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Style as Theory[1]

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A small but significant portion of writing in the still expanding domain of organizational research and theory is devoted to debunking the essentialist and (allegedly) scientifically grounded ideas and programs of our peers. Some of my writing, including this effort, falls within this tradition. Debunking the would-be towers of power in our field bears a loose similarity to the work performed by voluntary firefighters. The fire of interest here is a call to draw in our topical and theoretical borders, and the intellectual incendiary is none other than Jeffrey Pfeffer whose 1992 Distinguished Scholar Address to the Organization Theory Division of the Academy of Management started a modest little blaze that was followed by my own 1993 Distinguished Scholar Address to the same group which was designed to put it out. A stroke of luck too, for what better theorist could a confessed anti-theorist wish to follow and what better foil for debunking could have been sent forward than an acknowledged desperado of the podium like Jeffrey, who courts controversy like a bear in search of honey.[2] In what follows, I recreate in writing what I first committed to speech.

Jeff's talk—later published in revised form as "Barriers to the Advance of Organizational Science: Paradigm Development as a Dependent Variable" (Pfeffer 1993a)—represents a rather shrill plea for the development of a firm and consensually approved paradigm to drive organizational theory and research. Without much hesitation, Jeff argues that we would be wise to adopt economics as a role model for our many splendored—but unfortunately splintered—field. Economics is, after all, a proud and powerful discipline that has gone places. In a chilling segment of his address, a Stalinist purge of our low-consensus field is considered whereby we might invest authority in a few, well-published elites within our ranks who would be willing if not eager to institutionalize some topical and methodological strictures to guide our work. A high-consensus paradigm—or better yet, a Pfefferdigm—could thus be imposed. The result would be an increase in our prestige, power and pay.

The image Jeff uses to portray the field in its current state of play is pastoral but wild. There are too many of us doing too many different things. Our tangled theories do not fit neatly on any intellectual map. We do not value the systematic collection of data on a limited number of issues. Agreement across theory groups is unlikely and, given the way we structure ourselves, probably impossible; so the resources and rewards that flow from external sources to those in the field remain both modest and hotly contested. In brief, we represent something of an overgrown garden sorely in need of attention: "...there are thousands of flowers blooming but nobody does any manicuring or tending" (Pfeffer 1993b, p. 1). Specifically, we need to prune, pare and discard certain research topics and agendas that are, in Jeff's view, going nowhere.

I suspect I am a weed in Jeffrey's dreamtime garden. I am therefore a candidate for pruning, paring and discarding. But whether I am a tulip, wildflower or weed, I want to suggest here that this sour view of our field is—to be gentle—insufferably smug; pious and orthodox; philosophically indefensible; extraordinarily naive as to how science actually works; theoretically foolish, vain and autocratic; and—still being gentle—reflective of a most out-of-date and discredited father-knows-best version of knowledge, rhetoric and the role theory plays in the life of any intellectual community.

Jeff is not, of course, alone in suggesting that we overplay our science hand and underplay what other approaches to knowledge might teach us. Yet, just as the Enlightenment philosophers were a trifle premature in their pronouncement that science had triumphed over mere belief (doxa), those who would push for paradigmatic purity or unity in our field conveniently ignore the rhetorical elements that underpin and ultimately undermine their own efforts. More to the point, they ignore what has been called the linguistic turn (alternatively, the interpretive or textual turn) taken by a number of scholars within and across a variety of disciplines in the arts, humanities and sciences. This turn promotes language in the scheme of things and reverses the relationship typically thought to

obtain between a description and the object of description.[3]

The ordinary or commonsensical view holds that the objects of the world are logically prior and thus limit and provide the measure of any description. Vocabulary, text, representation of any intendedly nonfictional sort must be constrained by fact. But as some theorists now realize (however much they may complain), language is auditioning for an a priori role in the social and material world. Moreover, it is a role that carries constitutional force, bringing facts into consciousness and therefore being. No longer then is something like an organization or, for that matter, an atom or quark thought to come first while our understandings, models or representations of an organization, atom or quark come second. Rather, our representations may well come first, allowing us to see selectively what we have described.

This reversal is visible in organizational fields and is slowly worming its way into our classrooms, meetings, literatures and theories.[4] It is, to be sure, controversial, for it suggests that taken-for-granted ideas about empirical evidence, objectivity, reason, truth, coherence, validity, measurement and fact no long provide great comfort or direction. If such concepts are language-based, they are relative, not absolute. They are therefore contestable in whatever form they appear. What drives contestation (and the resulting polarization) is of course the perception that one's discipline, sub-discipline or sub-sub-discipline is under attack. That someone else is defining the field in such a way that one's own work is being denied legitimacy. This is certainly my response to the "I'm-a-Pfeffer, you're-a-Pfeffer, wouldn't-you-like-to-be-a-Pfeffer-too" view of the world Jeff presented us with last year. But it cuts both ways. When I call into question certain narrative devices that characterize a good deal of organizational theory writings, some in my audience will applaud and feel good while others will fall silent and feel like endangered species.

