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## Noise, Parasites and Translation Theory and Practice in Management Consulting

**Abstract** *Conventional representations of consulting stress the need to predict possible organizational realities associated with improved economic performance. It is conceptualized as a useful tool from which practice might profit if applied properly. In this article we explore theory as a means by which practice may not so much be honed by well-crafted advice as interrupted and transformed. Further, we propose a parasitical role for the management consultant as a source of 'noise' that disrupts established ways of doing and being by introducing interruptive action into the space between organizational order and chaos. What consulting can do is open up these spaces and create concepts that encourage new possible realities and real possibilities. The relation posited between organization theory and practice has the potential to create new forms of situated organization/organizing through disrupting established practice rather than by creating order. Consultants willing to take the risk of working in the productive space between organization and disorganization have a potential that questions the usual auspices of the enterprise. **Key Words:** disorganization; management consulting; organization; organization learning*

What should be the relation between organization theory and its *application* to organization practice? It is this normative question that prompts this article. Of course, some commentators and theorists have proposed relatively easy answers to this question. One example of such an answer is that organization theorists should show the truth to power—this would seem to be the line that arch-positivists, such as Donaldson (1996) express. The fundamental argument here is that an organizational structure should be associated with better performance in economic terms and that the task of the organization theorist, qua consultant, is to chart the contours best able to deliver this, to advise on misfit, and generally assist in the achievement of better performance. Thus truth, power and performance can, and should, be tightly connected. If this position of showing truth to power is one extreme, then perhaps the position that is furthest removed is that represented by writers such as Burrell (1997), who, in the name of philosophy and social

theory, would see the organization theorist as a creative artist whose creativity exposes the bases on which the possible truths of the practice of organization theory are contrived. The mid-point between these extremes, it would seem, is represented by writers such as Whitley (1987), who, inspired by the organic basis of the root term—organization—see the theorist as something like a medical practitioner, advising on the health of the body corporate, often with a low quotient of evidence-based medicine.

Although these approaches are significantly different, they are united across a common continuum—one that proposes that theory, as employed by the theorist, is a tool that can be used to somehow *understand* and potentially *inform* the nature of practice. Contrary to such perspectives, in this article we seek to explore theory as a means by which practice can be *interrupted* and *transformed*. Thus, rather than using theory as a means of representing or predicting possible organizational realities, we suggest that the role of theory should be to disturb organizational realities such that they might be changed. Further we propose a role for the management consultant as he or she who facilitates such disturbances. In so doing, the article is intended to provide a theorization of the potential of consultancy vis-à-vis its relationship to theory and practice.

Our point is nicely illustrated in a quotation from international business consultant Richard T. Pascale who, in discussing the Royal Shell Dutch Group, recently made the statement ‘One cannot direct a living system, only disturb it’ (1999: 83). To us, this notion of disturbance suggests two issues for the practice of consulting: the role of communication and language in organization, and the general possibility of intervention in ongoing processes. A practice of consulting emerges through such intervention and communication that can be thought of as the encouragement and maintenance of organizational learning and innovation—it seeks to help organizations both to change and to change the way they are changing. The processes that might lead to such change and learning are not ready-made solutions and simple how-to-do-it recipes that often characterize consulting; rather, they facilitate an organization being able to redefine and reframe the ideas and visions that inform its existence. Such a consulting process would involve ‘defining the situation’ (McHugh, 1968) in three inter-related ways. First, in terms of defining a *problem*, the address of which becomes the organization’s *raison d’être*; second, identifying a *language* with which the organization can recognize and manage this problem, and third, disrupting the boundary between organization and disorganization (Munro, 2001; Cooper, 1990). Representing consulting as defining the situation thus involves problematization, language, and dis/organization.

