

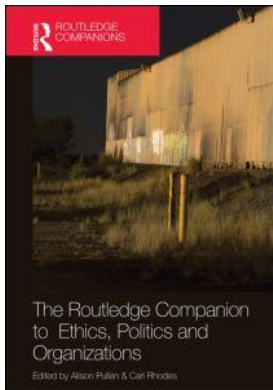
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A cultural politics of work

Resistance and escape in the culture of organizing

Martin Parker

If you work and do your best
You'll get the sack like all the rest
But if you laze and bugger about
You'll live to see the job right out.
The work is hard, pay is small,
So take your time and sod 'em all.
Cause when your dead you'll be forgot.

(Text from a china mug)

Here and now

If you wander down the small high street of one of the districts of the city of Stoke-on-Trent where I live and where that mug was made, you see promises of escape in shop windows and on billboards. Stoke is a poor city, and has not recovered from the industrial collapse of the 1970s.¹ About half the shops are boarded up or empty. Even the Subway sandwich shop has closed,² but there are drinkers in some of the pubs from mid-morning onwards. It is shit. A city that has been let down and left behind, and in which the factories have no roofs, the pits are closed and the steelworks grows grass and brambles.

But imagine yourself here, and you will be surrounded by promises. The betting shops have displays which hint at the mountains of cash on offer to someone who picks the right odds, and show pictures of steel-thighed footballers slamming the ball into the back of the net. The travel agent has pictures of a golden beach and a blue sky, a huge cruise liner in an exotic port, the skyline of New York, glittering like last year's Christmas tree. A newsagent window tells you that *you* could be a millionaire next week if you scratch the right card or tick the right box, and sells a lot of cigarettes and porn inside. Several massage parlours offer a simulation of the real thing, under signboards saying 'Executive', 'Little Tingles' and 'Head Office'. A billboard invites you to share the glory of the local premiership football team, another invites you to a blockbusting film in which determined looking men escape from somewhere or somebody,

and an off-licence with knockdown bargain prices shows fun and laughing friends with white teeth. On the bus stop, an advert for an employment agency with a smiling white man looking at the camera, inviting you to work. Someone has added teeth and glasses, an ejaculating cock and balls, and written 'WANKER' underneath. People in this city seem to exist on promises nowadays, on the idea that there could be an alternative to being here, now, on a pavement dotted with chewing gum and sparkling splinters of last night's glass.

For those who don't have the time, resources or power to debate, argue and dialogue, there seem to be at least two ways in which social arrangements can be contested. One is a strategy of graffiti, laughter, ridicule in which the figures of power appear with horns or big noses and the bus stop becomes obscene. This is criticism through representation, a form of thumbing your nose at those people and things that make everyday life difficult or objectionable. The other is escape, an attempt to take oneself outside the grating sounds and fatty smells of the present in order to be somewhere else, doing something else. Exit and absence don't have to be physical, but can also take the form of dreams, fantasies and promises. In this chapter, I want to explore both of these strategies as elements in the counterculture of organizing. There has been a fair amount of work done now on the former, on the ways in which films, songs, comic books and so on very often contain negative representations of management and organization, and I will review this work in the chapter (Hassard and Holliday, 1998; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). What I want to add here is some sense of escape as being understandable in these terms too. I want to understand the graffiti and the betting shop as different solutions to the same problem.

I will begin by quickly outlining some of the historical moves which have allowed the innocuous word 'culture' to carry such political weight. This means thinking about the word as a term which produces 'us' and 'them', either in spatial and institutional terms (the culture of Stoke, the culture of an organization), or in moral terms (they are like that, we are like this). I then move on to discuss how the idea of a counterculture of organization reproduces this 'us' and 'them' in representational terms, and use plenty of examples to show how I think this counterculture works. But I don't think this exhausts the ways in which we can think about a culture which indirectly opposes the present, in the terms of a resistance which pushes back against power. So the following section begins to explore escape as a form of politics too, what Scott (1990) calls an infrapolitics, an exodus from the spaces and terms that define what it means to be a subject in a managed society. In thinking about these ideas I will be using a combination of 1970s cultural studies and more recent forms of poststructuralism and queer theory. Of course the conditions for these escapes are often managed too, which is a potentially tragic end to this chapter, but one that I try to avoid by insisting that we can never know (for once and for all) what is political and what is not.

