



# **Notework**

**The Newsletter of the Standing Conference  
on Organizational Symbolism**

**November 2000 issue**



## Editorial

### Jo Brewis

Welcome to the November 2000 issue of *Notework*, which boasts a very unseasonal sunflower on the front and the usual assortment of strangeness in its contents ...

If you missed SCOS 2000 at the Hotel Titania in Athens, you definitely missed out, as the old cliché has it. We managed to survive the Balkan heatwave, which was at its height when we were there (average temperature a staggering 43°C), by virtue of excellent air con, lots of water and only venturing out at night like a bunch of academic vampires. The range of papers was exciting and inspiring and the hotel looked after us extremely well. The events – a reception in the Titania's beautiful rooftop bar, a boat trip, a Greek dancing night and the gala dinner – all went off with the usual SCOS bang. We must also say a massive thank you to Costas Dimitriadis and his team at StudyNet Hellas, especially Yiotta and Nansi - we couldn't have done any of it without their local expertise, unflagging cheerfulness and willingness to work excessively long hours. Sam Arnfeld's review of the conference is included in this issue. **Also please note the inclusion of the call for papers for SCOS 2001, which will be held at Trinity College, Dublin, from the 30th June to the 4<sup>th</sup> July next year, and is themed Organization(s), Institutions and Violence.**

What else? Well there's the regular Notes from the Chair as well as Executive Board minutes from the conference meeting in Athens in July, a review essay focusing on the new edition of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Intellectual IMPOSTURES: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (Profile, 1999) by Adrian Carr, information on a recent arts policy and management conference from Ruth Bereson, a review of the British Academy of Management 2000 conference by Robyn Thomas and a report on the American Academy of Management 2000 conference from Julie Wolfram Cox.

I'd also like to remind you all about our web site, at <http://www.scos.org>, particularly because **everyone** needs to (re)join SCOS, **unless** you (a) have joined online; (b) have sent the hard copy form from a past *Notework* to Marion Little at the University of Sunderland; or (c) attended the Athens conference, in which case Dave Richards has added you to the list of members (thanks Dave!). The form appears again in this issue, or you can use the online facility which can be accessed via the web page.

**Please also note that anyone who has attended any of the past conferences, excluding Athens 2000, still needs to join SCOS. This is because we now need to separate actual members from those on our mailing list for the purposes, for example, of voting in forthcoming Board or Chair elections.**

And, as ever, please do continue to pass copies of *Notework*, and/ or our web site address, on to friends and colleagues who might be interested in SCOS activities.

In fact the above comes as a timely reminder, because the publication format of *Notework* is changing. As always, this issue will be available in hard copy and soft copy (on the web), and that will continue to be the case for all future November issues of *Notework*. However our May edition (the pre-conference issue) will in future and for reasons of economy only be available on the web site. So in order to keep up with SCOS activities, you need to access the web site, join online (if you haven't already done so) and thereby obtain a membership id number and password so that you can bypass the site's firewall and access all future May issues of *Notework* (as well as lots of other unmissable SCOS stuff!). I will be announcing the online publication of the May issues via the <scos@mailbase.ac.uk> list so it is worth joining this list server if you haven't already. To join (you may also want to pass this information on to other people), please send the following message to mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk:

join scos first name last name

so I would send the message

join SCOS Jo Brewis

**NB** leave the "Subject" field in your message blank

Many thanks as always to all our contributors – and **please** keep the material coming! My contact details are shown overleaf, and the deadline for the next issue is **March 15<sup>th</sup> 2001**.

May the road rise with you ...

Jo

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# Notes from the Chair



*Stephen Linstead*

The searing heat of Athens in July seems far away today on a chilly November day in the North-East of England. But reinvigorated by a conference experience catalysed by Costas Dimitriadis and Yiota Vlacou and a superb set of social events SCOS has moved on despite the climate changes in the Northern Hemisphere, the rail network in the UK grinding to a halt, and widespread flooding. We have restructured the board to make it more effective, and new members will join us fully in their new roles at the conference in Dublin. We now also have regional representatives, who will take over formally in Dublin but are already eager to promote SCOS and receive ideas. As we confirm who these are we will post them to the website which will get a spring clean in the New Year.

Plans are well under way for the conference in Dublin, and the board will be meeting there in November to progress these. The conference theme is one we expect to be popular, and should also appeal to those of you who are planning to attend the *Critical Management Studies Conference* in Manchester. Also, the journal *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* is very close to being able to confirm a new editorial team and some exciting developments for 2002 - but these will be revealed in the next issue.

I'll be standing down as Chair at Dublin, so there will be a need to appoint a new Chair. However, from March 1st I'll be taking up the Chair of Management at the University of Essex, so I'm sure I'll have plenty to keep me occupied. Have a great New Year.

# Executive Board Meeting

## Titania Hotel, Athens, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2000

### (Very) edited highlights

#### Leading the way through the murky mire of Board drivel: Peter Case

We talked about

#### Treasurer's report

As there have been no significant transactions since the Manchester meeting in May 2000, formal accounts will not be presented until the November Board. Finances, however, are healthy.

#### Membership issues

*Notework*: 742 copies of *Notework*, May 2000 issue, were mailed in June to people currently on the SCOS database

*Membership*: Since the last Board meeting in May there have been another 34 on-line registrations, making a total of 117.

A further 3 people confirmed membership by using the form in *Notework*, making a total of 5 'newsletter' registrations.

As at 4th July 2000, there were 750 individuals on the database, comprising:

- 117 members registered on-line
- 5 members registered through *Notework*
- 116 names from the Academy of Management list
- 512 others.

#### Notework

The key issue here was whether a postal version of *Notework* should continue in view of the fact that an electronic version is now being produced alongside the hard copy and the costs associated with producing a hard copy version twice a year (around £800 per issue). We decided that (1) the November issue will continue to be produced in both electronic and hard copy format, both containing the call for papers for the following year's conference, and (2) the May issue would be produced in electronic form only.

Jo Brewis is also to contact key academic publishers offering them the chance to include flyers in future hard copy issues of *Notework*, for a fee of £150.

## **Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies**

Here we focused on editorial succession, brainstorming potential successors to Barbara Czarniawska and Brian Rusted and drawing up a list of possible candidates for consideration.

## **Restructuring of the SCOS Board of Management**

Peter Case distributed copies of a revised paper on the restructuring of the Board, as agreed at the Manchester meeting. This was then presented to members at the subsequent AGM.

## **Elections**

Peter Case and Simon Lilley are to stand down as Board Secretary/ Elections Officer and Treasurer respectively. In view of the restructuring recommendations, four Board Member posts will therefore need to be filled in the autumn. These are: Treasurer, Meetings Secretary, Board Secretary and Elections Officer. A call for nominations was later circulated electronically to SCOS members and closed on the 8<sup>th</sup> October.

Steve Linstead's period of tenure as Chair is due to end next summer. In light of the recommendation that the Board nominate a Chair-elect in order to ensure an appropriate 'hand-over' period, it is important that suitable candidates for the post are identified. Steve generously offered to extend his period of office should it prove difficult for the Board to find a candidate to take over by summer 2001.

## **Dublin 2001**

John Bergin reported that preparations for the Dublin conference were in hand. He discussed some of the themes that would inform the conference: a human rights angle on various institutions with appropriate key note speakers, panels concerned with the legal system, theology, medicine, organisational violence and so forth. The final version of the call for papers can be found in this issue of Notework.

## **Budapest 2002**

Simon Lilley reported that Tom Owen of ISBS (the conference venue), a former advertising executive and head of their marketing department, had agreed to act as a local organiser for SCOS 2002. Tom will also be attending the Dublin conference in order to gain some experience of the SCOS ethos and conference expectations.

Simon has been thinking of some possible social events and venues - dinner on the Danube, evening at a gypsy restaurant, etc. - and Peter Case reported that he had been liaising with the experimental theatre group 'Dah' (based in Belgrade), with a view to their performing at the conference.

## **SCOS incorporation**

Jo Brewis reported on research conducted into the possible incorporation of SCOS. In view of the complexity and tax implications of incorporation, we decided that SCOS should remain unincorporated for the time being.

## The future of SCOS

We discussed this at some length, especially the medium-to-long-term prospects for SCOS and its capacity for sustaining a major international conference annually. Attendance at the Athens conference was relatively disappointing - a significant number of last-minute cancellations meant that the target number of 100 delegates had not been met. The shortfall in numbers this year was due in part to (a) the reduction in value of the Australian dollar (which resulted in many colleagues from the Antipodes being unable to attend), and (b) the late issuing of invoices, which resulted in SCOS being out of step with the UK budget cycle.

According to Steve Linstead, prospects were not good in the medium term as far as the UK is concerned. Student recruitment is likely to fall because of the introduction of fees and research budgets are being tightened significantly. These factors result in there being a great deal of competition for available conference expenditure both internally, between colleagues, and externally, between alternative conferences.