In suggesting that consulting can play a part in an inter-dependent and immanently deconstructable relationship between organization theory and practice, we concur with Gergen (1992: 218) when he suggests that one can evaluate a ‘theory in terms of its challenge to the taken-for-granted *and its simultaneous capacity to open new departures for action*’ (emphasis added). In accordance with this, in this article we suggest a particular use of language for understanding consulting and the related processes of change, transformation and learning that enable organizations to cope with the surprising, emerging, and rapidly shifting complexity in which they operate. Although our intention is to inform organizational practice, we steadfastly wish to avoid the traps of positivistically oriented scholars

whose desire is to dissect, analyse and positively advise organizations on what their managers *should* do. Instead, we try to delineate a more pragmatic approach that, following Rorty (1989), concentrates on understanding *how* rather than *what* imperatives give rise to certain phenomena, yet recognizes that, in taking action, individuals cannot rely on universalities to inform their behaviour (Garrick and Rhodes, 1998: 180). Thus we intend to theorize and describe a consulting practice that acknowledges one must choose strategies for understanding and taking action in the world, and one must do so without the possibility of final knowledge of whether, in any ultimate sense, one's choices are correct (Cherryholmes, 1993).

In pursuing these issues, the article is organized as follows: first, we outline the concept of organization on which we build our perspective on consulting. Instead of viewing organization as an attempt to forge order out of chaos, we suggest that organization is a combination of different orders. In light of this perspective, we challenge some dominant images of consulting, which see it as a practice oriented only to a desire for order and control. Next we reflect on the role of language in consulting and the tensions that can emerge from it. Finally, we outline a new way of understanding the practice of consulting. We conclude by discussing the implications of our approach for the relationship between organization theory and practice.

Our discussion of these issues is theoretical, both in its genre and through the positions from which we write. By this we do not mean that the discussion is either separate or irrelevant to practice; on the contrary, we seek a position that provides a novel and more or less organized way of understanding the world that can be used to generate new opportunities for practice. We seek not to tell people what to do but rather to open up possibilities for what people might choose to do. We do not write from the position of expert-consultants sharing our 'experience' and 'wisdom' with the uninitiated. Neither do we suggest that we have some privileged access to the 'truth' or to the best advice. Instead, our value proposition might be better described as an attempt to reflect on the potential for practice in order to provide new and different ways of understanding it—ways of understanding that might lead to new ways of being and acting in the world and new ways of conceiving the relationship between theory and practice.

## Consulting to Organizations

Clark and Salaman (1996: 155) provide a definition of management consulting as an

advisory activity which necessitates intervention in an ongoing system where the advisers are external specialists and so have no organizational responsibility, and where the aim of the activity is some alignment to the organizational system.

One implication of this definition is that consulting concerns intervention from the outside—it means changing an organization *on purpose* (see for instance Schein, 1988, and his doctor–patient model). In addition, however, we suggest that such change should be informed by thinking creatively about the nature of the client organization, the vicissitudes of the client's problems, and the role and image of the consultant. In reflecting on his own experience, ten Bos (2000: 203)

says 'my work as a consultant and trainer has convinced me long ago that traditional and ingrained ways of thinking do not teach us much about what is going on in organizations'. He goes on to ask whether 'strategy [is] a set of bloodless planning techniques that could help bloodless managers to solve their bloodless problems?' (ten Bos, 2000: 204). In line with ten Bos's reflections, we believe that consulting can be understood from a pragmatic epistemological perspective that situates it within the volatile world of organizational unpredictability rather than just being a matter of applying familiar technique to often familiar problems.

If consulting is about intervening to change organizations, a starting point must be an outline of what one conceives an organization to be, such that it can be changed. With regard to mainstream analyses, organization is understood as a means of ordering, structuring and controlling the chaotic world outside. Its episteme is oriented to reducing uncertainty, equivocality and lack of control, as Clegg (1990) argued. From such a perspective, for any given enterprise, organization means extending freedom by increasing constraints, redefining boundaries, and generally minimizing the freedom of other entities. Here, organization provides a means for achieving a stable, predictable and secure world.