Culture and politics

Culture, like many words, can mean many things (Williams, 1976: 87). In its most general sense, it refers to an anthropological understanding of the way of life of a people, and hence also suggests some sort of distinctiveness between what different peoples do in different places and times. In that wide sense, it includes forms of song, dance, myth and so on, but also topics that observers might put in other boxes – such as technology, economy, government and so on. In principle, the anthropological sense of culture would leave nothing out. It opens an attempt to capture a whole way of life without making any particular distinctions between different parts of that life. This is because the different forms of anthropological culture intermingle. A marriage ceremony might embed assumptions about power and inheritance, and a story about the gods

tell us why we are at war with the people over the river. Wherever we begin, every other aspect of that life is implicated, because the social world does not come with dotted lines that allow us to separate economics, from politics, from culture and so on.

However, it seems to have been easier to maintain this holistic sense of culture when the object of enquiry was ‘others’. Anthropology grew out of the colonial encounter which identified ‘them’ as different from ‘us’, and perhaps *their* lives looked undivided when ‘we’ viewed them from a distance. Once the social sciences began to emerge in the imperial nations in the second half of the nineteenth century, forms of specialization began to produce diverse fields of enquiry which made a series of increasingly definitive claims about the separation of different elements of human life. The disciplines of economics, psychology, politics, sociology and so on were each predicated on the idea that they were investigating distinctive sites or institutions or doing so in a distinctive way. At the same time the humanities were increasingly demarcating those aspects of cultural life with which they are concerned – history, literature, music, visual art and so on. Whilst such distinctions were certainly helpful for claims to expertise, they also segmented knowledge in ways that made certain matters evident and obvious, and other ideas difficult to think at all.

In the case of the humanities, they also sedimented the idea of an implicit class distinction which became a way of understanding who has culture and who does not. We can see this in the second common meaning of culture as a label for *particular* and *preferred* cultural forms and practices – opera and not popular song, literature and not dime novels or penny dreadfuls. In general terms, this implies an epistemological distinction between ‘culture’ and the everyday, and hence a distinctive set of research sites where such work could be done – museums, galleries, certain theatres and universities themselves. To speak of someone as ‘cultured’ means that they are knowledgeable about what Matthew Arnold called ‘the best that has been thought and said’. More generally, it also becomes a way of gesturing towards the manners of the upper and middle classes,³ referring to particular forms of supposedly timeless comportment and attitude. The raucous and ephemeral vulgarities of the people after the industrial revolution were hence not culture at all in this second sense, and certainly not worthy of serious study. To put it bluntly, since trivia had nothing timeless to say about the human condition, it could easily be dismissed as ‘mass’ culture.

Combining disciplinary division with a cultural politics based on exclusion meant that academic ideas about culture have tended to bear all sorts of half hidden assumptions. Within studies of organizations, for example, the use of the term culture begins to be applied in quite specific ways from the 1980s onwards. Though earlier writers from organizational sociology, occupational psychology and industrial anthropology had referred to organizational ‘climate’, ‘atmosphere’ and ‘personality’, the growth of the idea of ‘organizational’ culture within the growing business school was driven by the claim that culture could be a source of value (Parker, 2000). In practice, what was being studied were usually the accounts of management and professionals. Older traditions of occupational community studies and shop-floor ethnographies (Brown, 1992) began to be eclipsed and the organization tended to be imagined as a container, a time and place where a particular sort of culture happened. Despite Linda Smircich’s (1983) often repeated insistence that organizations don’t *have* cultures, they *are* cultures, the tendency was to assume that culture began at 9 and ended at 5, and could be found within the boundaries of the workplace. The multiple intersections between the symbolic universe of a particular organization and that of a wider culture were hence rarely explored, perhaps because they were assumed not to be relevant for a business school audience. If it was work and organizations that was being studied, then the research needed to take place *in* work organizations, and not across, between or outside them.

As is often the case, the politics of management knowledge framing the word 'culture' was both elitist and partial. Yet the 1970s had already seen a series of movements in sociology, history and literature which were beginning to undo both the epistemological and institutional divisions that had produced such a complex terrain for a reasonably simple concept.⁴ The result was what is now usually called cultural studies, and (to simplify considerably) this was a new interdisciplinary space where an anthropological definition of culture was being applied to the way of life of the people of modern societies. Social historians began to investigate the common people, rather than kings and generals; sociologists began to relax the distinction between culture and structure which had produced their discipline; and literary critics began to pay attention to chapbooks, popular ballads and comics (Storey, 1993; Lewis, 2008). The result was an opening for a different understanding of culture, one that refused epistemological and disciplinary difference in favour of an engagement with everyday materials, with the celebration of the popular rather than the denigration of the mass. Clearly, this was work that came with a leftist political stance, in which popularity was not seen to be a problem, and populism was not an insult. One might have imagined that this would include work on work, but in practice organizations were rarely considered to be of interest in themselves in early cultural studies, more the backdrop to research on youth culture or education, or the unexamined sites which produced the clothes, TV programmes and pop music which were the object of analysis (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1977). In a sense, the focus was what happened outside work, in the 'leisure' time of the weekend and the spaces of the shopping mall, in the places of consumption rather than the places of production (Parker, 2006).