My remarks—very much like Jeff's—must then be understood as moves in a language game, an understandable and necessary effort to defend my work, to create a space for what I do against what I take to be the shortsighted, overly confident and more (or less) entrenched views of others. It is in this sense that staking out a theoretical position is unavoidably a rhetorical act. Rhetoric is always with us. It is with us not only at the point of paradigmatic clashes where it is so obvious but with us everywhere and always for the simple reason that our understandings of the world are put forth in black and white, as ink on a page. Theory is a matter of words, not worlds; of maps, not territories; of representations, not realities. As much as we might like to believe that hard fact and cold logic will support our claims and carry the day, there is no escape from rhetoric: from the informal, hidden arguments carried in texts, to the figures of speech, the metaphors, the tropes and the appeals to good sense or tradition or authority made by writers to support their claims.[5]

Textwork and Persuasion

One problem (of many) at the moment in our organizational field(s) is that most of us are trained in a logocentric tradition of empirical science with its count-and-classify conventions and taken-for-granted notions of progress. We display more than a little physics envy when we reach out for covering laws, causes, operational definitions, testable hypotheses and so forth. Our reading practices are governed for the most part by a correspondence presumption leading us to trust text as a more or less transparent guide to the world "out there." We cultivate and teach a writing style of nonstyle that values limited metaphor, simplicity and a formal, if not mathematical, precision. Much of our writing is washed by a thick spray of claimed objectivity since artful delights and forms are seen by many if not most writers (and readers) in the field to interfere with the presentation of what is actually there in a given social world.[6]

The result is that we elevate the "spare," "systematic," "elegant," "unadorned," "essential," "parsimonious" treatments of organizational life based on concepts that are said to transcend mere textuality. How organizational worlds are represented in print is not thought to be much of an issue. Writing is seen as a secondary or mop-up activity in our professional pursuits. This is, I think, a mistake and overlooks what might be learned if we were to take the textuality of our organizational theories and facts more seriously: What might we learn if we were to explore the terra incognita of our literary practices?

Such an exploration would involve the close examination of just what we do as organizational theorists. In this regard, I follow Geertz's (1974) quite sensible remark that if one wants to know what a science is—or, for that matter, what any scholarly field amounts to—one must begin by examining what the people in the field do. This is a post-Kuhnian perspective on the nature of our work and differs little from any ethnographically sensitive approach to technical work.[7]

What we do as organizational theorists is, of course, spend enormous amounts of time reading and writing.

Some of us produce both discourse and text we explicitly label theory whose purpose is to communicate our understandings of organization to particular audiences. Communication however implies that we are also and necessarily concerned with persuading our readers—the more the better—that not only do we have something to say but that what we have to say is correct, important and well worth heeding. The discourse we produce as organization theory has an action component which seeks to induce belief among our readers. Our writing is then something of a performance with a persuasive aim. In this sense, when our theories are well received they do practical work. Rather than mirror reality, our theories help generate reality for readers.

How does such a reality-building process work in print? This is not a simple matter. To approach it from a textual angle requires looking at how well-received theories are written, and this means looking at—rather than through—our more persuasive writings. Putting theory in print is a literary performance; an activity involving the use of language whose methods are ways of writing through which certain identifiable reader responses are produced. The materials of such a performance are words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, articles, books and so forth. The question at hand, then, is what literary methods—the particular compositional and performative characteristics of a text(s)—are associated with a certifiable example(s) of influential organizational theory?

The Allegoric Breaching of Karl Weick

To begin to answer this question requires a specific case of persuasive theorizing. Any case might do but my strategy here is to focus on what I take to be a deviant case of theorizing, deviant in the sense that the narrative and rhetorical practices used to produce the examined body of work appear to violate some of our received and more or less unquestioned notions of just how and what organizational texts (and theories) are convincing. Alas, I must leave it to others to follow with careful readings of other—perhaps more generic or conventional—theorists in the field.

My exemplar is Karl Weick who, over the years, has produced a substantial body of work. It is a body of work I have tried to enter and understand (not always successfully). His writings have the advantage of being familiar to most readers of organization theory because so many of them are on the required reading lists of Ph.D. programs in the field and it is surely the case that students cannot consider themselves organizational scholars of any depth or breadth without having read at least some of Karl's work. My focus is on the compositional characteristics of what I take to be the more successful (i.e., persuasive) features of Karl's work. I am not indifferent to content but my purpose here is to push for a different way of understanding theory by looking at what is conventionally ignored: the textual aspects of such work.

The reception history of Karl's work is a matter of record. It has been widely reviewed, summarized, quoted, borrowed, reprinted and elaborated on. It is, in general, seen by those in and out of the organizational theory field as insightful and innovative. Reviewers characteristically praise the work but not always in the same terms or without reservation. A set of frequently used receptive epithets include terms like "subtle," "cunning," "brilliant," "wandering," "multifaceted," "relativistic," "nonconforming," "artistic," "airy," "metaphorical," "evasive," "fragmentary," "cryptic," "evocative" and "suggestive." The issue to explore now is what compositional practices appear to produce such effects among readers?[8]

Before pushing on, however, I must say that I am not out to valorize or idolize the Weickian style, although I am most certainly a fan. My intent is to look carefully at what most of us would call a maverick style of theorizing—quite different from that celebrated by Jeffrey Pfeffer—and identify what I think is a distinctive and altogether useful way of putting theory into print. It is a way of theorizing that might well pass unnoticed if we did not look at its textual features because, at least in this case, theory and style are closely aligned. One carries the other.

