

PROCESS

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If we couldn't stop the world from moving, living would be unbearable; like being on a never-ending roller-coaster with tunnel vision. There would be no time to make sense of one moment before being drowned in the next. Fortunately, the apparatus of our consciousness is geared to slow up our experience, to frame and fix it into comprehensible 'things'. It is as though we turn the constant flux and chaos of lived experience into discrete and manageable scenes with familiar and well-behaved actors – like a strip cartoon. This is how we make sense of the world, by fixing it and naming it.

This 'sanity' comes at a price. In authoring these strip cartoons we cut them out from the world of experience and detach them from whatever reality it is that they belonged to. This deletes the background, the surroundings, the past, the connections and links to the rest of the world. Simple, understandable, sane ... but decimated, fragmented, dislocated. The cost of sense making is fragmentation. The history of thought could be described as a history of our struggle to come to terms with this fragmentation. Yet, each time some new idea offers to reconnect these fragments all it actually provides is yet another perspective: more fragments to study. Taking a look at the 'sense-making' literature of our times is like seeing the world through a thousand tiny fragments of a stained glass window – each one reflecting, distorting, filtering and framing some unimaginable reality beyond. The madness that is process is the unimaginable and incomprehensible vastness of reality beyond our 'reality'.

Fortunately Homo sapiens have evolved to make sense out of the chaos of process, to bring about order and with it control. This world of Things cut from the continuum of process has proved extremely useful through the course of human development. Things such as Deer and Buffalo, Lion and Tiger are powerful, shared notions when the social aim is to find food and avoid predation. Things such as Gods, Kings and Kingdoms provided order and stability. Science has enabled us

to characterise Things and to exploit these characteristics by better imagining what new Things we can create.

But all the time these Things are separate from the reality they represent. As this world of Things has evolved and elaborated, the route back to experience has become lengthened, vague, even at times impenetrable. This is more than simply a distinction between concrete and abstract. It is the reification of the symbolic in making sense of the world and the creation of something that, although it clearly partakes of reality, is not actually 'there'. Even the concept of Deer or Lion is just that – a multiplicity of drawings, narratives, images, memories of experiences. To us, the thing Lion is always something separated from the biological process that we allude to – unless of course, we should stumble into a man-eater. End of story!

Modernity could be described as a shift in the balance of social processes whereby lived experience has become subordinate to the world of concept. Experience is heavily discounted in favour of a perspective from which it is essentially disconnected. Ours is a conceived world of symbols and meanings. We only experience it third-hand. Reality has taken on the essence of advertising – even when the symbolic is blatantly apparent our adulation reifies it and makes it real.

We live according to a generalized image-repertoire... [the image] completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it... something we translate, in ordinary consciousness, by the avowal of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent), from which can rise, here and there, only the cry of anarchisms, marginalisms, and individualisms: let us abolish the images, let us save immediate Desire.

Roland Barthes said this, shortly before he was to be run over by a laundry van. End of Story!

Breaking the world up into Things brings order and control, but the madness of process still seems to seep through the gaps between these Things. Compartmentalising Things into coherent groups may narrow these gaps, but the resulting compartments are small, fragmenting the world of Things and leaving larger gaps between. The madness in these gaps cannot be reduced to the symbolic. It is untameable: a remainder. The Remainder. So the fragments have to work harder to keep this remainder at bay or lock it out altogether. Indeed, if it can

not be tamed, then at least the fear that it creates, fear of the unknown, can be exploited. Here is the opportunity to create and control worlds within worlds in which order and structure can be manipulated, albeit in the form of a dysfunctional symbiosis. There is benefit from the comfortable coherence created, but the price is to give in to the exploitative forces that provide the motive behind this ordering. And society is open to the weaknesses inherent in each of these social forms. This is, after all, a synopsis of social history: the competition between, and evolution of, these social forms. And the great social delusion exists in the denial that these processes should even exist. We are always preoccupied with the present and find it hard to see ourselves as immersed in a process playing out over generations.

Fragment and Exploit!