In questioning and problematizing such conventions, other forms of (Foucauldian inspired) organization theory have sought to redirect attention to study of those micro-practices of ordering, codifying, framing and classifying that stabilize theoretical effects such as the production of 'truth' (Chia, 1996: 32). For such theory, organization is a 'reality-constituting and reality-maintaining activity' (Chia, 1998: 366). Thus organizing involves ordering and 'ignoring; simplifying; fixing what is complex for a moment in a stable form; reifying' (Law, 1994: 132). Such forms of organization create putatively singular monologues that posit a claim to speak for the entirety of the organization against the multitude of dialogic alternatives that struggle for recognition (Rhodes, 2001). Thus, in practice, organization can be seen not just as a simple ordering device; it is more than just a 'grammar to reduce ambiguity' (Weick, 1979), always implying what Lee and Brown (1994) call 'irreducible otherness'. Identifying organization with order, classification and predictability is problematic because it 'closes off possibilities for simultaneous alternative readings and imposes a false finality on the dynamic process of understanding' (Rhodes, 2000: 29). This dynamism implies that organization exists within the noise of a multitude of voices that, heard together, sound like a cacophony, yet each of which, if heard independently, has its own order. For our purposes then, organization is not a proper formation of elements but a combination of both order and disorder—a mixture of different texts, potentially conflicting, produced from the varied perspectives and uses of language of those who comprise and interact with it (Rhodes, 2001), each pregnant with new possibilities for organizing and disorganizing. Chaos, disorder, multiplicity and noise are not in opposition to, but are the precondition of, organization.

Through this combination of order and disorder, organization can be seen to involve de- and reconstructing fundamentals equally threatened by the twin dangers of chaos and order (see Cooper, 1990). Thus consulting, as an intentional intervention in an organization, need not be seen as just organizing in the sense of the creation of a new order, but also as a disruption of order, an exploration and exploitation of the spaces in between present order and potential, future

order. Such consulting is a means to initiate movement from the margin; an intervention that is in between (*inter-venere*) the organization's usual ways of managing, leading and organizing, and the solutions that the consulting garbage-can offers to the problems it is able to define. Such consulting attempts to find new ways of organizing by injecting chance into rules, while finding the law residing in the heart of all disorder, where part of the role of consulting is to encourage self-reflection and to intervene in an unstructured way in order to provoke self-organization and increase the awareness of paradoxes that constitute organizational life (Stacey, 1996: 261).

## Consulting and Ordering

For many, especially those who take an institutional perspective, consulting is closely related to the creation of order. From such a perspective, it is stressed that the importance of highly professionalized consultants is that they maintain internal and external legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 355) and that consulting per se reflects a 'normative and rationalistic myth' (Berglund and Werr, 2000). Such views propose that consulting should first and foremost be seen as an exercise in reducing complexity, producing consensus, and seducing management into simple, comfortable and secure solutions. As such, consultants are seen as constructing and celebrating organizational rationality and ratiocination as a ceremony and façade, making grand narratives from 'organizational myths' (Clark and Salaman, 1996: 176), selling 'hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 1994), offering expectations institutionalized in consulting expertise (Alvesson, 1993: 1004; also see Fincham, 1999), formulating answers before the question has even been asked and making up managers in the fashionable recipes of the day (Clegg and Palmer, 1986).

Such perspectives suggest that consulting is an attempt to reduce complexity and sell safety by providing neatly packaged answers and unequivocal 'best practices'. Instead of deconstructing the taken for granted, they provide a 'final vocabulary' (Rorty, 1989) that tries to reassure and comfort management. Thinking in this way follows the tradition of western thought that conceptualizes abstract thinking and theorizing as ways of simplifying the real in order to control it, in the Cartesian sense of cutting, dividing, and separating in order to gain control (Dale, 2001). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1999: 201), however, we can understand the overarching desire and driving force behind such thinking as being to link ideas together—to bind them, with a minimum of constant rules of resemblance, contiguity, and causality in order to fight against chaotic reality, uncontrollability and unpredictability. When applied to consulting, such models involve the claim that one can simplify, stabilize and arrest the flux and constant transformation of organization and of managing to organize.

In opposition to such perspectives, Karl Weick (1979: 189) points to a different conception of consulting, suggesting that it is important to bring chaos, noise and disorder into order because

the inability of people in organizations to tolerate equivocal processing may well be one of the most important reasons why they have trouble. . . . It is the unwillingness to disrupt order, ironically, that makes it impossible for the organization to create order.