In other words (my words), a good deal of the scholarly appeal of Karl Weick's writing and hence his theory rests on its more or less unique style. It is a style that combines allegory and breaching. Allegory represents the idea that a coherent spiritual or abstract (in this case, theoretical or general) message is being conveyed in writing through the narration of a most concrete set of events. It is near symbolism as a literary form but more focused and controlled. Breaching carries the idea that the writing breaks with conventional textual practices in the field in which it enters. In this case, Weick's writings stand apart from most organization theory writings in identifiable ways. Four characteristics of Karl's work back up my use of the allegoric breaching label.[9] In no particular order, they follow.

Essay Form

Weick is something of a confessed essayist. This can be seen most readily in many of his articles but is also visible in some of the chapters of *The Social Psychology*

of Organizing (Weick 1969, 1979; both editions). The essay is of course a literary format more linked to art than science. By working in such a form Weick breaches the generic recognizability of normal organizational theorizing with its relentless summaries of past research, propositional chants, pachyderm-like solemnity and off-the-shelf textual formats (i.e., introduction, hypotheses, methods, findings, conclusions). Few plain writers of referential prose in organizational theory commit themselves and their readers to such a blatantly literary (artsy) style.

But Weick does so with glee and seemingly takes pride in the nonlinear possibilities of the essay form. Meanderings, detours, distractions are common in his writing. A personalized author is also put forth as is characteristic of the essay: the use of "I" and the refusal to cloak a writing in anonymity. While not obviously self-referencing (or self-effacing), it is difficult for readers to forget they are reading Weick while engaged with his work. This may well be a distinguishing feature of convincing theory texts since we stubbornly link pure theory with particular names like Perrow and March or the fashionable French like Foucault or Bourdieu. When theory becomes anonymous, it loses style and slides into a well-worn and recognizable genre such as a research report, an empirical monograph, an instruction manual, an article for a specific journal or a textbook where standard formats, topics, terminology and methods play large roles.

The essay is anything but an overtly systematic presentation of an author's views. This stylistic feature is sometimes treated as a bothersome defect by some readers, a defect that can be overcome only when others extract or cull the analytic jewels out of a messy piece of work, the jewels being the detachable theoretical contributions to be found in the work. Beginning students and textbook writers are perhaps the most likely to be both puzzled and disturbed with Weick for the apparent disorder that comes kit and caboodle with his essayist style. Yet, it is altogether possible that the lack of a system and the appearance of a tidy order in his writing is downright central to the point, purpose and value of his work.

To take an example of all this, consider a recent paper with the most Weickian title, "Cosmology Episodes in Organizations: Young Men and Fire and the Mann Gulch Disaster" (Weick 1993a). The paper is called an essay in the first sentence. A section title does not appear until page 7 (called "Sensemaking in Mann Gulch") and another five pages go by before another title appears ("Social Structure in Mann Gulch"). The last section head appears on page 15, "From Vulnerability to Resilience." Three headings, 27 pages. No ordinary introduction, no generic section titles, no obvious summary or conclusion sections and no recommendations for further research.[10] Not an atypical Weick paper. It seems the order could easily be otherwise; beginnings could be endings and vice versa. From title to last line, the order is unsettling and difficult to categorize as to its intentions.

Certainly there is a shape and pattern to this work. It is not a blob by any means but it stands some distance from the conventional writing styles. The work reads as something of a personal reflection, a meditation on a theme and is put forth in terse, highly qualified and personal prose. Moreover, the matters that occupy Weick's interest in the paper are not presented as things to which one must agree or disagree but as ideas tossed out to complicate our thinking about current problems in organizational theory (and elsewhere). Literary theorists repeatedly suggest that readers often reject argumentative thrusts or ideas presented as solid and unassailable. Weick's essays allow a reader to sense a writer struggling with an idea and trying to use that idea to come to terms with some concrete event or experience that serves as the narrative center for the writing.

In general, an elementary principle of the successful essay is precisely what Weick respects and follows in much of his work. An essay works to the extent that readers identify with the writer. And when they do, the essay will carry greater persuasive appeal than writings that force on a reader a systematic barrage of concepts, definitions, truth claims and roll call of famous names all serving to express certitude. Identification is created, in part, by revealing doubt. Who can identify with the all-knowing author? It may well be that the most persuasive style in the late 20th century is one that is informal, a little self-conscious perhaps but basically genial and pitched at creating a conversation or dialogue between equals.

Indeterminacy and Open-Endedness

A good deal of Weick's writings refuse settlement. Interpretations are left open and the world as depicted in print remains indeterminate. Weick is willfully and often amusingly paradoxical. The tactic is realized in its clearest form when Karl takes a perfectly reasonable and conventional proposition from organization theory and turns it around to see if it works equally well in reverse. In "Cosmology Episodes," Weick

(1993a) reverses the altogether logical proposition that "sensemaking precedes structure" and suggests that the reverse is just as likely. He says of an organization, "as it loses structure, it loses sense" (pp. 6–7). More concretely, he observes that "this loss of organization intensified fear" (p. 14). We normally think of fear or panic as preceding a loss of organization or structure rather than the other way around.

