categorization. The Big Mac is, of course, not just a text, and the analysis of organizations refers to something beyond the texts themselves. But as with the Big Mac in this paper, in organizational analysis this 'something beyond the texts' can only be approached through the texts. The associated dilemmas provide the axis along which nomadic theorizing and travelling theory pitch their respective tents. Somewhere between that radical scepticism towards essentialist and universal concepts to which Kondo gives expression, and the kind of repair work at (and from within) the boundaries of the modernist project represented by Clegg, is where organization theories and theorizing which claims contemporaneity with globalization must presently move. For although we cannot but essentialize—because of what we are—both what 'we' are, and what we 'are' are themselves essentially contested. And this takes place in a world in which we are essentially connected, but a world in which our answers to the question, 'what world is this?' (see McHale, 1992: 146–64) are, in their turn, essentially contested. Insofar as globalization can be represented at all, it is through the contradictory pluralities of such enforced in-betweenness and the tactics of serious play to which it gives rise. Glimpsed, but not grasped.

Notes

My thanks to Geoff Fougere for first bringing Dorinne Kondo's book to my attention and to Trevor Snowden for the E.V. Walter reference.

1 This paper is based on a chapter in the author's forthcoming *Hyperreality: A World of Difference*, to be published by Routledge.
2 In her splendidly scurrilous polemic against French theory and its reception within American literary criticism, Camille Paglia (1992: 220) argues that the resulting 'McDonaldization of the profession means standardized, interchangeable outlets, briskly efficient academics who think alike and sound alike'. Lamont's (1987) analysis of this process is altogether more scholarly but rather less entertaining.

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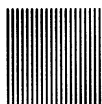
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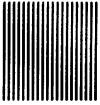
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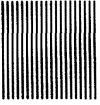
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