CMS and EGOS advertise their conferences two years in advance. The question was raised as to whether SCOS should be matching these organisations or, perhaps, considering a conference slot later in the year (early September, for example). SCOS might also think about moving to a two-year conference cycle, rather than persist with an annual event. Steve Linstead and Jo Brewis tabled the more radical idea of running SCOS down - perhaps terminating its existence after Budapest 2002, should problems persist and conference numbers continue to decline.

The Board decided to keep these issues under review and discuss the matter further at the November Board.

## ***SCOS membership form ... remember, it's free to join!***

**Please note:** *Everyone* who wishes to be a member of SCOS, and has not yet (re)joined either online or via the following form, whether they have attended past conferences or not (up to and including Edinburgh 1999, but **excluding** Athens 2000), still needs to join. This will allow us, for instance, to identify those entitled to vote in forthcoming Chair or Board elections. The form below is intended for use by those who do not have Internet access. If you do have access, please join online at <http://www.scos.org>. Please also note that you have the right to be removed from the membership list at any time. To remove your name, please mail David Richards at [david.richards@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:david.richards@sunderland.ac.uk), or write to him at the address given for Marion Little below.

The form should be returned to:

**Marion Little - SCOS  
Sunderland Business School  
University of Sunderland  
St. Peter's Campus  
St. Peter's Way  
Sunderland  
Tyne and Wear SR6 0DD  
UK  
Fax.: +44 191 515 3131**

Please also feel free to copy the form and pass it on to interested colleagues.

**NAME INCLUDING TITLE:**

**INSTITUTIONAL ADDRESS (IF APPLICABLE):**

**HOME ADDRESS (OPTIONAL):**

**FAX NUMBER/ S:**

**E-MAIL ADDRESS/ ES:**

**ARE YOU A MEMBER OF:  
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT? YES/ NO  
THE BRITISH ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT? YES/ NO  
EGOS? YES/ NO**

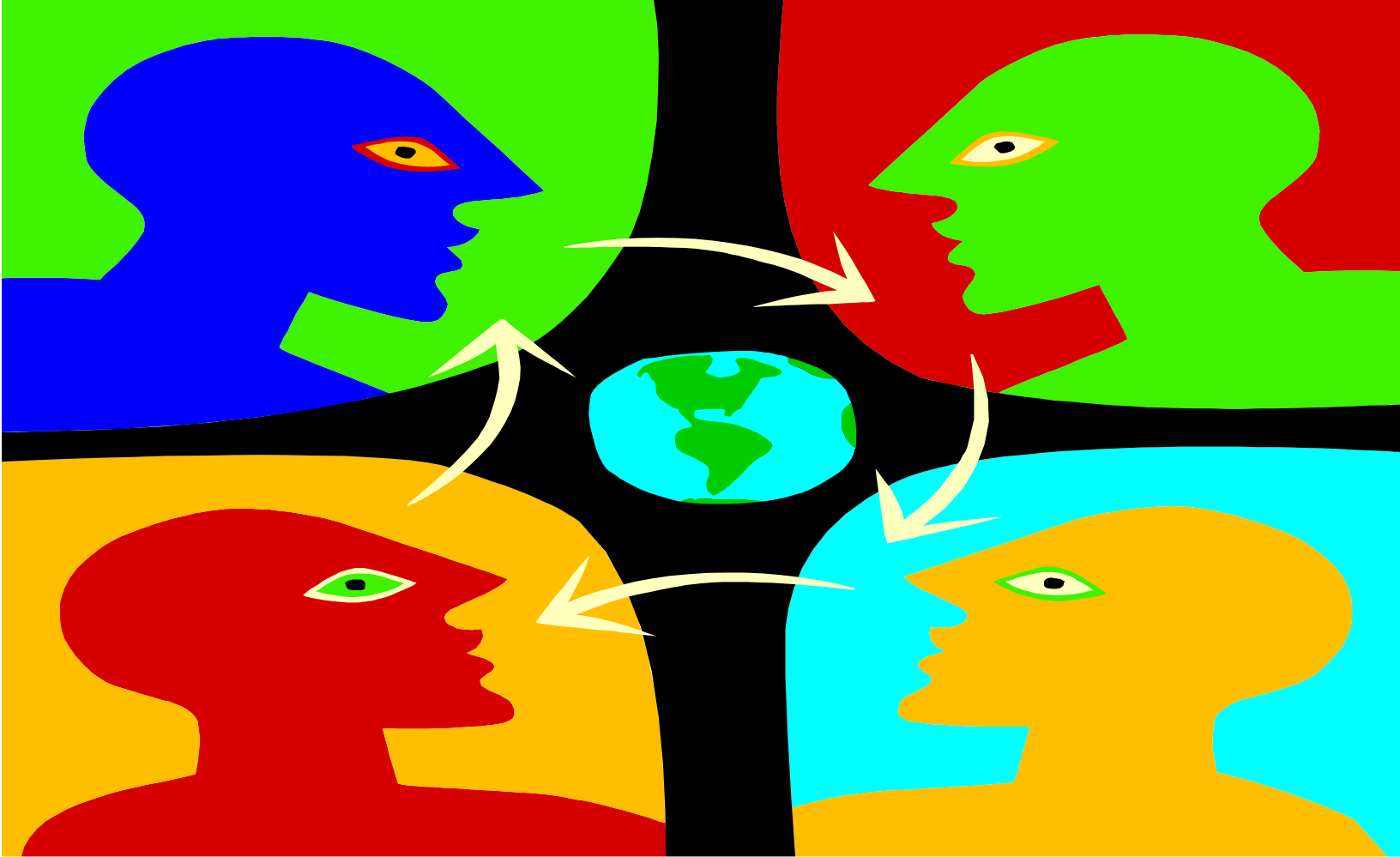
**WHICH E-MAIL DISTRIBUTION LISTS DO YOU BELONG TO? (EG, SCOS, ORGCULT, CRITICAL-MANAGEMENT ETC.)**

**PLEASE SEND ME DETAILS OF HOW SUBSCRIBE TO *STUDIES IN CULTURES, ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETIES*: YES/ NO**

**PLEASE ENROL ME AS A MEMBER OF SCOS AND SEND ME REGULAR INFORMATION ABOUT SCOS ACTIVITIES. I UNDERSTAND I WILL HAVE TO PAY NO CHARGE.**

**WE MAY OCCASIONALLY USE THESE DETAILS TO SEND YOU INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER RELATED PRODUCTS, PUBLICATIONS, EVENTS OR SERVICES THAT WE THINK YOU MAY BE INTERESTED IN. IF YOU *DO NOT* WISH TO RECEIVE THIS INFORMATION PLEASE CHECK (  ) THE BOX BELOW.**





# Conference review section

## (18th) SCOS 2000 - Athens: an inebriated review



In explanation of the above title I wish to stress that I am not at the present time actually intoxicated, although the idea to write a paper about my first conference experience was certainly one of those flashes of inspiration which seemed 'a jolly good idea' whilst enjoying a 'just-another-pint-before-I-turn-in' session in the rooftop bar of the Hotel Titania, I was compelled to write, not only by the seductive but by Steve Linstead's moving account of what means to him both past and present at the end of Annual General Meeting. He was asked if he could what the purpose and direction of the (almost twenty Conference on Organizational Symbolism could being. His answers echoed my own personal perceptions of SCOS and the Athens conference, like to share with you here.



Athens<sup>1</sup>. However, powers of lager, SCOS meant/ the final day's perhaps outline year old) Standing now be defined as experiences and some of which I'd

The following few sentences will be all too familiar to any reader who has ever embarked on the roller-coaster ride commonly referred to as the 'Doctoral Project'. I use this metaphor not only to elucidate images of highs and lows but slightly different sense. When you pay your money and get on the tracks appear to stretch out in front of you, definite and clear cut, and somewhat scary). They are spiralling inexorably towards a finite you can, at this point, still actually see and, of course, you are other equally excited souls along for the ride. But once you start find it becomes impossible to retain any kind of perspective either forward and you are thrown into introspective isolation as you cling seemingly out of control, unable to get off without doing yourself damage, and oblivious to anyone else who might be on the ride too! unbearably awful - and there are times when I do feel like this - Aargh - but that's not what I'd like to talk about here. I'd like to talk about the exhilaration and thrill that can be experienced when you're hurtling through space and you realise that there **are** other people on the ride and what's more there's a whole crowd of people cheering and waving from the end of the line.



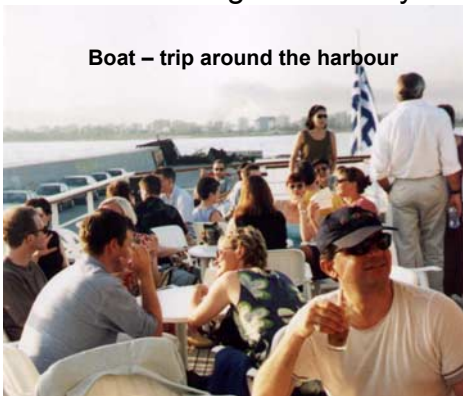
deliberately also in a thing, the (albeit twisted end - which surrounded by moving you backward or on for dear life, enormous All this sounds preparing to present

<sup>1</sup> Although I have to admit to somewhat hopefully attempting to write this piece at 3.40 am after the Gala Dinner - and of course not being able to decipher a single word of it when I woke up with my laptop still humming away beside me five hours later!