All these claims are put forth in a hesitant, subtle and rather hypothetical mode of expression wherein the words "perhaps," "if" and "maybe" play major roles. This comes close to what could be called a Hamlet Strategy of deferring final judgment while all aspects of an event are carefully examined from a variety of perspectives. It stands in stark contrast to the dogmatic, this-is-a-that and pin-everything-down language of organization science where we are told by an author at the outset, in the middle, and at the end of a paper precisely what is being proved beyond doubt.

Another distinctive feature that comprises the indecisive and open-ended character of Weick's writings is his stringing together of ideas or propositions without connectives. The reporting style is that of montage and it runs counter to the logically dependent clauses that arrange proposition flows sequentially. For instance, Weick lists four sources of organizational resilience in his "Cosmology Episodes" paper. The four are discussed in turn and consist of (1) improvisation and bricolage; (2) virtual role systems, (3) the attitude of wisdom and (4) respectful interaction (Weick 1993a, p. 16). There is no logical order to the four. One doesn't follow from another. The list (and ensuing discussion) acts on a reader as an estranging device and the reading experience is both befuddlement and wonderment. By breaking away from an easy logic, Weick challenges the reader to figure out with him how these things go together and just what they might mean in the context of his discussion.

A question to raise at this point is whether or not an apparently coherent and tightly ordered narrative is superior to a narrative, like Weick's, full of loose ends and logical reversals? Is the simple structure superior to the complex? Reading Weick one must say no. Again, the indeterminacy of the writing allows for identification since the style seems to me to be closer to the way we readers—pallid little trolls that we are—come to terms with the world and do theory ourselves.

To write in an essayistic, highly indeterminate fashion about organizations in a field so dominated by impersonal, disciplined rhetorics is clearly a breach. But I am reminded also that sociologists of scientific knowledge, when observing the everyday work of scientists, often note scientists, in private, think not in black and white but in various shades of gray (e.g., Latour and Woolgar 1979, Garfinkel et al. 1981, Gilbert and Mulkay 1983). When pondering their work, say, in the laboratory or lounge with colleagues, they speak in a tentative, open, one-step-up, one-step-back manner in which things could always be otherwise. But when going public and putting theories into words on a page (or spoken from a platform), all shades of opinion and doubt vanish. Simons (1988, p. 48) calls this pattern "think Yiddish, speak British."

My reading of Karl's work is that much of the time he "thinks Yiddish and speaks Yiddish." As such, his style represents an assault on the unquestioned objectivity of our received notions of the world. If a celebrated theorist publicly displays a tentative and reversible stance toward the objects of his affection, these objects may not be so very objective after all. The style becomes the theory. By letting doubt into his accounts, a reader's hold on organizational reality may be loosened. Doubt multiplies and a reader is forced to credit several explanations—sometimes contradictory —for the always concrete happenings that punctuate Weickian tales. This stylistic mark is closely related to the third characteristic of much of Karl's writing.

Dialectic Reconstruction

A favored Weick technique is to take two logical opposites and show how both may be true at the same time; thus the dialectic itself is transformed. This is an obvious violation of the scientific identity principle that decrees something cannot be true and false at the same time. Karl did this with a vengeance on some work of mine, showing just how an organizational socialization process could be both formal and informal, individual and collective simultaneously (Weick 1982, pp. 394–398). He works in reverse as well, producing a dialectic from an identity. In a clever paper on educational administration, he played off the cliché "a community of scholars" to note that community endangers scholarship while scholarship prevents community (Weick 1983). Both were needed if an educational institution were to thrive, but the language we use to understand the situation is often confusing and gets in the way of the very understanding we seek.

In "Cosmology Episodes," the tactic shows up again. Specifically, Karl argues that "ignorance and knowledge" often go and grow together in organizational

settings (Weick 1993a, pp. 22–23). The more knowledge that seems to be available to organizational members, the more ignorance there is among them (and vice versa). These are of course two matters we normally consider contradictory. It is a playful argument but instructive, and in a world full of seemingly insurmountable dilemmas, awards should be handed out to those who try to get past the tired either/or oppositions characteristic of formal logic.

This dialectic reconstruction is accomplished by Karl with more than a little linguistic sophistry (an approach, by the way, whose good name we should restore). It is done by reformulating the very terms used to express both ordinary and theoretical concepts. It is done through inventive language use. In words and sentences that are sometimes as cool, crisp and clear as a country creek, Weick suspends logical sequencing and pries words loose from their accustomed routines. The self-canceling paradoxes work to depict an organizational world that is in continual flux, a world that is always becoming.[11] From Cosmology Episodes: "... it doesn't take much to qualify as an organization. The other side of it is that it also may not take much to stop being an organization" (Weick 1993a, p. 5). There is a tentative, anti-essentialist and (moving) dialectic position being carefully staked out here and it is one that I think attracts readers because Karl's style is so consistent with his message.