And so now we can return to where we began, with the question of how to deal with what I saw all around me in Stoke, both the promises and the graffiti. It seems that this place and these phenomena don't fit well into the sorts of boxes that the university provides, which makes it interesting in all sorts of ways. This is a place made by industrial labour, and in which 'high' culture is simply absent. Instead we have examples of a variety of popular cultural practices and representations, most of which aren't even clearly 'about' work and organizations. The promises are seemingly unrelated to the ideological claims made by the proponents of free markets, a knowledge economy, self-management and so on. If the former are utopias of work (Grey and Garsten, 2002), then the billboards sell us Cockayne and Arcadia, the lands of plenty. And the graffiti, the cock and balls on a suit, is rejecting a claim that the world of work can provide you with money and smiles. Both, it seems to me, are examples of the counterculture of organizing, but they are not the same. If the spray paint is an example of an oppositional impulse, then the betting shop and travel agent are not explicitly 'against' something. If the former is an example of resistance, then the latter is an example of escape, which is not so much pushing against but rather an embrace of something different. Yet I think that they can both be understood as attempts to resolve some of the undesirable aspects of working life, and hence are 'political' in different ways.

Phil Cohen, in an early paper that prefigured some key ideas from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, suggested that youth subcultures offered magical resolutions to the contradictions of the everyday: 'It seems to me that the latent function of subculture is this: to express and resolve, albeit "magically", the contradictions that remain hidden in the parent culture' (1972/1997: 94). Cohen suggests that the procession of subcultures represented structural transformations of 'the basic problematic or contradiction which is inserted in the subculture by the parent culture' (op. cit.). Rather than seeing subcultures as pathological, they become articulated as imaginative responses to structural tensions and contradictions in the social. I want to adapt Cohen's argument here, and apply it to what I am calling the counterculture of organizing, as well as the promises of Cockayne and Arcadia being sold in the shop windows

in Stoke. In order to do this I want to use another rather classic paper from cultural studies, Richard Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia', originally from 1977 (1993). Dyer argues, using various media theorists, that there is a promise of something different, something better, in much that is dismissed as mere entertainment: 'Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realised' (Dyer, 1993: 273). His example is the musical, but it seems to me that this sort of argument can also be used in the context of betting shops, travel agents and pubs – any cultural formation which promises escape from now and hence articulates 'now' as a problem.

That is to say, I think that both the strategies of contest that I mentioned above – for those without the resources to engage in debates with the powerful – can be understood through these ideas from early cultural studies. Both graffiti and the betting shop can be imagined as ways to magically resolve the present, whether through opposition or exit. I will say some more about these ideas as we go along, but want to first outline the sort of empirical materials that I think are important when we consider these questions. I'll start with a genre of oppositional cultural representation which comments on work, management and business, but in ways that are often satirical and broadly hostile to authority.

Resistance

My suggestion here is that the counterculture can be set against a 'culture *for* organizing', which contains many images of work and management which are broadly positive. Think of the sorts of ideas you find in orthodox textbooks, in the marketing claims made by business schools, business magazines and newspapers, and the shelves full of stridently simpering one-minute manager books. Rather like the utopian dreams of escape offered by musicals, fashion, holidays or betting shops in popular culture, this is mirrored by an elitist set of representations which combine first-class lounges, expensive watches and exclusive credit cards with the idea of being a special person. Certain people are part of the star system within this arena – management consultants with international tours delivered to packed conference rooms in expensive hotels, 'outlaw' entrepreneurs who can afford private jets, business school professors who can charge extraordinary fees for their wisdom. Embedding these images are other more mundane ones – well-dressed people looking at lap tops, workplaces with water coolers and dress-down Fridays, and apartments offering lifestyle living in the heart of the city. This is all part of a cultural genre in which organizations, management and work are regarded as central to the reproduction of what is good, and the smile of a (male) executive gazing out of an aeroplane window as a (female) member of the aircrew passes by smiling tells us what our dreams should be.

However, as is obvious, this culture for organizing is hugely contested. A comic book called *The Adventures of Unemployed Man* (Origen and Golen, 2010) is just one example here. It tells the story of a smug middle-aged white superhero – 'Ultimatum' – who passes through the city at night with messages of self-help for the poor and deviant. However, after being fired from a company he thought he owned and realizing that he can't get another job, he gradually comes to realize that the problem is the inequalities of capitalism, and not the indolence of the poor. Fighting the forces of the 'Invisible Hand' and 'The Free Marketeers', he becomes 'Unemployed Man' and defeats evil through collective organization. Just about everything in this comic contests the corporation, neoliberalism, consumer credit and the individualism that underpins pro-managerialism utopianism. Yet I do not believe that this is an unusual or anomalous example. Indeed, I would argue that the counterculture of organizing is actually just as important and widespread as that which it opposes, and perhaps even more so.

