



## The Organization of Wire and String: Notes on an attempt to follow the Ben Marcus

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It is not obvious, or it is at least not obvious to everyone, that the study of organization must proceed from the classics of organization theory. That is, it is not clear that these books are the most relevant ones to struggle with when attempting to describe organizational or organized life. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to read something exemplary before attempting one's own descriptions of the manifold phenomena of organizing and to let that reading have some effect on the way one writes. Borrowing some terminology from Harold Bloom, we can say that the working management theorist must ultimately locate a given phenomenon on a 'map of misreading' resulting from a struggle with 'the anxiety of influence' that is occasioned by a set of often canonical works. The coordinates and major points of interest on such a map will define the 'field' in a quite literal sense. A map that includes 'Mintzberg (1994)' and 'Chandler (1977)' can be distinguished from one that leaves these out but includes instead, say, 'Williamson (1996)' and 'March & Simon (1993)'. Nobody ever really follows these maps, of course, at least not very closely. But they are interesting to draw whenever we are faced with new work and especially in such cases where this work seems to have opened one or another undiscovered country (or lesser death). Today, indeed, the world having grown perhaps altogether too familiar, there seems to be some interest in drawing up wholly novel maps or, more profoundly, work is emerging that seems to have gotten wherever it did precisely by ignoring, losing, tearing or cutting the orthodox maps, guided by a combination of highbrow intuition and primitive occultism. There seems, in any case, to be some support out there for proceeding on the basis of maps less famous than those that include the books just mentioned (not used). We experiment with the real in our attempts to follow and/or be misled by those maps.

One such map calls itself Ben Marcus. It is my work with a particular book of his, called *The Age of Wire and String*, my attempts to orient a set of inquiries by way of that map on the territory of organization studies, that I would like to present here. Marcus' book and the texts to follow are exercises in experimental writing, or simply literary experiments. Writing becomes experimental in the degree to which it seeks less to communicate an experience (i.e. to represent one or another state of affairs experienced, however vicariously, by the researcher), and more to occasion a reading that can itself serve as the relevant experience. In the case of writing on organization, the experimental text works only in so far as it occasions awareness of the reader's

current degree of organization and, hopefully, thereby also provides some insight into organization 'as such'. The question of whether it is successful should be left to one's peers working in the field, following the map and getting themselves interestingly or relevantly lost, seeing whether the experimental descriptions bring anything new or interesting or relevant to light. It is in the search for such criticism that I submit these short pieces to public scrutiny.

I offer three texts and some concluding commentary. The first is a programmatic statement that goes to the way the research itself has been organized (though all witnesses, as we will see, are false in this domain). The second and third present the results of such research. It is difficult to say anything very conclusive about these texts and I will not make the attempt here. Some information drawn from *The Age of Wire and String* itself might, however, be of use to the reader. First, the proximal 'setting' of these texts is present-day Ohio, making them descriptive only in the sense of being sad-faced (or vaguely Weberian) ideal types. "There will never be a clear idea of Ohio," of course. It is, perhaps, enough to know of "the person moving forward or standing still, wishing it was near" (Marcus, 1995: 61). 'Ohio' has also been defined simply as "the house" (*ibid.*) and it may be said that the task of the writing I am attempting here is either to locate the problem of organization on the map of Ohio or, as it were, find suitable housing for it. Second, Emerson's dictum that 'Every word was once an animal', is printed early on in the book, ostensibly as an epigraph. Third, "the Ben Marcus" is defined (*ibid.*, 76) as, among other quite different things, a "false map" and "a fitful chart in darkness" whose only real message is "that we should destroy it and look elsewhere for instruction". Fourth, the book is introduced with an 'argument' pleading the case for "a document of secret motion and instruction" suitable, of course, for life in "the age of wire and string". Fifth, a passing reference is made in the just mentioned argument to the obscurity of terms within "the living program". Sixth and last, the book itself (and thus this attempt to follow it) is offered (or imposed) as "a catalogue of poses and motions produced from within a culture". This offer is equipped with the worrisome caveat that "by looking at an object we destroy it with our desire" and the hopeful suggestion, therefore, that "the thing must be trained to see itself" (*ibid.*, 3-4).

We can, in any case, say of the pieces of writing to follow that they were written by a management philosopher who had been inspired to do so by the work of Ben Marcus. 'Inspired' can, of course, be variously interpreted. The texts may have resulted from the rather prosaic attempt to follow the false map known as (the) Ben Marcus, thus amounting to what a good Latinist is entitled, perhaps, to call *imitatio*, and in which case they must be considered an error, leaving their author neither here nor there, but leaving the *reader*, by fortuitous contrast, exactly where the reader is. *Here*. Alternatively, it may have been produced under the influence of the controlling Thompson (cf. *ibid.*, 27), in which case it is itself a manifestation of Thompson and authorship must, of course, be ascribed to Perkins (*ibid.*, 26). One departs from such a map at one's peril. It is, fortunately, forever too soon to tell and I mention the possibility here simply for the sake of good order. I suppose we are consigned to the quite unhelpful, and slightly helpless, insight that these texts must speak for themselves if they are to say anything at all – or, yes, despite themselves.