I'm sure that no-one will be surprised by the neurotic anxiety ridden state my family had existed in for the week prior to my arrival in Athens. Here I was, 9 months into my PhD, presenting my first paper at an international conference. I must be mad. Before I left, my Dad asked me what SCOS stood for. When I duly explained, he burst into guffaws of laughter asking if road signs constituted 'organizational symbols'<sup>2</sup>. I tried to explain that "Well, yes, superficially they are really" but needless to say I was not about to gain the upper hand in a discussion with my father for the first time in my life... But nonetheless, the seed was sown - what if my ideas really ARE hilarious and mad?

What if I lost my notes? What if I were bombarded with unanswerable questions? What if no-one came to my session? Or worse still what if people DID??!! Despite constant reassurances from my supervisor Jo Brewis, I was alone with these thoughts and a miniature bottle of airline Chardonnay (**ed.** – are you sure it was only the one, Sam???) as I made the no-going-back trip to Greece.

Still fuelled by adrenalin and riddled with doubt I found out how to work the TV, unpacked my toothbrush, burst into tears and got changed for dinner. The sight that greeted me as I arrived at the rooftop reception was astounding - not only for its magnificent views across Athens to the



Boat – trip around the harbour

Acropolis - but because there were a load of 'normal' looking casually dressed people getting ready to have a party! Where were all the pompous, archaic and eminent<sup>3</sup> professors that I was convinced I would be devoured by? Perhaps they were cleverly disguised and would pounce as soon as someone asked me what my research interests were. Not so! The dreaded question came and went, and to my astonishment, people seemed to understand what I was



talking about, none of them laughed, nobody talked about road signs and some of them actually **agreed** with me. Even those who didn't were incredibly supportive and constructive in their criticism. I felt the fear and anxiety melt away as we sat and chatted up there on the roof. Relief is not really the word to describe it, as I was to tell people in my paper the next day, feelings about organizations (including academic conferences) are something that you can't articulate and hope to capture in an authentic way. Which of course neatly negates the purpose of this article!

Anyway, theoretical difficulties securely brushed under the carpet, I was, as Steve Linstead put it, 'blown away' by the warmth and the support at this conference. The ideas discussed in and out of the sessions were about issues that could indeed be labelled 'mad' or at least 'bizarre', but I was struck by the way in which such innovative and creative ponderings were as easily discussed over papers, over dinner or in (under?) the bar over beer. As easily and engagingly as the failed English World Cup bid, the hotel food, Jo being on the BBC news, or our hangovers. A conversational and non-judgemental air permeated throughout - which is definitely not to suggest a kind of navel gazing 'fluffy bunny' absence of criticism by any means. On the contrary, I felt ready - strong enough - to welcome critique and knew that this was also a safe environment for me to voice my fears and existential angst, far from the politics and stifling convention which characterise so much of academic life, as I am coming to learn!

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<sup>2</sup> To provide some familial context at this point, my father told my inquisitive 8 year old son that PhD's were what people did when they couldn't be bothered to get a real job.... (Which of course we all know is true!)

<sup>3</sup> I hasten to add that the use of this word in no way suggests the lack of eminence in the assembled company!

SCOS for me represents the epitome of philosophical contemplation and academic life. A forum in which it is safe to have a voice, in which students are not sidelined or marginalised, in which the ramblings of a seemingly insane mind can be tamed and developed. This may sound a little naïve, but I was also surprised and delighted by the realisation that these people were just like **me** - professors, doctors, students - all the wonderful people I met in Athens were 'normal' in the sense that they (in some cases, mentioning no names of course...) drank too much, smoked too much, and worried too much! But perhaps, most importantly for me (being the only person in my family to hold a degree, and living and working in a 'deprived' inner city) was the chance to be among like-minded individuals who encouraged and pushed the boundaries of my thinking, rather than being discomfited by it.

And so - having never written anything within a word limit **ever** as Jo will tell you - I will hastily conclude by trying to answer the question that was posed to Steve at the AGM through my own lens. For me, the value of SCOS is precisely in its refusal to prescribe purpose and direction, other than that which its members bring to it - and I heard enough comments in Athens about conferences 'not all being like this' to realize that SCOS is unusual and unique. I feel that its continued existence as a **Supportive Company of Organizational Scholars** is vital to the development of us 'green' grass-roots academics as we deal with the existential, theoretical and methodological corkscrews and loops of the roller-coaster.



## And if that's tickled your fancy ...

**The Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism  
SCOS XIX  
June 30th – July 4th 2001**

Trinity College  
The University of Dublin  
Dublin, Ireland

### **ORGANIZATION(S), INSTITUTIONS AND VIOLENCE**

#### **Call for Contributions**

Organizations are often violent places, or sites of violence. To organize may be understood as to do violence to a natural state of affairs by imposing order upon it. Violence is woven deeply into both the practice of organizing and our experience of organization. Language inscribes violence into our ways of thinking about and representing experiential reality, even moulding consciousness itself. Nation states legitimate violence, and are often born out of violence. Religions may similarly arise from violence, such as Christianity's crucified God, and may even endorse sectarian violence. Some organizations are created to operate through violence; others are created to manage the consequences of violence. Violence may be done to others, to the natural world, to objects or even to ideas. Violence may take many forms – interpersonal, extremely physical, sexual, intimidatory, psychological, intense, infrequent, impulsive, sustained, planned, ritualized, official, encultured, verbal, cognitive, emotional, linguistic, visual and representational among them.

SCOS XIX invites empirical or theoretical contributions addressing aspects of violence formally and informally organized, institutionalized violence and institutions and organizations which embody or deal with violence. Such contributions may include but are not limited to:

Epistemic violence – violence exercised through knowledge regimes and epistemological suppression of the other  
Violence in language  
The violence of colonialism and its aftermath  
Violence in globalization processes  
Violence in human resource practices  
Violence in industrial relations  
Conflict  
Discipline  
Intellectual disciplinary practices  
Violence in personal and organizational change  
Resistance  
Bullying and harassment  
Victimisation  
Interpersonal violence  
Punishment  
Reprisal  
Football and sporting violence  
Violent institutions  
Violent crime and responses to it  
Violence in caring and service industries  
Managing the peace dividend  
Negotiating cessations of violence  
Institutionalised violence  
Revolution  
Pacifism  
Religious violence  
Gender dimensions of violence  
Violent therapies  
Fear  
Torture and cruelty  
War  
Death  
The assault on the peasantry  
Slavery and debt-bondage  
Violence of exclusion  
Sabotage and violence against institutions and organizations

### **Open stream**

As in previous years, contributions which may not fit the conference theme but which are related to the interests of SCOS – for example, transdisciplinary studies, organizational culture, organizational symbolism, organizational anthropology, aesthetics, change and change processes, health sector studies, postmodernism and new theoretical developments, qualitative and interpretative methodologies including ethnography, industrial relations, psychoanalytic approaches, globalisation and virtuality – are invited.

We welcome suggestions for workshops, performances or similar events as well as traditional paper presentations. Outlines of proposed workshops should be not less than the length of a paper abstract and should clearly indicated the resources required, number of participants accommodated, time required, the approach to be taken, and the objectives of the session.

Abstracts of 500 words should be submitted by December 1st, 2000 to:

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Email: J.P.Bergin@wlv.ac.uk



## **The main event**

# **American Academy of Management Conference, Toronto 2000**

## **Julie Wolfram Cox**

I regard the American Academy of Management meeting as the main event. This is for several reasons: its size, its ability to dominate my calendar year, its standing (a paper there once helped me to get a job), and also the simple fact that I haven't been to too many other large conferences, except as a conference spouse. It was partly in this latter capacity that I visited Toronto in June 2000, about six weeks before the main event. Staying at the Sheraton (later to become an Academy hotel), I had ferried children between the hotel pool and the coffee shop, checked out every item on the Kids' Menu and every Beanie Baby shop in Toronto's underground tunnels, tried to go to a cocktail party with children and Gameboys in tow, and climbed aboard trains and buses counting all the things that differed between Canada and Australia. By the time I arrived back in August, hoping that the Sheraton's staff would not remember me as the mother of the small child who ran wet and naked through the hotel a few weeks earlier (they didn't), I knew my way to the ATM, knew that the hotel had a rather over-sensitive fire detection system, was able to have a bath without the added decoration of rubber ducks and, as usual, started off with good intentions to go to lots of sessions and to visit the gym every morning. I made it to the gym only once, but did fare better at the sessions.