This resonates with Joseph Schumpeter's (1934) earlier description of the driving force behind capitalist society as 'creative destruction'. Indeed, Weick (1979) advocates something similar for organizations. Thus, following Schumpeter and Weick, rather than delivering simultaneously simplifying and totalizing grand narratives, we propose that consulting can be effective by increasing variety and complexity through a disruption of dominant orders.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach would seek to disturb existing patterns and structures that have become an obstacle to tomorrow's excellence. It would do this not by looking for incremental improvements or the implementation of the latest fashion or benchmark, but by reframing the routines that an organization uses to try to solve problems in a way that is noisy and uncomfortable. A goal of such consulting is to shake an organization out of its established order.

### Language and Consulting

Based on our arguments so far, we now turn to the question: how might consulting practice introduce chaos into existing states of order where one is potentially seduced by the rules and harmony of existing routines? Our starting point in addressing this question is that consulting is first and foremost a linguistic activity—a discursive practice through which realities are enacted. Indeed, what else do consultants do if they don't talk, listen, read and write? Thus, in that consulting is discursive, discourses can be said to create social reality by producing *concepts*, *objects* and *subject positions* (Hardy et al., 2000). On this basis it is possible that through introducing new language, consulting can seek to change both the way thinking is conventionally organized and the organization of conventional thinking (Otzel and Hinz, 2001). Hence, one can apply the 'linguistic turn' to illuminate the purpose of *applied* organization theory (Hatch, 1997: 368). We can elaborate this concept with an idea Rorty (1989) originally developed in philosophy, suggesting that changes occur through a process of contestation between old and new ways of thinking a thing into being. Further, when the new way of thinking is capable of redescribing many things in new ways it will create a pattern of linguistic behaviour that will define a new generation of adopters, causing them to look for appropriate new forms of non-linguistic behaviour. However, they will not argue the case for the new practices on grounds that are common to 'the old and the new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such a criteria' (Rorty, 1989: 9).

From this perspective, consulting, in its use of language and theory, can produce generational changes in organizing practices through effecting new ways of thinking, seeing and then being in the world. In this context, every language game produces a 'truth effect' (Foucault, 1990) which, in our case, directs ways of thinking about/of organization(s). Here, we turn to Nietzsche to help understand the nature of such 'truth':

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are

illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (Nietzsche 1990: 34)

Consulting might thus make an organization aware that in organizing it deals with images and not with substances (Alvesson, 1993). New language games, new concepts, are an attempt to see, perceive and think differently—just to see ‘how we get on’ (Rorty, 1989: 8). Further, it is theory that can help generate these games.

Consulting is in a potentially privileged position from which to introduce new language games and new theories because it is located at a decisive and powerful interface in our society—at the margin where theory and practice intermingle. Consulting can thus be a bridge between the world and the text (Cálas and Smircich, 1999: 659), mediating between science and practice (Czarniawska, 1999: 8). Such consulting practice produces and then introduces new language, deconstructing and disturbing established orders of discourse, translating and mediating between new and old languages and metaphors. The consultant can help free practitioners from the ‘iron cages’ that organizations become as their social constructions constitute routines that have outlived their sentence (Czarniawska, 1999: 9).

### Consulting and the Tensions of Change

Consulting may be conceived as a process of tension, oscillating between order and disorder and de- and reconstruction. It can deconstruct organizational routines and taken-for-granted convictions in order to open up a space to the other voices, different perspectives, and differing opinions that operate within it—producing dissensus, searching for instabilities, gaps and divisions, building creative dissonance into practice, even if it challenges the core values of the organization. Thus consulting challenges the knowledge an organization possesses (through learning) and the identity by which an organization is possessed (through becoming): it questions the established ways of world-making (Goodman, 1978) in order to open up as yet unknown perspectives and possibilities.