Our lives are full of the contradictions created by disconnecting things from process, and then feigning connections in order to better exploit them. The free market economy draws on our notion of Freedom as a fundamental human right to be nurtured and protected. It connects this notion to the appeal that markets should be allowed to find their own level without outside imposition. It draws on deeper links to the ethical correctness of Freedom itself and to the impeccable ethical certitude of Nature. Yet it exploits these Things simply because these connections do not withstand scrutiny. Markets are and necessarily have to be regulated because without regulation there is only corruption. Freedom is a difficult concept in any analysis, and freedom within the world of business is minted from the same coin as exploitation. And the ethical basis of Nature? There is none. Rather these are references to the long romantic tradition of Nature as pure, traditional, stable and above all free from the supposed corruption of humankind. Not the Nature of parasites, disease, viruses, predation and mass extinctions.

Fragment and Exploit!

Life today has never been more connected and more *inter*-dependent. This is in stark contrast to the almost universal image of autonomy where people are free agents able to make their own choices about how to live their lives. And yet a man in Huddersfield, England loses his job because his directors, seeking to appease their disembodied shareholders, have found 'cheaper' labour in India. A farmer sells up his livelihood because he can no longer compete with factory farmed produce brought half way around the world by ever more hungry

supermarkets. A family in Alaska lose their house because the rest of the world can not sate their appetite for carbon.

Right now there are problems facing *homo sapiens* on a scale and level of complexity that have never been experienced before. And the toolkit we have inherited to tackle these problems is sadly wanting. What is needed are new options, new ways of looking at the world that are better suited to dealing with the complexity and connectivity that is driving modern social forms.

The idea that the world of Things is in some way separated from the reality of process has existed and recurred through the history of human thought. But perhaps not surprisingly it has never gained widespread acceptance, given the utility to be gained from conceiving of the world as constructed from stable things that can be understood and manipulated. More fundamentally, the very act of conceiving of the world as process inevitably pivots us straight back into the world of Things. The former is always inaccessible while the latter is usually more than adequate for the purpose to hand. At least this has generally been true, but more and more we are faced with the shortcomings of this worldview: fragmentation, exploitation, and a general inability to tackle the sheer complexity of the problems ranged against us. The conceptual world of things has become too remote from the reality of the processes it tries to represent. What is needed is a way of reaching back to the reality of process, even if this is ultimately inaccessible. This is not about finding some new form of objectivity. It is more a form of anti-interpretation; an unravelling of the conceptual world of Things back towards the neglected ground that lies between Things and Process. Process may be unreachable but it is not unimaginable. Methods that enable us to imagine the experience of process may provide new perspectives and new 'insights' that can be used to critique the sensible world of Things and draw it back towards the reality of process that it is currently failing.

But before this can be done, there is an obstacle that must be removed! The very notion of process is itself contested and nowhere more so than in the writings of academia and the lectures of business schools. Papers describe Longitudinal Field Research (LFR), Grounded Theory, Action Theory, Activity Theory, Actor Network Theory, process mapping etc. Lecture courses offer to teach Business Process Management, Process mapping and Process engineering. Everyone wants in on Process and would be fighting to trademark it if they could: Process®.

The problem is that these ideas are at best not radical – constantly reverting back to the worldview of Things, and at worst reveal how the process worldview has been blatantly hijacked and converted into yet another comfortable arrangement of orderly, well behaved Things. LFR attempts to redress the shortfalls created by synchronic forms of research but its own methodology exaggerates the boundaries between the inside of ‘the case’ and what lies outside, cutting off the possibilities of exploring processes that extend outside these boundaries. Grounded Theory ought to be attractive to the cause of process but its foundations turn out to be no deeper than the piles of notes taken by its researchers on their excursions into the real world.

The Process of Business Schools shuns the very notion of process as the intractable reality of experience. This Process consists of orderly bubbles and neat arrows, lists of ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ and descriptions of ‘transformations’ turning one into the other. This Process fits on a sheet of paper, albeit sometimes a large sheet. It has defined beginnings and defined endings and defined relationships in between. It is a Process that has more in common with the well behaved world of computers than the messy world of social interactions. It may be useful if the objective is to shoehorn this disorderly world into a neatly ordered machine. But this would provide little insight into that world for those who are looking to reconnect with the reality of experience.

If the madness of process is beyond the grasp of meaning then maybe it is methodologically unreachable? Perhaps there is no alternative other than to accept a Popperian mind-set where fallibility constantly looks over the shoulder of science? This is, however, an alternative that has to be rejected, at least while the concept of process is explored. If we can intuit the process worldview properly then there ought to be ways in which we can use this perspective to generate new ideas. And these new ideas just may provide novel utility.