As those who have ventured to "The Academy" will know, the task of sorting out what is on and where is quite daunting. This, of course, applies both to the sessions and to the social functions, many of which now appear in the conference programme and on the Academy of Management website. Toronto was

the fourth time that I had been to the Academy, and I had spent a good deal of time on the plane going through the programme, which seems to get more complicated every year. This year the programme was classified by day, stream, author, location, number (although the numbers seemed to have an internal logic that was rather non-linear), and strange little symbols that signified whether or not a session was, for example, related to the conference theme (time) or was of “international interest”, whatever that means. Programme notes in hand, I was well-equipped to hot foot it between the Sheraton, Hilton and Royal York hotels, catch up with friends, listen to people whose work I had read or should have read, buy lots of books and clothes, go out to every party to which I or anyone I knew had been invited (plus a few more), get to the Man Ray exhibition, try a few restaurants, and start to plan for next year. It was easy to feel exhausted already.

After having particularly dreadful jetlag in Chicago last year (which meant that I was nodding off at 2 pm but wide awake for post-party outings), I arrived in Toronto with a day to spare and also took an extra day's leave at the end. This somehow implies that the conference has a definite start and finish, but it doesn't. It just swells over the weekend, and then slowly subsides after the Presidential lunch, which was, from others' accounts, rather dramatic this year. Within a few hours of my arrival, management-looking people wearing chinos and carrying small but sensible soft bags with room for their laptops seemed to arrive from everywhere. There was a huge increase in the rate of welcoming hugs in the Sheraton lobby, and a quiet coffee in the lobby coffee bar was a physical impossibility. It was on.

Now while there are many who sneer at the lack of sincerity in an Academy welcoming hug (which usually involves hanging on for dear life for a full two seconds, followed by a brief account of one's major life events since the last Academy, followed by a vague plan to meet up at a session/ party/ bar before seeing someone else and moving to the next hug or towards the elevator), I must admit that it is fun. I know it is pretty silly to get excited at seeing my office neighbour at the Academy, but I do. Having a paper accepted in the main event means that I am likely to be funded to go to the conference but, once there, the difference between the main programme and pre-conference activities seems to blur. This may, of course, have something to do with the start of the evening parties and a lot to do with the particular sessions I attended, but the supposed formality of the main programmes and informality of the pre-conference sessions seems to have become less noticeable, and, in some cases, inverted. What remains unchanged for me is an astonishment at the sheer size of it all, at the complexity of the programme, at the number of people sustained, the number of books published, at the wealth of some of the schools that host such generous parties, and at the extraordinary effort and transformations of graduate students in search of jobs. These students could be seen selling their wares in earnest via self-presentational discussions in dedicated booths or (relatively) quiet corners of the hotel lobby and restaurants. They are also likely to be the best-dressed and best-groomed people at the Academy, and are not very amenable to the conference hug. When I see them I am always very grateful to be employed, and try hard not to compare academic salaries between Australian and American institutions.

After a few days of being holed up in windowless conference rooms, and walking (yet again) between the Sheraton and the Royal York, other attractions started to beckon. At my first Academy, this was not such a problem (Miami in August with morning sickness was not all that attractive). At my second (San Diego), there was, from memory, an exhibition of published comics, and last year there was the American Sociological Association. This year there was Caribana, which was a Caribbean cultural festival marked by lots of events and streetlife, and by a dress code that did not include chinos. On the Friday night, a group of us walked down to one of the concert areas and had a rather quiet meal. A few days later, the Delta Chelsea hotel was home not only to Academy delegates, but also to a (sometimes violent) street party that extended through the hotel's corridors and on to its balconies. By Monday morning I found one of my colleagues shaking in the lobby of the Sheraton. She was trying to recover from a sleepless night and had just removed herself from the Delta Chelsea to the more genteel Royal York in order to avoid having to walk past the scene-of-a-crime in the lobby of her previous hotel.

The Academy is a place where several of my worlds collide. It's increasingly international and receptive to positions outside the mainstream. While its timing means that Australians need to try to disregard the start of summer in order to submit papers (when everyone else is thinking of the beach) and to take off three weeks into the second semester, it is the main event. Having a paper accepted at the Academy is a source of happiness. Being there is another. And you know you've stayed too long when the next conference starts to arrive.

Julie works at Monash University, Australia

## **BAM? Never again!**

# **British Academy of Management Conference, Edinburgh 2000**

## **Robyn Thomas**

When asked would I write a review of BAM, my first reaction was one of horror! What can I say about BAM that is printable? In fact, a straw poll of friends and colleagues who have attended BAM in recent years generates vitriol and contempt in equal measures. It seems that it is now open season on BAM, with universal condemnation from its 'customers'. So why has BAM gained such a bad reputation and why was BAM 2000 in Edinburgh this September seen as the epitome of this bad image? BAM is now in need of a serious makeover in time for its 2001 staging in my own institution of Cardiff Business School.

The aim of BAM, according to Cary Cooper's address in the 2000 conference proceedings, is "to promote and support the creation of management knowledge through research and its dissemination by teaching and application" (p.2). A particular emphasis is placed on the dissemination of knowledge to reach a wider audience. This is indeed laudable but requires extraordinarily good organisation as well as support from the academic community. The sheer range of papers as well as the juxtaposition of highly functionalist or less critical research with work drawing from more critical/ radical perspectives makes it feel at times like the Tower of Babel. In trying to appeal to a wide audience, BAM may have ended up appealing to no one. The lack of critical analysis is perhaps the main criticism of BAM over recent years and BAM 2000 lived up to its reputation on this matter.

This year, however, the organisation of the event has incurred even more wrath than the mixed quality of the papers themselves. The fact that the conference took place during the 'fuel strike' didn't help matters. In fact the only redeeming feature was the pleasures of Edinburgh, strangely tranquil due to the lack of traffic. Otherwise, the poor quality of the food, coffee, rooms and conference documentation dominated many a conversation. There's nothing to compare with the fury of a conference delegate forced to drink instant coffee!

A colleague's off the cuff comment on BAM 2000 says it all: "Edinburgh – a great city! The conference? An overall lack of critical thought, in a disorganised environment, with bad food and terrible rooms". And so I say 'never again!, I have definitely done my last BAM!'. But I suppose, as next year's conference is being held in my own institution, it's a case of 'never say `never' again'!

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# Thank goodness he's resigned ... : the wit and wisdom of Kevin Keegan

With thanks to David Collins, University of Essex, UK

Following a less-than-impressive performance by the England football team in their recent World Cup qualifier against Germany at Wembley, *Notework* wishes to mark the reign of King Kevin of Keegan over the squad (which ended just after said game with his resignation) with a selection of quotable quotes from the master himself ...

“The 33 or 34 year olds will be 36 or 37 by the time the next World Cup comes round if they're not careful ... “

“They compare Steve McManaman to Steve Heighway and he's nothing like him, but I can see why – it's because he's a bit different. They are both called Steve.”

“In some ways, cramp is worse than having a broken leg. But leukaemia is worse still. Probably.”

“Despite his white boots, he has real pace and aggression.”

“Goalkeepers aren't born today until they're in their late 20s or 30s and sometimes not even then. Or so it would appear. To me anyway. Don't you think the same?”

“The substitute is about to come on – he's a player who was left out of the starting line up today. There were others as well.”

“The ref was vertically 15 yards away. He has a moustache.”

“England have the best fans in the world and Scotland's fans are second to none.”

“The game has gone rather scrappy now as both sides realize they could win this match, or lose it, or draw it even.”

“You can't do better than go away from home and get a draw.”

“... using his strength. And that is his strength, his strength. You could say that that's his strong point.”

“Argentina are the second best team in the world, and there's no higher praise than that.”

“The good news for Nigeria is that they're two-nil down very early in the game.”

“That decision for me was almost certainly definitely wrong.”

“You'd think the Moroccans would have learnt their lesson by now. You can't win games without scoring goals.”

# Intellectual IMPOSTURE?: Sokal and Bricmont's attack on French postmodernists

## Adrian Carr

*...we want to 'deconstruct' the reputation that certain texts have of being difficult because the ideas in them are so profound. In many cases we shall demonstrate that if the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing. (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 5)*

*IMPOSTURE n. Deception by means of false pretenses (Funk and Wagnalls, 1985, p. 324)*

The notion that some write and say things that seem incomprehensible because what they are saying or writing means precisely nothing is something that could be said of more than just a handful of academics. No doubt, like me, you can all too quickly think of some spectacular examples. In some cases, one gets the feeling that what is said or written by such folk is done so as to give an air of command over a realm of knowledge superior to those who find the text incomprehensible. The fact that you and I find their utterances incomprehensible would seem to confirm our 'inferior' and their 'superior' status. A *danse macabre* in which projective identification is attempted. In free associating with such a situation, the word "imposture" comes to mind.

It is precisely such an association that is at the heart of the case mounted by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1999) in their volume *Intellectual IMPOSTURES: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, published by Profile. These authors charge some French 'postmodernists' with engaging in intellectual impostures. Specifically, Sokal and Bricmont, who are professors of physics, accuse a group of French postmodernists of "having repeatedly abused scientific concepts and terminology: either using scientific ideas totally out of context, without giving the slightest justification ... or throwing around scientific jargon in front of their non-scientist readers without any regard for its relevance or even its meaning" (1999, p. ix). They claim that such abuses and misappropriation of ideas from science have remained, thus far, unexposed. These abuses, in their view, can be read in a number of ways, but as to whether this abuse invalidates the rest of the work of these postmodernists is something on which Sokal and Bricmont "suspend judgement" (1999, p. x).