Through introducing repressed, marginalized or new language games, consulting has the potential to encourage people to speak in many tongues in order to enact different possible organizational realities and real possibilities. These emergent discourses, languages and ‘truth effects’ (Foucault, 1990) enact different worlds not yet routinized within organizational reality. Hence, consulting can delineate a creative space from where reflexive action can emerge—not to unify but to multiply reality. In order to learn and to produce necessary in-tension between order and disorder, consulting can supplement organizational rationality with what James March (1988) called a ‘technology of foolishness’ as playful creation relaxes the boundaries of thought, and complicates the ways we produce our realities. We therefore suggest that in order to map unknown terrains, to create new places, to defer perception, we need fantasy, imagination and ‘*randonné*’.<sup>2</sup> That is what consulting can—but often doesn’t—provide to organizations.

Organizational change, transformation, learning and becoming, the overarching goals of the consulting we are describing, lie between *randonné* and method,



between foolishness and rationality and between improvisation and standardized programmes. This consulting follows an inventive, capricious curve, surfing on possibilities, constantly renewing the configuration of these possibilities. It is the constitutive paradox of learning that keeps the entire organization in tension through ‘creation *and* imitation, variation *and* uniformity, distance *and* interest, novelty *and* conservatism, unity *and* segregation, conformity *and* deviation, change *and* status quo’ (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995: 192). Learning is thus repetition and difference at the same time (Deleuze, 1994)—it occurs at the moment when the old is *no longer* and the new is *not yet* in sight. It is thus a moment of undecidability, where the situation, as an emerging process, cannot be defined. This is improvisation with an unforeseeable ending (Hatch, 1999). We emphasize this argument because one cannot say in advance whether the change that an organization makes will be useful or not. Learning occurs when there is slack, emerging in spaces for experimentation, foolishness and *randonné*—it disturbs harmony such that the quest for usefulness might be fatal.

### Consulting, Noise and Parasites

Consulting as discursive practice is the art of negotiating tensions and exploring spaces in between existing order and potential chaos. The consultant’s role in this game can be circumscribed with a concept of Michel Serres (1982): consulting creates parasites. To make an important clarification up front—we do not use the term parasite negatively. Following Serres, a parasite is that which brings noise into the heart of a system, it disturbs and disrupts it—and, as we have seen, this is a decisive task for every organization. Parasites emerge in this space in between, where order becomes blurred into disorder and noise produces a new order. As they belong neither to the consultant nor to the organization consulted to, parasites represent the excluded interstitial relational third. They are neither A nor B but the relation between them. The parasitic process occurs, for example, in the consulting project team consisting of members of both the consultant’s and the client’s organization. Consulting can thus transgress the boundaries between seemingly ordered insides and apparently chaotic outsides, creating relational interstices and gaps (Fincham, 1999).

Parasites, metaphorically, translate language games as their form of life. They produce noise through introducing new metaphors and mediate through translation. Far from making a system fragile, such noise, disorder and irrationality strengthen it. Consulting can interact with organization to produce this noise in a ‘search for instabilities’ (Lyotard, 1988) within complex systems. This parasitic consulting wakes the organization up; it shakes the organization out of the harmony of a dreamless sleep, back into the randomness and unpredictability of life. It uses a technology of foolishness and invents problems anew. Following Serres (1982), noise, chance, risk, anxiety, and even disorder can give rise to a more complex system, rather than being the negation of systematicity.

Consultants can bring noise to an organization through the introduction of new metaphors, language and theory as well as by listening to the hitherto unheard. In any given state of being, such new language cannot necessarily be expected to be understood by the organization—it might be perceived as pure noise. However,

when a system is forced to make sense out of such noise, it is obliged either to translate it into its own language games or to undertake a generational change and recruit those who can readily speak the new language. Either way, it changes the filters that structure and organize its reality. Noise challenges the old way of world-making and forces it to rethink underlying frames informing organization.

## Mediation/Translation

Parasitism, to Serres, is ‘the heart of relation’:

that is the meaning of the prefix para- in the word parasite: it is on the side, next to shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. (Serres, 1982: 38)

It disrupts the bivalent logic that dominated western thought, representing the infinite (fractal) values between zero and one, between inside and outside, and between order and chaos. Parasites mediate between two or more systems, they are in between, neither here nor there but in the middle, ‘crossed by a network of relations’ (Serres, 1982: 39).