Just to take some examples – in films as diverse as *Brazil* (1985), *What Women Want* (2000) *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and *Fun with Dick and Jane* (2005) we have plots that are organized around the idea that the work organization is the problem. In popular film, most organizations are managed by bureaucrats, careerists or criminals, and freedom can only be found by telling the boss what you really think and then walking out, or pushing him out of the window of the skyscraper. In much storytelling, this is now no more than the deployment of a very common stereotype. If you want a bad guy then make him a company executive (Bell, 2008: 65 *passim*). So, when *The Muppets* film was being made in 2012, the plot revolves around an evil oil baron called Tex Richman, and the 2014 *Lego Movie* has Lord Business as the baddie. In science fiction movies, many now classic films have shadowy evil corporations as the ultimate source of the problem that needs to be overcome – the Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner*, Omnicorp in *Robocop*, Skynet in *Terminator* and the Weyland-Yutani Corporation in the *Alien* films. Our heroes are pirates and outlaws who fight against organizations (Parker, 2012) and films about work are explorations of the meaninglessness of routine, boredom and humiliation – *Clerks* (1994), *Office Space* (1999), *Waydowntown* (2000), *I Really Hate My Job* (2007), *Horrible Bosses* (2011) and many others.

I think we can add to this list of films a whole series of less publicized ways in which the same generalized scepticism is routinely deployed in endless acts of production and consumption – for example, a badge that simply says ‘Fuck Work’. I have one, and think of it as an impossible object (or at least, a hypocritical one) since it in some sense attempts to deny the very labour that went into its production. Like the mug from Stoke that I started this piece with, someone designed it and chose a colour and typeface that someone else had designed, marketed it, optimized the production schedule, pressed the button that made the machines run, packed it, designed a website, distributed it, sold it and collected the profit, or even the interest from their investment. Whilst the ‘Fuck Work’ example is rather extreme, a lot of money is clearly made through selling other examples of the counterculture of organization. C. Northcote Parkinson’s *Parkinson’s Law* (1958) was an early example of a book-length view of organizations as inane bureaucracies populated by pompous and stupid men in suits. More recent examples are books with titles like *Bureaucrats: How to Annoy Them*, the *Bluffer’s Guide to Management*, *The Little Book of Management Bollocks*, *The Little Book of Office Bollocks* and *Bullshit Bingo*. Found in a similar place in the book or gift shop might be *Mr Mean’s Guide to Management*, *The Tiny Book of Boss Jokes* or *250 Dumb Dares for the Workplace*, which is ‘guaranteed to keep the office entertained’. *The Office Kama Sutra* contains instructions for the ‘dance of a thousand sticky notes’ and suggests many ways in which offices can become sites of libidinous excess. It also has a reversible book jacket which will allow you to pretend that you are actually reading a book called *Getting What You Want at Work: Ten Steps from Fantasy to Reality*. Or you might choose ‘Voodoo Lou’s Office Voodoo Kit’ containing a corporate doll (with male and female sides), pins and ‘Executive Spellbook’. The book explains what is wrong with bosses (playing golf, eating big lunches, driving a Lexus), their assistants, the computer nerd and so on. It then proposes various voodoo remedies that will deal with them, and provides the owner with ‘your ticket to the corporate high life’. The same is probably not true of the ‘Office Profanity Kit’, containing a mini talking punchbag which swears at you when you hit it, and three stamps with the mottos – ‘This is F**CKING URGENT’, ‘Complete and Utter BULLSHIT’ and ‘I haven’t got time to read this CRAP’.

Television is another place to find examples of similar sentiments, such as the 2004/5 US reality TV show *I Hate My Job*. A similar show was aired the year before in the UK – *Office Monkey*. Each episode was a TV version of giving the boss the finger.

Offices are dull dreary places where nothing ever happens. That's why we bribed two members of offices around the country to disrupt their work places in the funniest ways possible. The winner gets a holiday, and the right to call themselves: Office Monkey.