Presence

All writers face the problem of how to keep their reader's attention pointed toward features of the text they deem most important. Presence is a literary tactic that serves, in part, to solve this problem. Presence is magnified by such practices as repetition, amplification, enumeration, figuration, provision of concrete details and so forth. It is something of a substitute for a formalist strategy of proof and analysis. Support for an idea or position by the use of presence means repeating it time and time again, each time with a twist, a little differently so that various shades of meaning can be discerned. Redundancy is the key. Contrasted to the spare, plain-speaking, sequential, one-thing-at-a-time simplicity of a good deal of writing in organization theory, presence is indeed an unusual textual feature.

Perhaps the best example of Karl's use of presence is found in his much cited essay "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems" (Weick 1976). In this piece, the title phrase is virtually beaten into the reader through its repeated use in shifting contexts. Time after time, different sets of concrete particulars are invoked to exemplify loose coupling, thus giving rise to a proof of the idea's vitality through its illustrated fit to diverse circumstances. Moreover, loose coupling is put forth without an explicit, singular definition, without a set of theorems, and without much detailed interpretation of a general or abstract sort. Peter Manning (1992, pp. 48–51), a respected critic and close reader of Karl's work, points out that this essay contains at least 15 different ways in which loose coupling is used. The idea is thus magnified and given importance not by analysis, but by repetition and amplification. By continually adding a new supplementary documentation for its presence, loose coupling is being particularized, not generalized.

This is not unlike Tom Wolfe's (1979) strategy for communicating "The Right Stuff" to readers. Wolfe never defines "The Right Stuff" but he repeats the phrase over and over again throughout the book, always in slightly to drastically altered conditions. Similarly, Karl gives loose coupling the quiddity it deserves by virtue of his seeming inability to precisely define it. But, in so doing, he also makes readers increasingly aware of its presence. The subtext reads that if a writer of Weick's obvious rhetorical virtuosity and talent cannot precisely express the idea of "loose coupling," how great an idea it must truly be! Oh what grandeur and power it must possess!!

The downside of presence as a rhetorical move is that its persuasive appeal will depend in large measure on the reader's experience and ability to identify with the examples provided in the text. If readers have only shallow experience or no such experience with the idea —or, worse, are unwilling to put that experience to use because they are overschooled in the *proper* way to read organization theory—language such as Karl's will fail and no connection among author, idea and reader will be made. Presence, to be convincing, requires more of readers than the joyless use of a magic marker to underline portions of the text. It requires imaginative readers able to put themselves into the illustrative situations that fill the text and bestow on key concepts both meaning and range.[12]

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The allegoric breaching style is I think a demanding one. But for readers able and willing to put in the work, it is persuasive and rewarding. It is however a style that takes a most unaggressive stance toward reality, organizational or otherwise. As such, it represents a rather different way of doing (i.e., writing) theory than we are accustomed. An example from

cultural anthropology may be useful in this regard. It comes from the pen of Dorothy Lee and tells of a far-away society:

Among the Wintu there is a recurring attitude of humility and respect toward reality, toward nature and society... I cannot find an adequate term to apply to a habit of thought that is so alien to our culture. We are so aggressive toward reality. We say "this is bread"... We do not say as do the Wintu, "I call this bread," or "I feel" or "I taste" or "I see it to be bread"... The Wintu never says starkly "this is."

(Lee 1959, p. 129; cited in Brown 1977, p. 24).

I think Karl would be rather comfortable among the Wintu. The lack of sharp definition, claimed objectivity, descriptive certainty and detachable conclusions mark a good deal of his work. He writes against our customary aggressive certitude toward reality, a certitude that lies at the core of the foundational, scientific pose that infects so much of organization theory. And if, as I've suggested, Karl gives us a distinctive style whose reception history indicates its persuasive character, perhaps others might experiment with its features as well. For me, many of Karl's novel writing strokes offer a promising way of doing theory, a way more in tune with current intellectual trends in many of the scholarly worlds that surround us and perhaps more in tune with the culturally blended everyday worlds in which we live.

Theory in Context

As a way of drawing all this to a close, I want to highlight certain implicit themes that run through my remarks. First, I have had relatively little to say about normal form organizational theorizing. By and large, I have characterized standard theoretical writings in terms of what they are not and used Karl Weick's writing to serve as an exception that draws out the rule. Part of this disregard is due to a lack of space but, more importantly, part of it is due to the annoying fact that we are to a degree blind to the ways we write unless we have in front of our face an example of another way to write. From examples of novel practices can come individual and collective experiments and perhaps as a result we can loosen up some of the writer's cramps that seem so prevalent in our field. By trying to write like everyone else (and not talking about it in public), we not only bore ourselves to tears but restrict the range of our inquires and speculations in ways that might be cheerfully applauded by Jeffrey Pfeffer.[13]

Second and relatedly, I am appalled at much of organization theory for its technocratic unimaginativeness. Our generalizations often display a mind-numbing banality and an inexplicable readiness to reduce the field to a set of unexamined, turgid, hypothetical thrusts designed to render organizations systematic and organization theory safe for science. I see in Karl Weick's unusual phrases, labels, titles, reversals, sweeps and swoops of wordplay something of a protest and an example of how to break from the frozen technical writing codes we find ourselves so often following. The message seems unmistakable. The language we use to theorize about organizations is not a symptom of the problems the field faces but is a cause of such problems. A position I think Karl would agree with is that our theories of the world are not mere reflectors of the world but makers of the world, and this is why the words we use are so terribly important. To put forth my own Weickianism: "Theorists are lost because they are blind to what words in context can teach them."