The process of parasitic consulting to such a network is a task of translation. In this sense, translation is far more than a pure repetition of the same in the words of the other: rather, translation always combines difference and repetition at the same time (Deleuze, 1994). According to Benjamin, translation seeks to communicate the ‘unfathomable, the mysterious, the “poetic”’ (Benjamin, 1982: 70) that constitutes the reality translated: it attempts to impart the underlying feeling beyond the surface of the written and spoken word. A translation, therefore, is never a literal likeness of the original, for the original undergoes a change—it loses and it gains meaning through translation (Benjamin, 1982: 73). Benjamin uses the simile of a tangent touching a circle lightly and at but one point: translation touches the original lightly, thereafter pursuing its own course according to the interplay between fidelity and displacement, difference and repetition (Benjamin, 1982: 80). It touches the original, takes one element out of its body and takes it on a journey, develops and transforms it on its own line of flight. Translation circumscribes the productive and creative process: it is a displacement, invention, mediation, and creation of a new link which did not exist before and modifies in part the two agents: it ‘comprises what exists *and* what is created’ (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995: 182). As we have pointed out, translation takes place in between and therefore it is the *inter-vention* par excellence.

The second capacity of translation is its power of *invention*: during its unfolding it modifies and changes both languages. It is the driving force behind organizational change and development. Like (jazz) improvisation,<sup>3</sup> translation is a play that implicitly changes the grammar and the words by repeating them; in the interstices of this play between difference and repetition a new language occurs. Translation helps us ‘to maintain the images of order and control that are central to organizational theory and *simultaneously* introduce images of innovation and autonomy’ (Weick, 1998: 548). Further, it ‘involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique

features to every creation' (Berliner, quoted in Weick, 1998: 544). A translation both reflects its past and explores the future, such that it is a process in which the ongoing action can still make a difference and every attempt at translation can be a point of departure for a new language (Barrett, 1998). There can, however, never be anything like a perfect translation: it is always a 'provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages' (Benjamin, 1982: 75). The language of translation never fits perfectly; rather, it envelops its content like a 'royal robe with *ample folds*' (Benjamin, 1982: 75; emphasis added). Folding and unfolding, enveloping and developing—these are the moves of translation, and with every single move, there (dis)appears a new, yet hidden reality.

To sum up: the task of the consultant as translator consists in finding an effect on the language into which he or she is translating that produces an echo of the original (Benjamin, 1982: 76). Further, rather than transporting a clear-cut message from one point to another, such translation creates a bridge between differing language games that shape organizational reality, deferring both of them. Translation is not about turning the language of theory into management's language; it is not about assimilating the foreign in order to make it the same. Hence

the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be *powerfully affected by the foreign tongue*. . . . He must *expand and deepen* his language by means of the foreign language. (Pannwitz, quoted in Benjamin, 1982: 81; emphasis added)

Concentrating on a foreign language, we deepen the understanding of our own language and enrich its vocabulary—it is here one can find the possibility to create alternative realities.

## Conclusion

The concept of parasitic consulting that we have described attempts to make an organizational system more self-reflexive; it does not improve the organization of production but analyses the production of organization such that new productions might be possible. Hence it does not increase the knowledge of the organization but questions the organization of knowledge. The disorder and noise that a consultant can generate in an organization symbolizes both danger and power: the danger of destruction and the power of an emerging order (Douglas, 1966: 94). Such consulting does not confirm the action-generating mode in which organizations operate much of the time and it does not function in a trivial problem-solving mode that attempts to find solutions to pre-given questions (Starbuck, 1983). Rather, it is a demanding problem-generating process that enables and encourages organizations to think, act and feel differently. As such, consulting can try to enact new worldviews, new ways of world-making, and to encourage people to disrupt established ways of thinking. Consulting can be a walk on the edge, including the possibility of falling and failing. And as we know, the map does not mirror the territory; it forms it while mapping it (Baudrillard, 1983; Clegg and Hardy, 1996). The map used to guide the consultant—image, memory and theory—is of pivotal importance to its practice. Transforming the map might

change the landscape and a sterile business might turn into a fertile soil for further experimentation.