In addition to putting a group of French postmodernists 'in the dock' on the abuses of science charge, the book has a second major target for prosecution, namely claims related to epistemic relativism. Sokal and Bricmont challenge the argument, mounted by some postmodernists, that modern science is but one narrative or one social construction amongst many others that are possible. I suppose that, if one accepted this epistemic relativism, the charge sheet related to the abuse of science would be less important. But, before we explore the nature of these two alleged major offences as apparently committed by some French writers, it is crucial to understand the background and the degree of *care* exercised by the authors in targeting their critique.

### **PLACING IMPOSTURE IN CONTEXT: IT STARTED WITH A (KISS) PARODY**

Like many academics in the social sciences, I look forward to the next English translation of works by French postmodernists. So much of this discourse related to postmodernism seems to be conducted in French and, as such, passes those of us by who cannot speak or understand this language. Even when some of the discourse is translated into English we have significant and substantive arguments over the

quality of the translation. Jacques Derrida's fundamental argument "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (1976, p. 158) is commonly translated as meaning there is nothing 'outside' the text, but many scholars point to this as a mistranslation which also misses the subtle context in which the argument is couched. Similar difficulties have been raised with the various translations of other prominent writers in the social sciences (see, for example, Ornston 1992).

The volume by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont that is the subject of this review essay was originally published in 1997 in French and entitled *Impostures Intellectuelles*. Now published in English, the volume is entitled *Intellectual IMPOSTURES: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*. The authors not only enter the debates over postmodernism, but do so in a way that gives the appearance of being more inclusive of scholars who are not able to read the original French texts. Sokal and Bricmont, in quoting the work of postmodernists, have used the English translation of the relevant text but where they feel the translation needs correction they have offered such corrections as a bracketed comment. In some cases, for example where no English version of the text is available, they have provided their own translation. In the introduction to the volume, Sokal and Bricmont claim they "remain as faithful as possible to the original French, and in case of doubt we have reproduced the latter in brackets or even *in toto*" (1999, p. 15).

The issue of producing an authentic representation of the original text is one of a number of objections Sokal and Bricmont anticipate some readers might wish to raise as they read the book. In the introduction to the book, ten possible objections to their grounds for critique have been anticipated and a brief response is given. The objections anticipated by Sokal and Bricmont are:

- The quotations' marginality;
- You don't understand the context;
- Poetic licence;
- The role of metaphors;
- The role of analogies;
- Who is competent?;
- Don't you also rely on argument from a position of authority?;
- But these authors are not 'postmodernist';
- Why do you criticise these authors and not others?; and,
- Why do you write a book on this and not on more serious issues? Is postmodernism such a great danger to civilisation?

These anticipated objections are part of an indication that Sokal and Bricmont are attempting to put before the reader a considered work which is the result of minds that have measured their grounds for critique very carefully indeed. This is a second edition of this book and, before we even encounter the introduction, there is both a five page preface to the first edition and a six page preface to the second edition. These prefaces also suggest to the reader that the authors are carefully marking out their grounds for critique. Indeed in their very first paragraph to the preface to the first edition, Sokal and Bricmont note that:

The publication in France of our book *Impostures Intellectuelles* appears to have created a small storm in certain intellectual circles. According to Jon Henley in *The Guardian*, we have shown that 'modern French philosophy is a load of old tosh'. According to Robert Magiori in *Libération*, we are humourless scientific pedants who correct grammatical errors in love letters. We would like to explain briefly why neither is the case, and to answer both our critics and our over-enthusiastic supporters. (1999, p. ix)

What Sokal and Bricmont seem to be doing is trying to resist any blunting of their critique by claiming, in their words, "neither too much nor too little" (1999, p. ix). The critique is of "a set of intellectual practices,

not a social group” (1999, p. xi). They appear to be trying not to foster a ‘them’ and ‘us’ divide. In psychoanalysis we talk about ‘them’ and ‘us’ as the result of a process called *splitting*. Briefly stated this is a regressive reactive process where, as a form of primitive unconscious psychological defence, individuals dichotomise the world into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects — idealising the good and, through projection, demonising the bad. The world can as a result get divided into ‘them’ (bad) and ‘us’ (good). It is in the face of unpleasant and fundamentally different views that we find the hallmarks of this process at play and acts of generalisation, dichotomising, distortion, concealment, manipulation and such like are encountered.

Clearly there are explicit indications that the volume is ‘popular’ in the sense of being a second edition in two years and the back cover displaying the usual highly complimentary review statements. But worthy of note is that these review comments come from newspapers/ popular press in the UK. Popularity and bestseller status notwithstanding, it would appear that Sokal and Bricmont are intent on cooling the ardour of their current and would-be over-enthusiastic supporters. The authors reassert, in the preface to this second edition, the narrow focus of their work and their suspension of judgement of any group or general body of work beyond such a focus.

The introduction to the volume also contextualises the impetus for the book — it began with a hoax played on the American cultural-studies journal, *Social Text*. Sokal wrote a parody of some of the postmodernists’ work with which this current book is concerned. The title of the paper was “Transgressing the boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum theory”. Sokal describes the paper as “brimming with absurdities and blatant non sequiturs ... [it] asserts an extreme form of cognitive relativism ... proclaiming categorically that physical “reality”, no less than social “reality”, is at bottom a social and linguistic construct” (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, pp. 1-2). The absurdities and non sequiturs were citations from prominent intellectuals that were laced together with a facade of coherence. It was **fatuous prose. Amongst the conclusions reached in the paper were that the  $\pi$  of Euclid and the  $G$  of Newton were merely to be viewed in ‘their ineluctable historicity’.** The seemingly ludicrous proposition was also presented where quantum mechanics was rendered as being a non-linear theory. The article was accepted by the editors (without outside review) and published in a special issue of *Social Text* — a special issue that was aimed at refuting criticisms levelled at postmodernism/ poststructuralism. For Sokal, it seemed hard to imagine the editors “shooting themselves in the foot” (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 2) in a more profound manner. The nature of the hoax was reported on the front page of the *New York Times* and in numerous other newspapers.

The original paper by Sokal is reproduced as an appendix in *Intellectual IMPOSTURES*. Without venturing too far into this original text, I must admit to being a little uneasy as to whether that original article is as much of a blatant parody as has been claimed by its author. The state of quantum mechanics is such that it appears to be open to alternative interpretations. I gained this impression, somewhat paradoxically, when I read Albert’s (1992) book on quantum mechanics — a work cited and recommended in Sokal’s original article, and also a volume by Wick (1996). In what Albert describes as the “many-minds” theory, he seems to suggest that there are indeed problems that lie in quantum theory’s mathematical formalism which stem from the narrowness of conception. Ultimately, Albert argues, physics is about *what the observer thinks* which is very much at odds with Sokal and Bricmont’s argument *against* postmodernists’ relativism of science. I would commend the volume by Albert to the reader who may wish to seek to debate with Sokal from within that field.

The continued declaration by the editors of the journal, *Social Text* (see Robbins, 1996), that Sokal did actually have the nub of a real argument, explicitly gains support from some of the supposedly informed commentators on science. For example, Paul Horgan, a senior writer for *Scientific American*, comments in the *New York Times* (July 16, 1996) that Sokal “proposed that superstring theory might help liberate science from ‘dependence on the concept of objective truth’”. Professor Sokal later announced that the article has been a hoax, intended to expose the hollowness of postmodernism, in fact, however,

superstring theory is exactly the kind of science that subverts conventional notions of truth” (see Robbins, 1996, p. 58).

For those wishing to read further about the furore over this hoax, and its post-mortem, I would refer the reader to the following selection of web sites<sup>1</sup>:

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/stt/stt/sokal.htm>; <http://www.math.tohoku.ac.jp/~kuroki/Sokal/index.html>;  
<http://www.astro.queensu.ca/~bworth/Reason/Sokal/index.html>.

Browsing the papers collected together on these web sites quickly reveals that, although the declared intention of the original paper by Sokal (and also this latest book with Bricmont) was to narrowly mark the ground for criticism, a broader “war” over sciences and postmodernism has been ignited. Just as in any war we find the hallmarks of the kind of splitting discussed earlier. We find exaggerated and distorted claims by the warring groups. Also evident in the media reports on these web sites is something of an anti-intellectual feeding frenzy. This is something I presume Sokal, as an academic, would not have been pleased with as an outcome. The papers on these web sites also reveal Sokal being drawn into a psychologically interesting position in the ‘war’. In the context of a group, it has been noted (see Bion, 1961; Ogden, 1982) that in the face of anxiety an individual in a dependency relationship may draw from others to help — in this case those anxious about the claims made against science by some postmodernists. In what is sometimes referred to as ‘role suction’, individuals in a group may search and pressure, through projective identification, a leader or authority figure (or an acted out missing leader - see Alford, 1994) into reaffirming the group (ego)-ideal in the face of attack, initiating a response to the attacker and clarifying the nature of the attack. The leader/ authority figure may become idealised as the group members, through the process of splitting, collude in their fantasies and simultaneously deny individually and collectively ‘bad’ parts in themselves (or, in this case, their theories) and their leader. From these web site listings, one can see how Sokal seems to have been drawn into a much larger debate to that intended, becoming the authority figure/spokesperson for a larger group and clarifying the nature of the grounds of critique for others to follow. Some of the preface to the second edition of *Intellectual IMPOSTURES* is more easily understood in this wider context.