(www.princess.uk.com/programmes/individual/recent/office.htm#)⁵

The squirming embarrassment that accompanied victory was painful to watch, but tapped into some deeply rooted assumptions about what work is, and what work does to people. Office humour is generally spiteful, a form of vengeance that punishes hypocrisy and pomposity. This has been exploited by many British situation comedies in their portrayal of figures of authority.⁶ *On The Buses* (1969–73), *Are You Being Served* (1972–83) and the Reginald Perrin shows (1976–79) all contained various supervisory or management characters whose vacuous vanity is regularly exposed (Hancock, 2008). Often, these dramas were also post-war satires of social class in an era of accelerated social mobility, particularly of the 'jobsworth' who is acting up in terms of status and authority. So, Captain Mainwaring, the bank manager in *Dad's Army* (1968–77) or the leisure centre manager Gordon Brittas in *The Brittas Empire* (1991–97) are both claiming airs and graces which they clearly do not possess. Nowhere was this better satirized than in the mock reality TV show *The Office* which ran for two series on the BBC between 2001 and 2003, and then was remade for US TV in 2005 with eight series made at the time of writing. The US show, featuring the Dunder Mifflin company, has led to a video game, board game, nodding models of the characters, T-shirts, fake Dunder Mufflin websites and parodies of motivational posters.

The other iconic anti-work satire of the last few decades has been the Dilbert cartoons by Scott Adams. Co-opted by an entire generation of management academics and trainers, Adams's syndicated strip explores the stupidities of office life through the eyes of a naive junior (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 116–118). Many episodes of *The Simpsons* picked up on similar themes concerning Homer's work at Mr Burns's power plant and the characteristics of the various professionals who work in Springfield (Rhodes, 2001; Ellis, 2008). These ideas were prefigured in Matt Groening's 1980s cartoons such as the *Work is Hell* collection (2004). Senior managers read articles titled 'How to Make the Veins in your Forehead Throb Alarmingly' in a magazine called *Lonely Tyrant*. An even more surreal portrayal of work is David Rees's *My New Filing Technique Is Unstoppable* (2004) which contains assorted employees abusing each other about their filing systems, computers that insult you in the most profane fashion, and a character called Dr Niles Fanderbiles from the Quality Perfection Department who delivers self-righteous homilies in a Chinese accent. These satirical portrayals of work can also be found in plenty of underground comics and zines, such as the sad quietness of Stephen Knowles's *Five Days Out of Seven* (2004). Celebrations of sabotage and slacking, and descriptions of alienation and boss hatred are a powerful theme, as Stephen Duncombe catalogues (1997: 79 *passim*). Less ribald, but just as powerfully, Matanle et al. have also shown how Japanese salaryman manga comics can represent popular challenges to management authority (2008).

Given its easy access at most workplaces and relative anonymity, it is hardly surprising that the Internet has become a site for the popular culture of organizing, as well as many ways to practically avoid working. The circulation of various anti-management spam mails is now a routine part of office life. Surfing during work time is a problem for organizations in itself, and various snooping technologies have been developed to prevent it, just as other counter-technologies have been developed to allow rapid movement between illicit web trivia and 'real' work on the computer. After all, if you were playing 'Whack Your Boss' you would almost certainly not want your superiors to know. This is a downloadable game that lets you kill your boss by using common office equipment.

Martin Parker

So one can enjoy the numerous ways of whacking your boss. You can smash his head to the wall repeatedly, you can squish his egg head in the drawers of your office table. There are actually twenty different types of whacking your boss.

(<http://whackyourboss.info/>)⁷

Bored with watching the blood splatter, you might go and have a look at websites and blogs like i-resign.com, worktotallysucks.com and mybossisanidiot.com. The last allows you to send a letter from the site to your boss, anonymously of course, and helpfully provides templates and examples of other people's letters. There are some particularly nice examples on the site workrant.com, which encourages obscene venting of various kinds. This, for example, from 'Killy Killkill', in IT and based in the UK.

Dear Manager

A quick question – HOW THE FUCK CAN YOU BE SO FUCKING INCOMPETENT WITHOUT ACTUALLY DYING OF IT??? And one comments, which needs to be branded across your stupid fucking face – backwards, so even a fucking mong like you can read it in the mirror – NO YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND MY FRUSTRATION BECAUSE EVERY SINGLE FUCKING FRUSTRATION I HAVE IS ENTIRELY DUE TO YOU. (. . .)

I feel better for that, thank you.

All these examples work so well precisely because the counterculture of organization is embedded into so many assumptions about what work is and what it is not. We don't need to employ a huge amount of interpretive labour to make sense with them, or to explore their assumptions. They are the equivalent of the bus shelter graffiti, a representational politics which gives power the finger. The trickier thing is to connect this sort of politics with the promises made by the betting shop window, which is what I will try to do in the next section.

