

The Cunning of Communication: Human Resources Management, the Flexible Self and the Invention of Work Rage¹

An overworked clerk is staying late in the office to finish a report. Suddenly realizing a quirk of computer fate just made him loose an hour of work, he vigorously crumples a piece of paper and dashes it in the dustbin.

A manager comes to a worker's desk to inform her that her workload of the day is to be increased. When the manager turns her back around after having dispensed her instructions, the clerk gives her the finger.

During his monthly "performance appraisal", an employee of a firm is told that an immediate improvement in his performance is mandatory or else he will be let go. The next day, the employee comes to the office with a rifle and shoots at his co-workers.

These stories, although seemingly incommensurate, were told to me during different human resources management conferences as cases of the same new and allegedly widespread "problem" in the management of labouring humans: "work rage". I attend these human resources management (HRM) talks - with an unshakable cynicism that I confess straightaway- as part of my doctoral research about North-American human resources managers' discourses on subjectivity. Across conferences, conventions and human resources management literature, the importance given to the discursive artefact of "work rage" has appeared overwhelming and therefore requiring some anthropological deepening, as an example of what Canadian anthropologist of science Allan Young (1997) following Ludwig Fleck has termed an "epistemic thing". I thereby consider "work rage" as an artefactual discursive dispositive that condenses and gives access to the broader epistemic culture and ideology of contemporary management.

"Work rage" and the corresponding "enraged worker" are some of the latest arrivals on the market of contemporary management imaginaries. Modelled on the equivalently catchy "road rage", the term "work rage" and the interest for it made their apparition in American management circles in the last decade. Academic and non-academic references to the concept

¹ The title of my paper is a grateful allusion to Elizabeth Povinelli's book *The Cunning of Recognition : Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002).

have exponentialized in the last five years. “Work rage” is very dissimilarly defined across HRM sources. According to my survey of HRM literature on the theme, the most recurrent traits attributed to the “enraged worker” are a refusal to cooperate with others and to obey authority, a tendency to argue and to act belligerently even with superiors or clients and a propensity to swear, scream or to be physically brusque towards objects. Clearly, the label “work rage” comprises a variety of antagonistic behaviours, attitudes and feelings that can range from a slightly disapproving sigh to the hostage taking of one’s office or shop floor. As a cultural or epistemic artefact, the label of work rage, its circulation and its effects are more significant than its - very thin- content. What seems of particular interest is the fact that, in spite of its definitional heterogeneity, work rage is systematically referred to in the language of mental health and the psychopathological, as a “diagnosis” comprising a list of “symptoms”, “prevention methods” and “treatments”. In the work rage dispositive, the worker is transformed into a sick person in need of therapeutic help; the workplace, through various assistance programs, becomes conceived of as the therapeutic setting rather than the pathogenic environment; and needless to add that the potential causes of the “patient’s” oppositional attitudes and emotions find legitimacy only if discussed within the framework of this *psychotherapeutic habitus* of contemporary business organizations as it has been termed by Foucauldian critical management students Costea, Crump and Amiridis (2008).

Let me stress that I am interested in work rage as a door leading to the ideological level, as a “symptom” of a deeper “affliction”. Therefore, the point is not to know if aggressive behaviour does or does not occur more or less frequently in the workplace, nor to decide if “work rage” exists as a legitimate diagnostic category. Little valid research has been conducted on the subject; and many human resource managers, work therapists and organizational psychologists I interviewed, even among those keen to propagate the “work rage” dispositive, told me that they never had encountered an actual case of work rage in their practices, but that they *knew* it *could* happen...

An abundant literature in critical management studies has thoroughly highlighted the circumvolutions of the human resources field’s relationship with science and its own positivist epistemology. The least we can say is that, since Elton Mayo’s 1931 hoax Hawthorne Effect, human resources management theory and practice has been anything but scientific, despite the field’s attitude of scientificity (Stewart 2009). Again, I am not interested in denouncing work rage as an invention, a myth or a lie, I rather want to understand how and why this fiction, this myth, this “thing” came to enjoy such a success. How is the tale of the “worker gone mad” productive? Where does it point to in current conceptions of work and of work relations? What can it reveal about the management of the self, emotions and behaviour in the workplace? Needless to say that

mine is a North-American perspective. I am very eager to learn how the phenomenon I describe takes shape (or not) in European settings.

The formalized concern for the worker as an individual emotional subject is a quite recent but crucial transformation of contemporary work relations. As Nikolas Rose (1989), Charles Taylor (1989) and Foucault (2004, 1984) have but differently analysed it, the attention to workers' affects, psyches, health and selves simultaneously participates in and results of the shaping of the modern private subject.