## **ON TRIAL, CHARGED WITH ABUSES OF SCIENCE: LACAN, KRISTEVA, IRIGARAY, LATOUR, BAUDRILLARD, VIRILIO, DELEUZE AND GUATTARI**

In making their *abuses* of science charges against a group of French postmodernists, Sokal and Bricmont define explicitly what they mean by using the term ‘abuse’. Specifically, they identify four characteristics that individually or in combination constitute abuse:

- Using scientific theories and terms with, demonstrably, only a vague idea of what they actually mean;
- Using scientific concepts without giving the slightest justification for doing so;
- Using scientific jargon without any regard for its relevance or even its meaning; and/ or
- Manipulating phrases and terms that are meaningless.

(see Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 4)

Charged with an abuse of science are Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Latour, Baudrillard, Virilio, Deleuze and Guattari — all French, and all selected on the basis of having an increasing impact on thought in the United States. Each of those charged have a chapter devoted to their alleged crimes.

An abridged charge sheet reads as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> For those readers who enjoy parodies of postmodern discussion, you may also care to visit the “Postmodernism Generator” — a web site where an academic paper, complete with appropriate references and syntactically correct verbiage, is spontaneously generated upon your visit. This postmodernism generator was developed by Andrew Bulhak in Australia and the web address is: <http://www.elsewhere.org/cgi-bin/postmodern/> .

*Lacan* — for misuse of the scientific concept of typology. Claiming that elementary topological structures explain the structure of mental illness. Also, “his ‘definition’ of compactness is not just false: it is gibberish” (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 21);

*Kristeva* — for misuse of the scientific concept of set theory. Claiming that set theory is, metaphorically, some kind of poetic language — having, like Lacan, no “idea of the mathematics she is invoking” (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 47);

*Irigaray* — for misuse of the scientific concept of fluid mechanics. Claiming that the equation  $E=mc^2$  might have been privileged as a topic of study in-as-much as speed is a more masculine interest than, say, fluid mechanics. Also claiming that “menstruation makes it more difficult for young women to understand elementary notions of geometry” (Irigaray, cited by Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 111) ;

*Latour* — for misuse of the scientific concept of relativity and confusing “the pedagogy of relativity with the ‘technical content’ of the theory itself” (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 120). Claiming it is the enunciator that plays the central role in relativity theory;

*Baudrillard* — for misuse of the scientific concept of non-Euclidean geometry. Claiming, in what amounts to “meaningless” drivel, that “one should perhaps consider history itself as a chaotic formation, in which acceleration puts an end to linearity” (Baudrillard, cited by Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 140);

*Deleuze and Guattari* — for misuse of the scientific concepts of chaos, limit and energy. Claiming the difference between philosophy and science is to be seen in their different views of chaos. Also “immersing” such scientific terms/ phrases into a discourse that becomes utterly meaningless (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 149); and,

*Virilio* — for misuse of the scientific concepts of velocity and acceleration and being intoxicated by his own words. Claiming that as a result of economic exchanges “it seems necessary to reconsider the importance of the notion of ACCELERATION and DECELERATION (positive and negative velocities according to physicists)” (Virilio, cited by Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 160).

The charges of making inaccurate and pretentious invocation of scientific concepts and terms, at one level, could be viewed as one ‘tribe’, in this case that of physics and maths, believing their *sacred language* has been *profaned* by another. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the charges in detail, I do have some questions that the reader of this review might wish to ponder when they examine the evidence for themselves in reading Sokal and Bricmont. These questions are as follows:

- Do these abuses loom large in the work of these French postmodernists? Put another way, are these alleged crimes such that they colour the work as a whole?
- Would the correct rendering of the scientific concepts lead the postmodernist theorists to alternative conclusions and, if so, what would these be?
- Do those who follow this French gang really put much store by their sojourns into the language and concepts of science, or are they simply indifferent and/ or amused by these invocations?
- Why is it that it is French authors who are targeted with having committed specific crimes and misdemeanours, if the intention was really to ridicule or hold to account those in the US that are responsible for the circulation of such texts?
- Why is Derrida absent from the list of accused? He invokes scientific concepts, and one would have thought he, amongst them all, would have been viewed as a prominent member of the ‘pomo gang’.

My distinct *impression* from this the first of the two major sections of the book is that Sokal and Bricmont are trying to level a collective charge against this French pomo tribe (gang), an accusation, or at least the imputation, that they are a mob of charlatans. The authors declare, as I noted earlier, that they suspend judgement on whether the abuse of science charge invalidates the work of these French authors. I do however get the feeling that there is a degree of smugness here — withholding judgement, but condemning by virtue of a lack of balance and no pleading of mitigating circumstances. The authors fail to offer a commentary on how a corrected view of science might lead to a different conclusion for these French theorists. In some ways, Sokal and Bricmont, in focusing upon a narrow feature of postmodern

discourse, present an exaggerated view and provide something of a *caricature* of it. Contextualising the alleged abuses would have provided a more balanced picture.

Additionally, Sokal and Bricmont open themselves up to charges of being linguistically reductionist in their insistence on univocity. The discourses of science and of social science are different realms and to expect social science to be written and carried on as though it were natural science is not only inappropriate, but misses the point. Articles in the social sciences are crafted and published with a variety of intent. So, when Sokal had the original paper published, could it have been that the editors thought the central idea was provocative and likely to lead to further discussion and debate that in turn may yield further ideas (notwithstanding the problematic status of the science in the article)? Sokal seems blinded to that possibility as does this volume by Sokal and Bricmont in its lack of engagement with the different nature of the discourses.

The whole notion that approaches to understanding the social sciences should simply imitate those in the natural sciences is an assumption that pervades the Sokal and Bricmont volume. What seems not to be understood by these authors is that in the very conception of the act of doing research in these different genres a different approach is demanded. Horkheimer (1937/ 1976) put the case well many years ago when he argued that generalizations could not easily be made from so-called experiences, because the understanding of experience itself was being fashioned from ideas that were in the researcher him- or herself. The researcher is simultaneously part of what s/he is researching, and caught in a historical context in which ideologies shape one's thinking. Thus any theories would be conforming to the ideas in the mind of the researcher rather than the experience itself:

The facts which our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity, and yet the individual perceives himself [sic] as receptive and passive in the act of perception. (Horkheimer, 1937/ 1976, p. 213)

## **RELATIVISTIC SCIENCE?**

Postmodernists, in general, subscribe to some version of what has come to be known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' — a claim that linguistic categories structure our perceptual and cognitive view of the world. Sokal and Bricmont only note this fundamental hypothesis by way of two footnotes, and do not deal with it head-on. Instead, they choose to examine the consequent or related contention that a truth claim cannot be examined independent and outside of itself. This latter contention is that of the relativist. While there are different forms of relativism, Sokal and Bricmont (1999, p. 51) wish to confine their charge against postmodernists to that of *cognitive* or *epistemic relativism* — the claim that ways of knowing such as science and magic are simply different 'narrations' and involve making truth claims from different standpoints. These different belief systems are exactly that, with no overarching method or basis for making judgements between the belief systems. Judgements can only be made *within* each belief system with each belief system itself having self-validating structures and ideas that cannot be disputed or penetrated from outside the system of their creation.

I said I was not going to specifically examine the charges listed in the charge sheet above. However, I think the Sokal and Bricmont claims against Latour provide an initial brief glimpse of why their wider criticism — postmodernists' embracing of epistemic relativism — proves to be unconvincing and philosophically naïve, particularly their refusal to concede the social construction of science. This example simultaneously, and ironically, highlights why postmodernists emphasise the importance of discourse.

Sokal and Bricmont seem to bemoan the *fact* that scientific facts are verbally mediated in the sense that a theory has to be communicated via words from one human being to another. In their three part charge against Latour for making errors in understanding the theory of relativity, Sokal and Bricmont argue that he erred in confusing “Einstein’s pedagogy and the theory of relativity itself” (1999, p. 119). They then go on to clarify this charge:

Einstein describes how the space-time coordinates of an event may be transformed from any reference frame to any other by means of the Lorentz transformations. No reference frame plays any privileged role here; nor does the author [Einstein] exist at all — much less constitute a ‘reference frame’ — *within* the physical situation he is describing. (1999, p. 119)

The obvious question arises as to how is it possible to have access to any theory without pedagogy?