The implications of our discussion for the application of management and organization theory to practice are manifold—as we argued, following Michel Serres, organization is the constantly threatened space in between order and chaos. While we are provided with enough senses to protect us against the danger of explosion and chaos, we do not have enough when faced with death from order. It is our difficulty in disrupting existing order that makes the creation of a new order problematic. Such difficulties are the challenges for consulting and for theory, but in productively responding to this challenge consulting may be conceived as a practice that constitutes the interplay between order and chaos and thus creates the space in which the consultant operates. If consulting is about helping organizations to change and learn, such learning is a journey on the edge, on the fringe; a way of exploring the space—it cannot be measured by the old standards because it is the very process of inventing and establishing them anew. Thus organizational slack, *randonnée* and a technology of foolishness are the preconditions of learning and change where theory acts as a catalyst to, rather than a representation of, organizational reality. All processes of organizational transformation are processes that are not entirely controllable and manageable because they imply the deconstruction, deterritorialization and reversing of existing practices and images that frame an organization's actual possibilities. Consulting might then see its task as transgressing this frame in order to develop new competencies—which, necessarily, implies a playfulness that encourages people to experiment with the taken-for-granted order of the organization.

In conceptualizing consulting this way we also realize that we need to take care not to deify the consultant as a master of the art of noise—an idealized being capable of injecting sufficient noise to create corporate turnarounds and pave a path to organizational prosperity. The notion of the parasite suggests that change and insight are not magically transported from the brain of the consultant to the body of the organization but, rather, that consulting might re-create the spaces between putative divisions of brains and bodies. Indeed, consulting firms are not havens of pure reason and idealism—they are real organizations comprising real people with real lives. The changes they might be involved in are neither pure nor clean but mediated through the embodied reality of everyday life. These realities are not merely mundane and unimportant. As organizations, consulting firms are composed of people pursuing their own projects in a pressured setting in which it is by no means certain that they will persuade the client of the soundness of their analysis and presentation (Ramsay, 1996). The long hours, the tight schedules, the politics, the pressure to justify preferred policies, and the need to follow the company line, are all real pressures that consultants face and that constrain their independence and creativity. The parasites created, the *randonnée* embarked on, and the translations attempted are mediated through potentially problematic collaborations between different organizations. Consulting is not easy.

Despite such complications, we believe that consulting is important because it proposes action in the space in between organizations. Consultants are not business Messiahs but earthly dwellers on the threshold of two organizations—boundary spanners across the realm of the unpredictable and unstable, where there are no guaranteed or timeless answers but only pragmatic options which

inevitably lack the ability to defy unknowability. What consulting can do is open up spaces and create concepts that move and multiply client organizations, as well as encouraging new possible realities and real possibilities. Of what significant value is consulting if it does not make a constant effort to balance learning and becoming, organizing and disorganizing, while politically negotiating the space in between?

To turn back to our opening question, we suggest that the relation between organization theory and organizational practice has the potential to be one in which theory disrupts practice to create new forms of situated organization. Further, the creative and disruptive translation of such theory is a task that might be taken up by consultants who are willing to take the risk of working in the productive space between organization and disorganization.

## Notes

1. Complexification is increasingly understood as important for management and organization theory—see the special issues in *Organization Science* (1999) 10(3) and *Organization* (1998) 5(3).
2. *Randonnée* is a French word used by Serres (1982) that is not directly translatable into English. In one sense it means a hike, an expedition or a rambling walk but, importantly, it also includes the connotations of improvisation, chance and impetuosity. This is not so much a planned journey whose destination is charted, but more of a rambling journey to a destination not fully known. A magical mystery tour, perhaps?
3. See Hatch (1999), Zack (2000), special issue of *Organization Science* (1998) 9.

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