## I. The Department of Wire and String

To pretend that there are other concerns is to pretend. (*Ben Marcus: 4*)

The Department of Wire and String is committed to the articulation of experience, whether material or social, natural or cultural, with such means as are provided by the Legal Beast Language. It organises research and teaching to this end.

As best as we have been able to determine, among the four, six or nine allowed terms prescribed by the lexicon are skin, cloth, paper, string, wire, house, settlement, and weather – words that are always recently animal. Whatever hope we have is constituted by the (logical) possibility of articulating contemporary experience in documents that depend for their interpretation on a working understanding of only these terms.

While we demand strict compliance, the combined implicature of the lexicon indicates a certain liberality of usage. For example, most collections of animate matter can be articulated as compositions of skin, wire and weather; the house implies *both* the knife *and* the bed; etc. To understand dogs and birds is to master the grammar of skin, wire and weather. To understand the house implies mastery of the bed-and-knife assemblage. On this logic, everything of importance can receive articulation, i.e., proper documentation of the age can be provided, contrary to assumptions of reigning orthodoxy.

Articulation, preferably on cloth or paper (but we are open minded as to media) can be attempted by either (a) arrangement or (b) folding of the primary beast lexicon. What is essential is that that the surface attain its metaphysical composure. In a metaphysical composition the object is experienced as an apperception that includes it. The Department of Wire and String is committed to the task of training the things named by the Legal Beast Language to see themselves. Following Sernier, we believe that in perception objects are consumed by the desire of the perceiver. Our ambition, such as it is, is to allow things to consume themselves if at all, and thus to attain accurate vision.

## II. The House of Paper and String (The Bureau)

These several things are best arranged openly. Like doors, they ought to be installed on hinges in stable frames, i.e., in a durable but revisable arrangement. Connect pages (pieces of paper) by string-like associations (bindings, references, file folders). Lighting affords a proper vantage on the paper work; the work is carried out upon the paper; that is, the office does something to parchment of various kinds. This doing is a species of articulation, retraceable to barking in its final analysis. Do not retrace. An office is no place for simple, inarticulate grunting (as a home might be). Articulation seeks the inhabitable region (paper) between the dog's barking and the tree's. Install the page in fitting proximity to the skin (determine this distance by careful experimentation). Past research indicates that the skinned body affords a region of legibility across which the page may be passed and registered, where after it is often retained within. I.e., it now sits between the weathered skins of the body as a paper boat set upon an inland sea or

the tide of a storm in the interior. Such retention should be avoided in the present context, i.e., it should be officially denied or, if need be, admitted and denounced. The office landscape should offer no soil for permanent habitation or settlement. Only temporary frame shelters may be established on the shore for contemporaneous habitation by several persons (weathered skins, concealing voids traversed largely by wire and string and the unnameable grey substance concealed by what passes between us as cloth). A general sense of well being and good feeling (whose model is that of natural fabrics set carefully upon skin or a settlement braced resolutely against whatever weather) may be encouraged by gently sliding loops of string (and their attachments) along wires (between the housing frames that keep them taut). The windows and doors may be adjusted by opening and, where applicable, closing them in order to produce or reduce drafting effects. These might all too easily cause discomfiture as papers are shuffled haphazardly in the open air above the desks. (This is called Unofficial Weather and is rarely good.) Securing an office environment (managing its climate, providing Official or 'Fair' Weather) depends upon the careful folding and unfolding of skins, into more or less self-organizing bodies that respect the integrity of the papers involved and the necessity of intermittent settlement. These bodies ought to be trained to know when to move on, i.e., to see themselves as skins passing along wires smooth enough to spare them pain, even if pain belongs not to the skin but to the storm within.

### III. Dressing the Part

How, then, comes it, may the reflective mind repeat, that the grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue, should have been quite overlooked by Science, --the vestural Tissue, namely, of woollen or other cloth; which Man`s Soul wears as its outmost wrappage and overall; wherein his whole other Tissues are included and screened, his whole Faculties work, his whole Self lives, moves, and has its being? (*Thomas Carlyle: 2*)