Third, the positive spin I've put on indeterminacy and open-endedness draws on the familiar Weberian distinction between formal and practical (or situational) rationality. Formal rationality, when carried into theory, is the idea that we can define decisively all relevant terms, allow for all conceivable possibilities and bundle up our understandings such that our meaning will be perfectly clear. Practical rationality emphasizes context and, when carried into theory, suggests that ambiguity is always and necessarily present. The two forms of rationality clash, for it seems to me that the more we try to be precise and exact, the less we are able to say and that the harder we try to follow a rigorous theoretical system, the more we are tempted to fill it out with uninspired observations. Semantic clarity and distinctiveness is achieved only to the extent that we allow statements to depend on the identity of the writer, that we allow the circumstances that surround discourse to enter into our considerations of what is being said, that we allow ambiguous statements to stand without question in the hope that future remarks will clarify their meaning, and so on (and on). This state of affairs recommends that we put our theories forward with an awareness of a haunting irony: To be determinate, we must be indeterminate. Perhaps by focusing on concrete particulars, by revealing our doubts and anxieties, by not trying so hard to achieve the other worldly ideals of science, our writings will be able to display our ideas with coherence enough to

make them intelligible but not dress them up with an alluring but false sense of finality. *Les petits fait divers* over Pfefferdigmatic certainty (or unity).

Finally, I think it possible that if we were to move away from our apparent fascination with tidy and relatively closed intellectual systems, we might be able to develop our organizational theories in a less contentious and defensive fashion. Debate, not conversation, now rules the day. Yet there are examples—Karl Weick being one—of arranging and explicating theory in what comes close to a conversational and open fashion. It is a way of doing theory that is I think sensitive to the speaking–hearing process and, when brought into the writing-reading process, represents an inviting brand of theorizing. The object of debate is of course to overwhelm or obliterate one's opponent: to prune, pare and discard. The object of conversation is to keep it going: to plant, nurture and cultivate. In the most uncertain domain of organization theory, the latter objective seems preferable.

What I am suggesting is that since the very process of theorizing helps create the organizational properties we find in an all too real world, it is a matter far too important to be left to a small set of self-proclaimed experts with their mock science routines, images and metaphors. History is on my side for it is not always the case that persuasion is simply a matter of a few well-placed power-brokers who bludgeon opponents into submission by controlling publications, positions and resources—although it is probably still too often the case. I think a disarmament program is in order to take away certain taken-for-granted tropes that govern organizational theorizing—tropes like progress, truth and reality (singular), as well as all those terms drawn from bipolar hierarchies that privilege certain terms over others, like hard over soft, objective over subjective, perception over imagination, quantitative over qualitative and masculine over feminine.

In this light, it may well be that the most crucial questions having to do with theory development concern the ways we now carry on our work with each other. For example, how can we increase our tolerance for unorthodox approaches and, at the same time, increase the chances that we will learn from one another? What are the conditions that surround productive scholarly exchange in the field? Should debate or conversation guide the process of intellectual discussion and disagreement? Are certain institutional arrangements more likely than others to facilitate tolerance, learning and conversation? These are the kinds of questions I think we should be asking. They seem to me to be still open to discussion despite vigorous attempts like Jeffrey's to answer them once and for all. The answers—if indeed there are any—must come from the polyphonic voices that comprise our highly diverse field. We must be willing to listen to each other and to listen with respect. The goal is not to control the field, increase our prestige, run a tight ship, or impose a paradigm for self-serving or utilitarian ends. The goal is to learn from one another such that our ink-on-a-page theories and consequent understandings of organizations can be improved. Too often we forget.

Endnotes

[1]As I note in the text, this paper began as a speech. Arie Lewin was the first to approach me about turning the speech into a paper. Peter Frost was unflagging in his efforts to gather in the spoils—whatever they may be—for *Organization Science*. Barbara Gray, John Jermier, Linda Pike and Linda Smircich read an earlier draft of this paper and raised a number of questions which I have tried to answer. Jim Walsh (and his committee members) started the speech making and paper writing process by issuing an invitation to address the Academy of Management Annual Meetings in Atlanta in August, 1993. It was an offer I could not refuse. I am grateful to all. But I also realize that a speech and a paper are two very different performances. A speech is a live performance: "a mingling of," as Goffman (1981, p. 164) says, "the living with the read." As such, I took liberties in my talk that I dare not take here. From the podium, I felt free to embellish, to exaggerate, to improvise, to tell a joke or two, to pun around and ramble on without great concern for the niceties of written and often stilted communication on the belief that my listeners would take away the spirit of my remarks more so than my words. A good deal of editing has then gone into this talk-based paper. I have tried, however, to preserve some of the spirit of my verbal performance in the body of the paper and take up the academic slack by forcing on the reader a set of my beloved if grim endnotes.