This is probably the point at which *any* reviewer should declare their own background so the reader can get a better understanding of how the reviewer may have a particular slant (lens) on the subject under review. A university education saw me graduating, and teaching, in sciences — majoring in genetics, physics, chemistry and earth sciences, then undertaking postgraduate education initially in genetics before much later switching to psychology and organisational studies. Nowadays, much of my work focuses upon how psychoanalytic and critical theory provide some insight into organisational issues. I continue to have an ongoing interest in genetics. This background is clearly insufficient to venture into the debate over quantum mechanics, but it does give me sufficient grounding in the sciences to be sceptical about the notion that the role of knowing is free of presupposition. Contra Sokal and Bricmont, I do suggest that scientific knowledge is socially and culturally mediated and needs to be explicitly acknowledged as such. Part of my postgraduate genetics study involved reviewing the ‘evidence’ that people of colour were less intelligent, as well as for the nineteenth-century proposition, put by many scientists of that era, that women were less able to reason by virtue of their biology. The term ‘science’ was, I concluded, used as a shield against those who charged these ‘scientists’ with racism and sexism. To yield such deductions, ‘facts’ were supposed to have been assembled through the application of the scientific method.

If knowledge is mediated by cultural, social and linguistic ‘structures’ and practices, then, as such, its ‘truth’ claims (facts) would seem to be inevitably relational. This is what Sokal and Bricmont deny and postmodernists are the ones that are in the firing line here. I hasten to add that this part of the philosophical landscape is not only occupied by postmodernists, but they are the ones singled out for criticism without any contextual refinement of this landscape being attempted. One cannot simply reduce this argument, as Sokal and Bricmont have attempted to do, to whether there is such a thing as “truth” — which, of course, according to them can only be discovered/ verified through the scientific method! The issue is not one of objective truth, but one of some transparency over how we come to hold the conclusions that we do: what logic, reason and other mediated pathways did we use (unconsciously guided), in coming to ‘believe’ this was the truth? This is really a major feature that the likes of Latour are seeking to illuminate in their pursuit of the sociology of science. Unfortunately the myopia of Sokal and Bricmont means they do not recognise the mediated-ness of their beloved science.

I have some concern here also for a philosophical glide that Sokal and Bricmont make, possibly without realising they have done so. The target of the book is the French contingent of postmodernists, but this contingent is less concerned with relativism than it is with opposing realism. Sokal and Bricmont declare that “our philosophical argumentation will, in any case, be rather minimalist; we shall not enter into the more delicate philosophical debates between, for example, moderate forms of realism and instrumentalism” (1999, p. 50). This is the only substantive mention of realism in their text and their general defence seems to be their acknowledging that they “are well aware that we will be criticised for our lack of formal philosophical training” (1999, p. 51). It is somewhat ironic that the first of those four senses of the way in which they accuse the French postmodernists of abuse of science (i.e., only having



a vague idea of what the relevant words mean) might also be applied to their own knowledge of philosophy! In this context it is perhaps not surprising that they do not discuss realism. However, this is not only important in the discourse of the French postmodernists that they target, but the notion that something is mind-independent, the realist position, is exactly the philosophical position they wish to open up for debate in their volume.

In a similar vein, perhaps it is not surprising to find that Sokal and Bricmont did not attack the major, and ironic, difficulty with relativism as a form of philosophy. The Achilles heel of this form of philosophy is to explain the following: if there is no such thing as objective knowledge of 'reality' that is independent of the knower, then is not this incommensurate with maintaining that the relativistic thesis is itself an item of objective knowledge? This is a serious point. Had Sokal and Bricmont pursued this issue a more engaging critique may have been mounted from *within* the framework of postmodernism itself. There are a number of self-contradictions in the postmodernist formulations which make for interesting tensions within the field of social sciences as a whole. For example, postmodernists presuppose the metaphysical realism they wish to deny, for without it their text has no grounding, and presents a 'dialect' beyond comprehension. Moreover, many postmodernists themselves get caught in the self-contradiction of denouncing logic and reason and at the same time advocating such things as deconstruction, which is itself a logical and reasoned instrument. Some versions of postmodernism, in their notion of the "death-of-the-subject", suggest there are no privileged positions for which a subject needs to be presumed for the text ('text' being all happenings, experiences and events), yet these postmodernists use the individual, for heuristic-type purposes, as a conduit to mount their critique of modernity, and at the same time advocate a privileged position for the reader over the author in the authentication/ interpretation of any text. This appears to be a self-contradiction that would be interesting to pursue as would the notion of dissolving of the subject as, putatively, it spells the death of many parts of the field of social science.

In venturing into the arena of philosophy, with which they have a passing familiarity, Sokal and Bricmont would have been better advised not to have taken on the major issue of relativism. Examining such a major concept requires a reasonable level of philosophical sophistication, not just to appreciate the range of schools of philosophy that, to varying degrees, embrace some form of relativism, but also to appreciate that postmodernists themselves do not all embrace relativism in the same manner. Some postmodernists embrace an extreme form of relativism such that it is difficult to say anything with any confidence. Yet others view truth as personal and community-specific — as Rosenau observes, "although it may be relative, it is not arbitrary" (1992, p. 22).

## **BEYOND POMOLOTOV COCKTAILS**

Sokal has asserted, on a number of occasions, that he wrote the original article to get the American academic left to come to their senses over the discourse of postmodernism, as he confesses that he is "an unabashed Old Leftist" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 249). Sokal and Bricmont, in the epilogue to their book, similarly spell out their political intent. According to them, postmodernist theorising has had "three principal negative effects: a waste of time in the human sciences; a cultural confusion that favours obscurantism; and a weakening of the political left" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999, p. 193).

The last of these "negative effects" is a claim that needs some clarification. On the web sites listed above, one also encounters this connection — that postmodernism is in some way inherently left-wing and/ or only associated with those on the political left. Sokal and Bricmont are all too ready to suggest postmodernism is that territory occupied, claimed or associated with the political left. Unfortunately in this blanket ascription they reveal a lack of historical perspective in such a linkage and are perpetuating a stereotype that is more problematic than they are prepared to admit. For example, Heidegger and de Man are credited with playing a significant part in bringing postmodernism to some prominence in France and in the US respectively, yet both "actively supported the Nazis" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 156). The

association of postmodernism with those on 'the' right wing of politics is arguably just as substantial as the association of postmodernism with *some* sections of the left.

While some on the left embrace postmodernism, for many Marxists postmodernism is an anathema as it does away with the author, agency and intentionality — without which revolution would seem impossible. Postmodernism also is inherently conservative as Madsen (1992) argues and, as he suggests, it becomes an ideological mystification of consumer capitalism. Like any other ideology, postmodernism draws attention to some issues while simultaneously ignoring or obscuring others. Some postmodernists embrace the notion of the end-of-ideology for they view new types of information and technology as the powerhouse of social and organisational change. It is the march of technology, information systems and consumerism that really renders the individual, and their consciousness and false consciousness, irrelevant or at least of no great import. A vision is posited in which the 'system' appears to have a life of its own. Advancing the end-of-ideology as they do would seem to be aiding and abetting, in a Gramscian hegemonic way, the interests of capitalism. These postmodernists appear to be seeking to remove, through theoretical formulation, the economic and political realms as both the site and source of any struggle, and instead shifting the focus to discourse (see Cloud, 1994, p. 226). Moreover, the "works by itself" mentality that comes from dissolving agency gives the ruling apparatus (the political economy) a kind of objective status, removing examination of how it was created and mobilised in the first place and how it continues to be used and reproduced for the interests of the ruling 'class'. While not putting forward such an argument, Agger comments in a similar vein when he says:

Indeed, the end-of-ideology thesis, captured figuratively and in gesture in the lived experience of postmodernity, props up capitalism by diverting attention from substantive social, economic, and cultural alternatives. As Horkheimer and Adorno noted in the 1940s, the culture industry exists in large measure to represent capitalism as a rational social order, hence perpetuating the commodification of all experience (Agger, 1992, p. 80).

In as much as some sections of the left embrace postmodernism, the claim by Sokal and Bricmont about its weakening the political left is something that many would agree with, but such a claim needs to be appropriately contextualised within the broader voice of the left and the discourses of the political right wing. Sokal and Bricmont have missed an opportunity to more richly describe the political landscape and, as a consequence of missing such an opportunity, they leave the reader with the mistaken impression that postmodernism is a preoccupation of the left.

Some supporters of the Sokal and Bricmont volume declare that these authors have dealt a death blow to postmodernism. These supporters are premature in their declaration. When it comes to postmodernism I have declared myself to be an agnostic with a scepticism that is informed by critical and psychoanalytic theory. Notwithstanding the extensive criticism I have made (and continue to make) of the 'truth claims' put forward by postmodern theorists, I do however have great respect for those who critically work with the postmodernist texts. I find many of the 'techniques' of enquiry that have been assembled and developed by postmodernists compelling. In a recent paper, to help in 'deconstructing' Las Vegas, I employed the critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947/ 1997) reading of Homer's tale of Odysseus and his encounter with the Sirens. This encounter was used to illustrate how the glitz, glitter and newness of the present, à la Las Vegas, appears all the more meaningful in the light of the archaic. The conclusion was that the juxtaposition affords us an opportunity to *see ourselves in spite of ourselves*, or to be decentred from our historical position of privilege (see Carr, 2000). Postmodernists' techniques, such as deconstruction, playfulness, the clash-of-opposites, intertwining of form and content, metaphoricality and the like, unsettle us from our 'conventional wisdom' and afford us an opportunity to penetrate and reflect, perhaps anew, on what we have taken for granted. It really does not seem to have occurred to Sokal and Bricmont that the linear thinking they champion throughout their book is fraught with dangers, in-as-much as it obscures and marginalises any 'other'. It is to be hoped that readers of *IMPOSTURES* are a little more reflective.