Escape

Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor's book *Escape Attempts* (1976/1992) was subtitled 'the theory and practice of resistance to everyday life'. In characterizing everyday life as an 'open prison', Cohen and Taylor then go on to explore the various ways in which people cope by escaping into theatres of the imagination – through routines, distancing, fantasy, satire, inner identities as well as caravans and hobbies ('yoga, martial arts, dancing, occult, drugs, sexual workshops, discovering wild flowers, eating, boating, fishing' (1976/1992: 155)). Cohen and Taylor present an account of escape in which resistance may well not be visible at all, being perhaps a question of distancing oneself from a work role which is played 'with detachment, with irony, even cynicism' (1976/1992: 54)⁸ or a form of fantasy or identification (with a football team or film star perhaps), which begins to insulate someone from a 'paramount reality' which is degrading and damaging. If paramount reality tells us that we are no more than puppets being moved around by others then no wonder we want to become heroes in another drama. The most important point here is that the escape might be invisible, it might manifest as no more than going to see a film in which some good people beat some bad people, or a musical in which there is dancing and beauty, or the promise of a golden beach.

Nearly 30 years after Cohen and Taylor's *Escape Attempts*, Papadopoulos et al. published their *Escape Routes* (2008), a book that reframed 'paramount reality' in terms of Foucault's formulation

of the move from sovereign to versions of capillary power structured as what they call ‘postliberal aggregates’ (2008: 25). If the first book was predicated on a social phenomenology which insisted that social construction wasn’t the same as determination, then this one is predicated on a poststructuralism which assumes that structures are always leaky, incomplete and can be escaped from. Of course post-Marxists or autonomists like Papadopoulos et al. talk more about the state than Cohen and Taylor, but the message is not so different. They suggest that we can classify itineraries of escapes as being concerned with new forms of life, migration and mobility, and a precarious relation to labour which produces new forms of sociality. Their routes are often (but not always) escapes in space, prefigured by vagabonds and nomads, because ‘[e]scape is about energy, whilst discipline is about rule and labour is about static abilities’ (2008: 52).

Our interest in escape is not that it culminates in a *better* configuration of life. Rather, the concept enables us to examine the often neglected engine of transformation which occurs without a master plan and without guarantees. Escape is a means, not an end.

(Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 61)

Escape, in other words, is not the absence of politics, but an example of politics.

Cohen and Taylor are more pessimistic than Papadopoulos et al. – compare their ‘attempts’ to the latter’s ‘routes’ – but in both cases escape is a form of resistance, but often an invisible one. The etymology of resistance is a sense of standing against something. It is a stance, a positioning which makes a standpoint clear, and implies some sort of force against force, a resistance. But the etymology of escape suggests leaving one’s cloak behind, leaving your pursuer clutching at your empty clothing whilst you vanish elsewhere. This is flight, a form of mobile politics that takes us elsewhere, and could easily not even be understood to be political at all, in the sense of a politics of making statements. Yet, as James Scott suggests, there is much resistance which is documented in what he calls the ‘hidden transcript’ – ‘the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups’ (1990: xii). For Scott these ‘weapons of the weak’ include folk tales, disguises, sarcasm, the occupation of different spaces and so on (1985). Scott’s is a politics of the trickster, both in terms of what the trickster can do but also a sense in which it is often a politics that doesn’t (at first glance) seem to be political at all. Judith Halberstam’s (2011) queer take on these ideas is to explore illegibility and failure as statements of refusal and escape too. Judged by a culture that defines success in terms of production and reproduction, a refusal to play the game looks like an art of failure. I want to use this sort of work in order to understand what I see in Stoke, and what I think is a strong impulse towards escape in much of the popular culture of organization. Unlike the explicit resistance we can see in many of the oppositional examples above which stand against work, the boss, the organization and so on, this seems to me to be a form of politics that shows itself through departure. In that sense, the promise of something else is predicated on an acknowledgement that the present doesn’t work, and going absent is a reasonable response.

Consider this example. In May 2004, the English theme park Alton Towers put up a website titled ihatework.co.uk which encouraged employees of other organizations to ‘escape the workplace rat-race’ by printing off a coupon for a cheap day out. The clear implication of the site was that you might pretend to be ill that day, and this provoked a small media storm with the Confederation of British Industries claiming that Alton Towers was acting irresponsibly in encouraging unauthorized absences. The PR people from the theme park of course denied this was the case, but one might wonder how tolerant the park management might be if other organizations encouraged their own employees to take time off work and go and have some fun.