Since the industrial revolution, the interest taken in workers' psychological states in most of the ideologies of personnel management was limited to the effects of rewards, incentives and punishments on productivity and employee retention. From the middle of the 19th century, welfare capitalism had understood that the industrialist "caring for" his workers was a productive, efficient and moral mode of labour force control. But this "care" remained largely focused on the aspects of the workers' lives that were mobilized in their work: health and hygiene, time management and some educative measures. Although workers' behaviour came to be increasingly standardized and scrutinized in the course of the twentieth century with the help of scientific management, the concern for the worker's state of mind in but also outside of work can be associated with the rise of the Human Relations and Human Resources Management paradigms in the 1960's and 1970's United States (Keenoy 2009, Wren and Bedeian 2009).

According to historian of organizational psychology Roy Jacques (1996), human resources management appeared both as a humanist counter-proposition to Taylorism and scientific management and as a tentative answer to America's inferiority anxieties in front of Japan's economical explosive advancement. The premise of the human resources management's paradigm was from the start simple and very intuitive: People are essential to an enterprise's success; committed, motivated and perhaps even happy workers mean greater gain for the business. HRM popularized the idea that taking into consideration the "softer" and "human" side of an organization i.e. its people and its culture (Brewis and Jack 2009) would lead to a greater productivity of the organization. It also spread the conviction that committed, motivated and ideal "human resources" selves could be engineered, fabricated and managed by employers through a variety of positivism-inspired pseudo-therapeutical techniques and practices of subjectivation such as training sessions in leadership and creativity, healthcare and development programs, methods of motivation, repeated individual assessment of performance, etc. By the 1980's, the human resources management paradigm was established as an academic discipline. It was institutionalized in business schools and in psychology departments and widespread in corporations in the US, Canada, Great-Britain, Australia and, however with greater resistance, in

other European countries with stronger labour movement traditions (Keenoy 2009). It since then has developed a teeming academic and non-academic literature and research field, which - as the example of work-rage demonstrates - is a-historical, a-critical and largely self-referential. Barber (1996) wrote - enthusiastically - that the HRM paradigm should today be considered as one the strongest ideological forces of capitalist globalization.

Of course, the birth and successful development of HRM holds accountable to wider social, cultural and political movements that I cannot go further into now. Suffice to say that the period during which HRM won its spurs tallies with Reaganism in the US, Thatcherism in Britain, with the beginning of global economical deregulations and with the rise of “the market” as the unique, totalizing and autonomous force of regulation.

These larger and deep transformations entailed by the ideology of neo-liberalism / ultra-capitalism brought changes in the conception of work relations. From a dualist conception of the conflict between workers and capital as the fundamental equilibrium state, work relations came to be thought of in terms of a common good between the individual worker and the firm, the corporation. In the overwhelming logic of the market, labour and capital are not opposing forces anymore; they become partners in shared interests. Individual workers can gain personal financial, social, professional and psychological advantages by sharing the objectives of the corporation and the enterprise benefits from these committed allies that only need a little “help” and monitoring to assure their “development”, “motivation” and “commitment”. The reactive collective labour force is dissolved into responsive individuals. Simply put, it is thought that everybody has something to win by collaborating towards the sole valid objective of winning on the market (Fleming and Mandarini 2009).

In this erasure of the idea of a fundamental conflict between workers and bosses, the very fact of conflict comes to be understood as a problem of communication. When a disagreement arises between possessing and labouring forces –the later being made into isolated oppositional characters or “mad” individuals- it is swallowed under the heading of a failure in information sharing. With the help of managers and work therapists, employees could be helped better understand what the corporation wants from them; with the help of managers, corporations could be helped take better advantage of what the workforce has to offer. Any disagreement is remediable through discussion and deliberation. As noted by Costea et al. (2008), it is not insignificant, given this therapeutic communicative *habitus*, that the curricula in American business schools have gradually turned away from sociology, political science and moral philosophy in favour of studies of organizational psychology, communication and ethics. The fame in management literature of concepts such as communicative ethics and deliberative

rationality and the success of thinkers such as Habermas to the detriment of conflict perspectives are also remarkable.