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# Call for contributions

## ephemera: critical dialogues on organization

ephemera:

- is a new electronic forum for developing and extending discussions of critical perspectives on organization.
- is transdisciplinary and encourages contributions from a broad spectrum of academics, researchers, activists, practitioners, employees and other members of organizations.
- invites critical discussions of a range of issues relating to organizations and organizing in their widest senses.
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- provides a platform for a critique of present modes of organization, but also for discussion of the meaning of critique and for the development and interrogation of current critical discourses on organization.
- offers a forum to bring together a variety of perspectives in productive dialogue and critical questioning of the nature of contemporary organization.

### Formats

ephemera encourages contributions in a variety of formats including academic articles, book and film reviews, field notes, interviews, photo essays and other experimental modes of representation.

### Themes

Contributions are invited on a range of themes dealing with organization in its widest sense, including: What is critique?, gender, race, disability, sex and sexuality, bodies and embodiment, marx today, critical realism, globalization, feminist theory, postcolonial and subaltern studies, strategy, labour process theory, poststructuralism, surveillance, knowledge and information, ideology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, technology, cyborgs and cyborganization, post-humanism, time, space, architecture, philosophy of organization, chaos and complexity, biology and genetics, popular culture, consumption, collective action, political protest, etc.

The first issue of ephemera will be published online 1st February 2001.

### More information

For more information and an extended call for contributions, please visit our website at:

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ephemera: critical dialogues on organization

'All that is solid melts into air'

### Editorial and advisory panel

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# You can't please everyone: artistic integrity and social responsibility

This forum was held on the 21<sup>st</sup> October this year at the National University of Singapore's Cultural Centre. It was designed to address important issues in the area of arts policy from a national and international perspective. Its format ranged from a keynote address highlighting international practice in the field of arts policy to involvement with local artists, academics, managers, business people, the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Information and the Arts. It was intended to facilitate an important dialogue which is essential for the planning and development of arts policy and management in Singapore.

The forum was both timely and forward looking as Singapore is increasingly investing in the arts in terms of infrastructure and at a policy level. The construction of two major cultural complexes, the MITA Renaissance City Report and an increase in government expenditure for projects of \$50 million and increased sponsorship and support for the arts from the corporate sector are evidence of this. In the light of such investment in the arts, it is important that an understanding and critique be developed by arts managers, policy makers, arts groups, artists and researchers.

The guest of honour was Mr David Lim, Singapore Minister of State for Information and the Arts, and the keynote speaker (on "Government Policies and Artistic Freedom") was Emeritus Professor John Pick, who founded Europe's first Department of Arts Policy and Management at City University, London, having previously worked extensively in education and the arts. He is currently Emeritus Professor at City, and Visiting Professor in Arts Management at South Bank University, also in London. John Pick's next book, *Managing Britannia*, will be published early in 2001.

The forum will form the basis of the first Arts Policy and Management publication on Singapore and it is hoped that this will serve as a useful tool for policy makers, managers and artists in the coming years. The overall aim of the day, then, was to facilitate a dialogue between policy makers, managers and practitioners which will develop discussion about

- The need for the training and study of arts management
- The requirements for arts infrastructure
- The corporate sector and the arts
- A local and international perspective of the issues involved in sustaining artistic integrity
- Artists and artistic groups exchange ideas with managers and policy makers
- International arts policy and practice.

For more information about the forum day itself or the planned publication, visit the forum web-page at <http://www.fas.edu.sg/ell/forum>, or contact Dr. Ruth Bereson at [ellrmb@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ellrmb@nus.edu.sg)



# Rethinking gender, work and organization: call for papers

Keele University, Staffordshire, England

27-29 June 2001

An international interdisciplinary conference of the journal *Gender, Work and Organization*

As a central theme in social science research in the field of organization, the study of gender has achieved contemporary significance beyond the confines of early discussions of women at work. Launched in 1994, *Gender, Work and Organization* was the first journal to provide an arena dedicated to debate and analysis of gender relations, the organisation of gender and the gendering of organisations. The forthcoming conference consolidates our knowledge and theorising and brings together scholars concerned to further advance theory, research and practice of these issue into the 21st century.

The Gender, Work and Organization Conference 2001 provides an international forum for debate and analysis of the following issues, in relation to gender studies:

Feminist theory, sexualities in organisations, men and masculinities, gendered identity and subjectivity, power and resistance, home working, gender and new technologies, alternative organisation, new managerialism, harassment and discrimination, unequal pay, race and ethnicity, women and men in management and human resource management.

The conference will be held at Keele University, Staffordshire, in Central England. Keele is the UK's largest integrated campus university. The University itself occupies a 617 acre site with Grade II registration by English Heritage and has good road and rail access. Many architectural and landscape features dating from the 19th century are of regional significance. International travellers are served by Manchester and Birmingham airports. On campus accommodation caters for up to 100,000 visitors per year in day and residential conferences.

**Abstracts of approximately 750 words excluding any references are invited by 28 February 2001 (please note extended deadline).** Prospective contributions will be independently refereed. New and young scholars with 'work in progress' papers are welcomed. Please **MAIL** or **E-MAIL** one hard copy of your abstract to the address below. Abstracts should include **FULL** contact details, including your name, institutional affiliation, mailing address, telephone number and e-mail addresses.

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Dr. Christina Hughes, University of Warwick

Dr. Deborah Kerfoot, Keele University

## Conference advisory board:

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# **Tamara: the journal of critical postmodern organization science**

## **Call for papers – special issue**

### **Re-imagining change**

Much has been written about the phenomenon of change; about the complexities surrounding organizational change; about the challenges that change poses; and crucially about the need to rethink change. Change, we are told, is all around us. It affects our social and work lives in a multitude of ways. The pace of change is said to be increasing and there is, for many, a real fear that changes – not of our making and hence beyond our control – could engulf us at any time. Little wonder, then, that numerous attempts have been made to address; indeed to rethink the perplexing problem of change.

In this special issue of *Tamara: The Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*, we invite contributions that seek to go beyond attempts to rethink change within the paradigmatic confines that presuppose stability as an ultimate condition of reality and that therefore construe change in strictly *exceptional* terms. In this special issue we invite contributors radically to 're-imagine' change; to see change as inexorable, flux, process and movement and to then understand stability and organization in derivative terms. How would organizational change look if form, stability and fixity were exceptions rather than the natural state of things? Would social order, stability and organization then appear closer to the lived experiences of the ordinary individual who increasingly feel trapped by the demands imposed on them by the modern society of organizations? It is hoped that through this alternative 're-imagining' of change we might come to develop a more accurate, useful, subtle and enriching understanding of that which currently perplexes us. This call for a re-imagined understanding of change is inspired by the work of C. Wright-Mills and his call for the exercise of the 'sociological imagination'.

Writing decades ago, Wright-Mills argued that the sociological academy had made itself aloof from the day-to-day concerns of the population. The academy, he argued, had ceased talking to the concerns and

ambitions of everyday people. The *subjects* of sociological inquiry, therefore, had become *objects* as sociology became academic – in the everyday, pejorative sense of the term. Thus Wright-Mills noted:

‘Nowadays men [*sic*] often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling they are often quite correct: what everyday men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their power are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.’

To escape the traps and perils of this confining domesticity, Wright-Mills proposed a more imaginative form of analysis; a sociology dedicated to allowing ordinary men and women access to the tools and understandings they would require to link their private troubles with larger public issues.

In making this call to ‘re-imagine’ change, we invite contributions from those who would be something other than spectators of change. We invite those who recognise and would loosen both the traps and the trappings which bind our current understanding of the challenge of change to share their thoughts. We call on academics to be more intellectuals than academic. We call on practitioners, trades unionists, artists, activists, journalists; we call upon all those who would ‘re-imagine’ their lives and our futures so that we might move between private orbits and public concerns to come to a new appreciation of organization and change.

### **Submission Details**

Full details on house-style, manuscript length etc may be found at <http://www.zianet.com/boje/tamara>

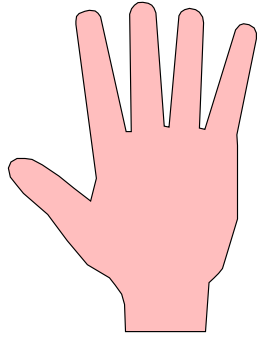
This special issue of *Tamara* will be co-edited by Professor Robert Chia of the University of Exeter and David Collins of the University of Essex.

Please send manuscripts in the prescribed format to:

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**That's all folks ...**