Indeed, much popular culture that addresses work does trade on precisely these senses of escape from the ‘open prison’ as the hook for selling whatever is being sold. For example, an advert for a discount airline suggested that you could ‘Tell the boss to stick it . . . where the sun don’t shine’ because the holiday is largely made meaningful as a way of escaping from the times and places of work. Or a promotion for Xmas parties is called ‘P45’ (the UK tax form you get when leaving, or being sacked from, work), ‘because you never liked your boss anyway’. Even the advertising for a chocolate bar can be articulated in terms of what it promises – ‘Have a break. Have a Kit Kat’ – because having a break from work is part of the routine of work itself. Almost any leisure-related product can make a useful reference to the repressive structure of the working week, such as the restaurant chain ‘TGI Friday’ (Thank God It’s . . .), the TV show ‘TFI Friday’ or the hundred and one pop songs that have Friday on their mind, and are waiting for the weekend when we can dance, party, escape or be together with the one we love (Rhodes, 2007). In the Animals’ 1965 song ‘We Gotta Get Out of this Place’, the singer begins by watching his father in bed, tired and hair greying, because he’s been working and slaving his life away. Getting out is the best thing you can ever do.

If we turn back to my image of Stoke which I started this chapter with, then that impulse to escape is written on the shop windows, on the billboards and in the discarded lottery scratchcard on the pavement. It is precisely this impulse that so much of popular culture employs to ‘magically resolve’ the problems of the present (Cohen, 1972). I assume that Cohen uses the word ‘magically’ here because there is no obvious mechanism that might allow such a resolution to take place. There is no legible rebellion, no cock and balls sprayed on a poster, no party politics, no rocks being thrown at the police or shop windows being smashed. Instead there is a desire for exodus, to be somewhere else, doing something else. So the promises in the betting shop window, massage parlour, travel agent and off-licence are of escape from now through the mechanisms of luck, sex, aeroplanes and alcohol. It might not only be the work organization that needs to be escaped from, because there are possibilities for misery in unemployment and human relationships too, but there are enough references to relaxing, treating yourself, deserving a break, Friday night and the weekend to understand that the articulation of this escape is at least partly against work.

There are other escapes here too – those of popular entertainment, as suggested in Richard Dyer’s (1977/1993) essay on musicals. He uses a series of structural oppositions in order to illustrate the sort of politics he sees in ‘entertainment’, a category almost intrinsically defined as trivial.

| <i>Social tension/inadequacy/absence</i> | <i>Utopian solution</i> |
|--|-------------------------|
| Scarcity, inequality | Abundance |
| Exhaustion | Energy |
| Dreariness | Intensity |
| Manipulation | Honesty |
| Fragmentation | Community |

(Adapted from Dyer, 1993: 278–279)

In his examples for the first column he very often mentions work or the implications of work – ‘unequal distribution of wealth . . . work as a grind, alienated labour . . . monotony, predictability, instrumentality of the daily round . . . advertising . . . job mobility’. So, he argues, what entertainment does is to address the issues in column one and ‘solve’ them in column two.

To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience. Yet to do this, to draw attention to the gap between what is and what could be, is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire. What musicals have to do, then (not through any conspiratorial intent, but because it is always easier to take the line of least resistance, i.e., to fit with prevailing norms), is to work through these contradictions at all levels in such a way as to ‘manage’ them, to make them seem to disappear.

(Dyer, 1993: 279)

So much of what we find on the billboards in Stoke dramatizes just this sort of gap, between the dull or oppressive present, and the drama of an alluring woman in a red dress with perfect makeup, or the cool gaze of a spy, superhero or pirate. Even the posters advertising the local football team seem airbrushed, with bronzed demi-gods in taut poses, and wearing brightly coloured shirts sponsored by an online betting company. As they gaze at us, we might dream of such lives, of a kind of social mobility that would take us from here to there, to a life of energy and intensity, to become someone who was respected and popular, and who could afford a big house and a shiny car.

Whether oppositional or utopian, it seems to me that the politics of popular culture is to question work, organization and management. It can do this through explicit satire, the wit of the trickster, or through a form of imagination which takes us elsewhere. This elsewhere, which Dyer sees as utopian, is a criticism of the present through its very existence, almost as if the more that the everyday world becomes a place of promises, the more obvious it is that those promises will never be fulfilled. As the National Lottery hailed its subjects – ‘It Could Be You!’ It could, but it won’t.