This broadly outlined, what could the artefact of “work rage” tell about the actual state of work relations and the emotional working subject? Quite clearly it can be read as a triple limit of the HRM paradigm. Three short observations:

Firstly, critical management political theorists Thomas and Linstead (2002) have highlighted the unstable nature of “the subject” in HRM discourse. Whereas much of HRM discourse and practice aim at “empowering” the individual worker, at validating and helping express his “agency”, his “creativity”, his “authentic self”, this authenticity and freedom of self are to the managers to manufacture. The request made to the worker to perform an authentic self in the workplace is really a requirement for flexibility. In HRM discussions of work rage, the episode of rage is systematically but paradoxically presented as a double failure: that of the worker who *disclosed too much* of his “authentic feelings” and of the therapeutic managerial apparatus that failed to properly monitor its “product” or to create for it an adequate “culture”. It is interesting to note that HRM discussions on work rage seldom tackle basic work relations’ issues such as workload, schedules or pay, and prefer to present the problem of work rage in the terms of mental health, placing the definitive burden of emotional flexibility and correctness on the individual worker.

Secondly, the “enraged worker” positions himself as the revealing excess of what Boltanski and Chiapello in *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (1999) have identified as the contemporary figure of the ideal employee/person: the competitive bum with great ideas. In effect, in personnel management advice literature, the behaviours and attitudes that are presented as “the best ones” to adopt as an employee and to look for in recruitment are the ones that simultaneously read as profitable for the employer and protective to the employee, thus confirming the vision of employer and employee heading collaboratively in the same direction. To commitment, motivation and flexibility, the “new” worker must add some originality, some style, even some dissent, some resistance. The ideal worker is not anymore the docile employee who skilfully obeys orders, but the extravagant nonconformist totally dedicated to his job and whose occasional “going overboard” is a sign of creativity. In this Google-modelled valorisation of what Boltanski and Chiapello call “designer resistance”, the dispositive of work rage serves as a reminder of who sets the limits of the dissent.

Lastly and more broadly, the work rage “tale”, by revealing the invisibility of conflict in contemporary ideologies of work, points to the limits of the communicational paradigm. As I said before, never is the (phantasmagorical) fit of anger interpreted as a fury of the labour force.

Rather, by naturalizing the “problem” as an individual ailment of the employee gone mad, HRM excludes straightaway a number of fundamental questions about the nature of work, the neo-liberal subject, corporative morality, etc. If I allow myself to summarize much too briefly Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2002, Turcot DiFruscia 2010) critique of the liberal deliberative ethics, I would say that the treatment of work rage illustrates how it functions by exteriorisation of internal limits. By putting on the angry worker the burden of qualifying as a participant in a “conversation” in which the premises must be adhered to, the corporation, HRM, neo-liberalism ask that he, the worker, confirms those premises, as arbitrary and harmful as they may be.

So, to summarize and conclude, if the story of the management of labouring humans has been about the production of humans’ feelings, attitudes and behaviours, maybe we can think and perhaps hope that the dispositive of work rage, as it puts so evidently into light the deep limitations of neoliberal conceptions of work and of the self will also give workers a renewed sense of resistance.

References

BARBER, Benjamin

1996 Jihad vs McWorld. New York: Ballantine Books.

BOLTANSKI, Luc and Chapiello, Ève

1999 Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme. Paris: Gallimard.

BREWIS, Joanna and Jack, Gavin

2009 *Culture: Broadening the Cultural Repertoire* In The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 232-250.

COSTEA, Bogdan; Norman Crump and Kostas Amiridis

2008 *Managerialism, the Therapeutic Habitus and the Self in Contemporary Organizing*. Human Relations 61: 661-685.

FLEMING, Peter and MANDARINI, Matteo

2009 *Towards a Workers’ Society? New Perspectives on Work and Emancipation* In The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 328-344.

FOUCAULT, Michel

2004 La Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979. Paris: Seuil.

1984 Le souci de soi. Histoire de la sexualité III. Paris: Gallimard.

JACQUES, Roy

1996 Manufacturing the Employee. London: Sage.

KEENOY, Tom

2009 *Human Resource Management In* The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 454-472.

POVINELLI, Elizabeth

2002 The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism. Durham: Duke University Press.

ROSE, Nikolas

1989 Governing the Soul: the Shaping of the Private Self. New York and London: FAB.

STEWART, Matthew

2009 The Management Myth. New York and London: Norton.

TAYLOR, Charles

1989 Sources of the Self. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

THOMAS, Robyn and Linstead, A.

2002 *Losing the Plot? Middle Managers and Identity.* Organization 9(1): 71-93.

TURCOT DIFRUSCIA, Kim

2010 *Shapes of Freedom. An Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli.* Altérités 7(1): 88-98.

WREN, Daniel A. and Bedeian, Arthur G

2009 The Evolution of Management Thought (6th ed.) Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.

YOUNG, Allan

1997 The Harmony of Illusions. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.