[2]The tempest in a honey pot initiated by Jeff's remarks continues. There have been two published rejoinders (Perrow 1994, Cannella and Paetzold 1994) and, from personal experience, a good deal of corridor, seminar and tavern talk about the pros and cons of paradigmatic consensus in our field(s). Most of the controversy swirls around the content, not form, of Jeff's analysis and thus stands apart from the themes I pick up in this paper. It is worth noting however that Jeff's talk (and paper) is a superb example of his own style. It is stuffed with operational definitions, testable hypotheses, appeals to scientifically grounded truths, string-cited references to supporting evidence (much of it his own), and so on. It is, I think, stylistically impressive and clearly the kind of writing he does best. Indeed, when in top form, no one does it better. This makes for something of a problem, because when Jeff breaks from the impersonal, third-person, just-the-facts format and issues a hesitant personal confession or two, the displayed lack of certainty and assumed intimacy (identification) with the reader ring hollow if not false. On paper, an uncertain Jeffrey Pfeffer is no Jeffrey Pfeffer at all. My point being that he is most convincing in genre, least convincing outside of it. The genre, however, deserves scrutiny.

[3]This language-first switch produces a culturally relative version of reality and suggests that perception is as much a product of imagina-

tion as imagination is a product of perception. Reality thus emerges from the interplay of imaginative perception and perceptive imagination. Language (and text) provide the symbolic representations required for both the construction and communication of conceptions of reality and thus make the notions of thought and culture inseparable. The literature exploring and promoting this ontological gerrymandering is enormous and can be found within and across many cutting (or bleeding) edge fields, e.g., natural language philosophy, post-structural linguistics, cultural and symbolic anthropology, contemporary literary studies, semiotics, constructivist schools in sociology and psychology, etc. A summary of this literature is impossible, but a few of the works I have found accessible, influential and relevant to organizational studies include: White 1978, 1981; Rabinow and Sullivan (Eds.) 1979; Ricoeur 1976; Clifford and Marcus (Eds.) 1986; Brown 1977; Clifford 1988; Fish 1989.

[4]See, for example, Daft and Wiginton 1979, Burrell and Morgan 1979, Barley 1983, Morgan 1986, Turner (Ed.) 1987, Krieger 1989, Fiol 1989, Martin 1990, Astley and Zammuto 1992, Barley and Kunda 1992, Manning 1992, Reed and Hughes (Eds.) 1992. These works are appreciative of interpretive shifts in contemporary social theory but most do not problematize in-house representational techniques in organizational research and theory. Two recent works that do are Kilduff's (1993) splendid deconstruction of *Organizations*, the classic March and Simon (1958) text, and the savvy reading Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) apply to several organizational ethnographies. Both works take seriously the role rhetoric plays in the materials they examine and thus force their target texts to tell a rather different story than what their respected authors may have intended.

[5]In the context of this paper, I treat rhetoric as an attempt (in writing) to persuade, alter or otherwise move readers with respect to attitude, opinion, interpretation and, most critically if least likely, action. Effective rhetorics vary by genre, of course, and style, as the distinctive (individualized) use of rhetoric, is always relevant when considering influential texts. This is not to argue that organizational research and theory is reduced to rhetoric and therefore rendered corrupt but, rather, to argue that rhetoric is inevitably a part of organizational research and theory if a work is to have any impact. For some good treatments of the role rhetoric plays in social theorizing see, for example, Gusfield 1976, 1981; Brown 1988; Davis 1971; Edmondson 1984; Nelson et al. (Eds.) 1987; Simons (Ed.) 1988; Van Maanen 1988; and, especially, Green 1988. The inspiration for much for this work is, naturally, Burke (1957, 1962).

[6]The kinds of vague advice we offer students on writing provide convenient examples: "avoid logical inconsistencies," "seek empirical tests of ideas," "try to be precise," "use the standard public language and avoid the babblish elements of vernacular and jargon, academic or otherwise," and so forth. We teach that sobriety, attention to detail, balance between theory and data, care without obsession and an easy, not relentless use of metaphor are critical to the legitimation of one's work. What we conveniently ignore, of course, is that these are matters set by fashion, not natural law: by the imagery and genres available in particular periods. Someone writing today with, for instance, Whyte's (1943) organic allusions or Thompson's (1967) stark propositional inventories will not qualify as a credible organizational theorist. We gloss such matters because it blurs the distinction between rhetorical and rational persuasion. But, as I argue in the text, a strong distinction between the two is impossible to maintain. On the role of rhetoric in selected disciplines, see, for example: White 1973, Fish 1980, O'Neill 1981, Bazerman 1981, Marcus and Cushman 1982, McClosky 1985, Stocking 1992, and, in organization studies, Gergen 1992.

[7]The post-Kuhnian perspective implies that inquiry and advocacy are difficult to pry apart. Close ethnographic looks at high-science fields provide wonderful examples of this interdependency at work (e.g., Lynch 1985, Latour 1987, Traweek 1988). For a contemporary, telling and quite astonishing treatment of the sociology of scientific knowledge, see Ashmore (1989).