Somewhere, else

Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics to the 1957 musical *West Side Story* play with a particular notion of escape, a spatial one which is outside the experience of the poor who lived in the upper west side of New York in the 1940s. In the song ‘Somewhere’, with soaring strings behind, his characters sing of having time together, time to look and time to care, of a new way of living. It is a powerful and beautiful cry for a sort of utopia from mean streets in which violence seems to trump love. In this chapter, I have tried to conjoin escape and resistance in the context of the popular culture of organizing. In using the term popular here, I am trading on the idea that this is a form of culture that has historically been ignored by the university, and is still largely ignored by the business school. This aspect of popular culture I argue has a politics that is in general opposition to a ‘culture of organizing’ which celebrates management and the market and can be found in the business school and other sites where the ideologies of capitalism are reproduced. I think that the counterculture manifests itself in two different strategies. Sometimes its complaints are voiced loudly, in graffiti on a bus stop, caricatures of evil bosses or a mug that tells you that hard work is pointless. At other times, and perhaps more often, the strategy is to withdraw, to imagine, to hope that promises can come true because the present is too grey to bear. So when Cohen and Taylor, criminologists remember, describe their escape attempts as attempts to go ‘over the wall’ (1992: 187), we get a nice sense of what the possibilities for escape might be, and an echo of other outsiders, vagabonds and outlaws (Becker, 1963; Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 42 *passim*; Parker, 2012).

So far so good, but let’s reflect on what this sort of argument does to ideas about cultural politics of organization. For a start, most of my reference points have been unapologetically nostalgic – three works from the high point of leftist optimism in British social science from

1972, 1976 and 1977. There is a sense in all these works that the struggle for hegemony could be aided by taking these cultural resources seriously. They assume that it is possible to understand a popular consciousness which is otherwise dismissed as mere entertainment, the product of culture industries which stupefy with bread and circuses (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/2002). Though it is easy enough to sniffily dismiss all this as a romanticism of trash, I value this 1970s sense in which a politics can then be found in the trivial, in comic books and graffiti, as well as in musicals and betting shops. It echoes Halberstam's fascination for the 'silly' archives – animated film in her case – as being examples of 'low theory' (2011: 15). However, one of the problems is that such a 'culturalist' politics (hers included) runs the risk of ignoring the ways that the market produces and exploits desires for rebellion and escape, and then sells them back to us. Stories of surveillance and co-optation are common nowadays (Heath and Potter, 2004; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006) and cultural politics more timid as a result. People pay money to place a bet or buy a lottery ticket, and their escape attempts seem to merely result in a move from one courtyard of the open prison to another. Cohen and Taylor are well aware of this problem: 'to say that everything can be an escape is as unhelpful as it is to assert that there is no need to look for escapes, that life offers everything' (1992: 155). Or, to use the same equation, if we call everything politics, then perhaps it becomes harder to identify a politics that makes a difference, a politics that changes things, rather than merely leaves its graffiti on the structures of the powerful, or distracts us from the iron cage.

Perhaps, but this is to assume that we already know what 'politics' looks like, which is a general problem for this entire volume. I have a simple suggestion for such difficulties of definition which end as counsels of despair. We could add some of the contingency of post-millennial poststructuralism to these 1970s cultural studies arguments, and simply assert that to decide what counts as political in advance is already to narrow the possibilities of action. We cannot know, here and now, what graffiti might do, or what effects withdrawal might have. 'The art of escape is the art of constructing an indeterminate form of energy from the encounter and interference with a regime of control' (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 52). This, I think, is similar to what Scott calls 'infrapolitics . . . a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name' (1990: 19). To put it another way, to decide what is 'political' is itself a political moment, and the sorts of decisions we make will show us the possibilities of the world in different ways.⁹ If we are to understand Scott's 'weapons of the weak' we cannot use the criteria established by the state, the town hall, the university or the political party (Scott, 1985, 1998). Then, instead of seeing Stoke as a place of despair and defeat, a place of empty promises and futile gestures, we might see it as a site in which cultural political struggle against hegemonic ideas about work and organization are written on bus stops and shop windows, as well as glittering on the early morning pavement.

Notes

- 1 Because this chapter is an attempt to pull together a number of arguments made in different places, parts of it have been shamelessly plagiarized from Parker 2006, 2007, 2012 and 2014, with no apologies to the author. Thanks to the editors for their comments.
- 2 And, since Subways are normally more resilient than rats after a nuclear apocalypse, this tells you something about Stoke's economy.
- 3 Not just class, though this does seem to have been the most important organizing concept, but also gender, race and ethnicity too.
- 4 I'm not sure that culture is a particularly complex concept. Rather, its wide application results in it being a word with many different antonyms, prefixes and suffixes which result in it being a family of inflected terms rather than a single word.
- 5 This site was accessed some time in 2004, but seems to have disappeared.

- 6 Apologies for the ethnocentricity of the following examples. Popular culture of the TV variety is rarely genuinely global.
- 7 These websites were accessed in November 2011.
- 8 See, for another version of such detachment, Herman Melville's figure of Bartleby (Beverungen and Dunne, 2007).
- 9 The same goes for ethics too, as many of the chapters in this volume show. To decide in advance what is ethics is to close down what ethics might become. Perhaps an 'infraethics' might parallel my arguments about politics here, an ethics that begins with weakness and invisibility, and not heroic gestures.

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