Best to keep some things hidden. There are parts that ought to be sheathed in wool, cloth or paper so as to avoid detection, even under conditions of great excitement. These parts, which are of course already proximally concealed by (or as) skin, must be set at a distance not to *motion* but to *sense* (implying an ideological arrangement rather than an geographical one). The skin must be rendered insensate; it must become unaware of its own sensible sensations, and ultimately less wary of itself. This allows for the accurate apperception of other bodies ('seeing the other as oneself'), whether skinned or not, distributed beyond the skin but beneath the weather. Cloth or wool vestments may be employed in establishing the necessary distance. Where these are unavailable, darkness and stillness (obscurity and immobility) may be used. It is important to apply such operations in concert. A concert of darkness *and* motion, for example, is likely to lead to contiguous skin surfaces, a situation which is not recommended, especially in the dark where the professionalism of other skinned bodies cannot dependably be presumed. Practical coverings (work clothes or aprons) are therefore ideally suited to well-lit situations calling for motor skills or the display of other discernibly beastly behaviours. Be aware, however, that garments are themselves implicatures often indicating their removal by subtle and even occult gestures that are, as it were, woven into the very fabric of these false skins or proximate coagulations of very stable weather ('clouds that cover the man'). Winds under the cloth but above the skin are unlikely and even

unseemly but not unheard of. While a variety of lulling lotions have been proposed throughout history, their application all too often renders the relevant parts conspicuous. Darkness or loose clothing<sup>1</sup> (under cover of which the necessary obscurity may be established) is therefore in any case advisable here. In apprehending the covered skin, decency suggests sensing only the immediate surface and ignoring the (unfortunately) fashionable gesture to what is 'below' it (this pretentious preposition is itself a fashionable or 'white' lie). Business can be conducted efficiently in this tension. Local weather conditions and general changes in climate can of course account for or excuse breaches or openings in fabrics whose true function is to close tightly upon the skin wherever possible. Tissue paper may be used to soak up the residual effects of the necessary dissonance between the original equipment (beast tissue) and the standard issue (official garbing). What is called 'expression' (the export of the beast and its subsequent capture by a purposefully designed urban setting) occurs by means of this residue, which can be refined and worked up into a lather. From this substance articulation may proceed, affording a variety of tongues or languages, which may be preserved in frame structures established beyond the cloth, and (ideologically if not proximally) well beyond the skin, arranged upon the ground of whatever settlement has been reached, however tentative. There, and only there, can the negotiation of one or another cloth-peeling ('the repealing of the cloth') suitably commence.

## Commentary

Suppose we read these pieces in the context of specific problematics. Take, for example, 'research management' (or social epistemology more generally), 'corporate restructuring' (or strategic management) and 'sexual harassment' (or professional ethics). If there is a tendency in I, II and III to be organized under any one of these headings *more 'naturally' or 'intuitively' than the others*, then it seems to me that an argument begins to form for the relevance of these texts to those contexts. Such an argument would emphasise the immanent likeness of the texts to their contexts and thus the potential of the texts to serve as catalysts for the experience of that context's *haecceity* or immanent 'this-ness'. Such potentials, if I understand a good portion of the contemporary critique of organization theory in general, are very much in demand, if rarely supplied. I wonder if I have met even a small portion of the demand here.

In any case, what I am after is obviously a particular style of writing, and I am trying then to apply this style to some issues that arise in the description of organizations, without further comment on those issues. It is an exercise in presentation, not interpretation. Style is the way one expresses oneself; still more concretely, it is the choice and combination of one's words. This is especially clear here, where the style seems to emerge from the adoption of a relatively limited and concrete vocabulary, embedded in a more or less scholarly and somewhat abstract (even distracted) prose idiom. The style of 'the Ben Marcus' is clearly one that aims to achieve its effects by the wholesale, pre-emptive imposition of estrangement on the text, only after which an

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1 Darkness, when construed as 'weather you can wear' (as in popular advertising, for example), is of course thereby understood as the 'loosest' possible form of dress.

attempt is made to produce simple, if struggling, imagery as this strange lexicon is articulated in ordinary grammatical forms. Is this, at bottom, anything more sophisticated than circumlocution and euphemism? Is it worth the effort (whether of reading such texts or of writing them)? Time and more experiments will tell. But it seems clear to me that if something new is to happen in areas like knowledge policy, the theory of modern bureaucracy and the gender politics of the office, which is to say, in organization studies, the problematics that comprise them and the contexts that house them, then it will have to come by way of experimentation with modes of expression, with styles. The aim of writing, said Ezra Pound, is to get “off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader’s mind, onto a part that will register” (Pound, 1938: 51). We have only the lexicon and the grammar to work with: the imperfect maps handed by often doubtful teachers to perfectly incredulous students. These maps are normally presented as ‘theories’ but their effects are felt in the style of writing that goes on in the academy and, of course, in the organizations populated by their graduates. If theories are, as Bourdieu (1992) proposed, ‘programmes of perception’, then styles are, perhaps, manifestations of ‘the living program’ so often obscured. Orthodox (or ‘famously correct’) maps don’t encourage experiments in the way of expression. Perhaps patently false maps could do some good.

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