[8]This is not, by any means, an exhaustive or systematic review of scholarly reactions to Karl Weick's work. To develop and categorize reader responses to the substantial body of work Karl has produced over the past 30 or so years would be a daunting task. My point here is simply to point out that it is widely regarded—indeed celebrated—as high-grade organization theory and yet also treated as more than a little idiosyncratic and enigmatic. Uniqueness is notoriously hard to pin down, but here I try to locate it in Karl's compositional practices or writing style. There is however a danger of setting myself up as a style critic who, by some master stroke, is able to authoritatively divine and define all the persuasive elements to be found in an examined work. Readers are thus homogenized and reduced to passive subjects responding to a particular text like Skinnerian rats responding to a given stimulus. This is not my belief nor intention. Readers actively locate and create the meanings they pull from texts and different readers may respond to the same text in quite different ways. This is apparent in my list of scholarly reactions to Weick's work. There is, no doubt, a collective order to reader responses however, such that subgroups of readers could, in principle, be identified by certain of the background characteristics they bring with them to a text, characteristics that may lead them to experience the text in a similar fashion. But, alas, this highly contingent treatment of text requires a much finer-grained analysis then is presented here. Reader response theory is developed nicely by Iser (1978, 1979), and a useful, culturally contextualized example of such theory put into service is Griswold (1987).

[9]I use this label with some trepidation. Like all critics, whose unenviable job it is to pigeon-hole the work of others, I realize a single, simple tag is a dangerous way to characterize a large and diverse body of work; work that continues to develop new themes, directions and stylistic gestures. Moreover, Karl—like all good writers—works within and across different literary genres and thus restricts, modifies and amplifies his style accordingly. Stylistic purity is not being suggested here. My claim is merely that "allegoric breaching" is associated with what I take to be the most persuasive of Karl's writings and the smattering of examples I've provided in this short text are intended to be representative of these writings. His least persuasive writings, I would argue, are those that display few of the compositional features I discuss here.

[10]The page numbers and textual arrangements refer to an unpublished draft of "Cosmology Episodes" I had on hand—and in mind—when working up my analysis of Karl's style. The paper has subsequently been published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* under the same title but in substantially revised form (Weick 1993b). The typescript of the published version runs 49 pages, it is no longer explicitly called an essay, the personal tone has been—to a

degree—sacrificed, the number of bibliographic references has more than doubled, there are eight section heads, etc. The published version still contains the allegoric breaching style I highlight here but it is certainly less prominent than in the previous draft. Perrow (1985) would call this editorial work "asphalting": a way of flattening out the writing (and writer) and bringing a work in line—down to snuff—with current journal practices. Style, it seems, is something of an anathema to journal editors. I justify my use of the unpublished draft in this paper on the grounds that it represents a relatively undiluted (unpolluted) example of Karl's style. It also has the advantages of being both recent and short.

[11]This is particularly apparent in *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Weick 1969, 1979) whose very title signals Weick's intention to take on the then canonical text of the field, Katz and Kahn (1966) *The Social Psychology of Organizations*. The move away from structure to process, from permanence to temporality, from role taking to role making and so forth is conveyed by Weick in a loose, crazy-quilt fashion quite the opposite of the target text's tight, orderly presentation where all "variables" fit neatly into place. Impressionistic anecdotes, flights of metaphoric fancy, reprints of *New Yorker* cartoons, hand drawn graphics all contrast with propositional inventories, system diagrams and universal postulates. The solid organization of Katz and Kahn is deconstructed and reconstructed by Weick as a fluid bundle of social and cognitive practices. Read in tandem, the two texts could not be further apart in theory or style.

[12]The "illustrative situations" deserve comment since Karl seems increasingly concerned with apocalyptic events and landscapes—nuclear accidents, flight decks of aircraft carriers, forest fires, air disasters. These are sites where anxieties of the white dead dawn peak and where communications fail. It is these communication failures—organizational breakdowns—that challenge Weick and thus make a good deal of his work profoundly metadiscursive as he struggles with problems of expression, style and making the inexplicable explicable through the language of theory. By working toward a flawless diction where every word is made to count, Karl is also making a tacit but powerful statement about the value of form as form.

[13]I am aware that some readers may well dismiss my push for textual experimentation as bad career advise. Karl Weick can get away with it but, after all, he is tenured, venerated and skilled. Those of us lacking any one of these gifts are best advised to stick with the crowd and try to write like everyone else. Such a view strikes me as terribly shortsighted for it denies that textually aware and thoughtful students can both acknowledge talent and learn from its display. It also denies that readers—including journal editors and reviewers—are moved by graceful, innovative writings that are attentive to such literary matters as rhetoric, presence, voice and imagery. Indeed, my point throughout this paper has been to link persuasion to style and style is anything but institutionalized. Like language itself, scholarly writing practices are not cast in stone. Marshalling one's tropes to go in unconventional ways may be difficult and perhaps lonely, but it is by no means everywhere and always unwelcome.

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