What follows are a few rudimentary thoughts on methods that may prove fruitful.

Time

Almost all methodologies involve the excision of their subjects from the continuum of time within which they were embedded. Beginnings and endings seem inevitable but they also create a sharp disjunction between what is inside and outside. Some methodologies such as Longitudinal Field Research may attempt to overcome this disjunction, but in many ways they have made it more acute. What is needed are methods that avoid being trapped by time.

Why not start a narrative in the middle and work outwards? Or write a narrative backwards by following the processes impinging on a particular moment as they bifurcate and multiply. Develop a sense for the dramatically different time periods that processes have: the immediate manipulation of the micro-material present; the gradual evolution of the technology involved; the still slower development of social forms; and the geologically slow progression of our anthropological evolution. You may chase one thread back no more than a few weeks or months, while another may only reveal its significance over decades.

You could start from almost anywhere: a particular meeting or event; the publication of a Newsletter. What were the enablers of this event? Where did the ideas discussed/written about come from? Who was involved and how did they relate to the company or organisation involved? What happened as a result of the meeting? You could follow events back as a result of your own research but why be bounded by it? A meeting on implementing a new corporate initiative to 'create shareholder value' is as much enabled by today's willingness to dedicate resources to the meeting and the initiative as it is by the corporate turnaround effected 5 years before. It wouldn't be happening if there were no consultants offering suitable 'solutions' and they wouldn't be doing so if they hadn't got their ideas from somewhere. The very notion of Shareholder Value has to be a prerequisite to this meeting and has been part of a process that threads its way back over several decades. It is a story that has been shaped by the larger macro-economic history of the west and key events in this history have impinged on our meeting in more ways than one. Is the logic of 'net present value' that pervades the tools of this trade really connected to the shareholder's notion of 'value'?

The Veil of Interpretation

Why tell a story at all? Is it really the job of the researcher or the business consultant to provide their interpretations? Or is their job to enable their audiences to arrive at meanings of their own? Instead you could omit or reduce your intermediate 'meta-narratives' and present your research materials in more open arrangements to allow your readers the opportunity to explore and develop their own interpretations. At the very least we should be humble enough to recognise that our interpretation of events is just another voice amongst many. Polyphony is a well-used idea intended to open up interpretation, provided it is allowed to amount to more than just different ways of saying the same

thing. Can we really escape our own ego to allow truly polyphonic representations?

The task of the researcher/writer is not so much that of ‘author’ as of ‘director’. Unfortunately the researcher’s interpretation is always inescapable even in the choice of raw material and the manner in which it has been captured. But perhaps for the researcher/director it is more a question of how to present the material as creating it in the first place. Why not use what has been bequeathed to you by history? Or at least allow your co-researchers (the researched) to do the creating bit? Your task is to chip away at what has been collected or offered to unravel as much of the interpretation of others as you can. There is also an element of experimental archaeology here. You must examine the bits that you have revealed and try to imagine how they would have been used. Your goal is to use Things as simple pointers to get your audience to sense or appreciate the underlying process from which they have been generated.

The Triumph of Experience

In the last twenty years museums have recognised that they can gain much greater appeal by becoming more experiential than conceptual. Maybe researchers should be looking at ways in which they can enable their audiences to experience the processes they are researching in a similar manner. Perhaps you could arrange your research findings using tools similar to computer games. Like many of the adventure style games, you could create a network of rooms or spaces through which your readers can wander at will. Each node in the network could combine a variety of materials – images and video clips; audio excerpts from interviews; documents (whole or abridged) – and perhaps you could even admit the voice of the researcher/guide. From each node your audience can explore in any number of directions. They could move from the shop-floor to the suppliers (or to the design office, or to the accounts department) or they could choose to follow the process that delivered the production technology itself and enabled the shop-floor to exist in the first place. And all the time your aim is to enable your ‘readers’ to experience your ‘researches’ whilst remaining sensitive to the fact that they can never really escape from your interpretative function; just as your interpretations can never escape from their re-interpretations.

These are just a few ideas of how researchers could try to reinhabit the lost space between inaccessible process and disconnected concept. This is not a manifesto for a new order, a new Objectivity or a new truth. Nor is it an attempt to create ‘Yet Another School’

of social theorising. It is rather a methodological plea coming from a sense of something beyond the comprehensible: that the world out there works as a swarm of complex, distributed, and interconnected processes. And that perhaps, just perhaps, we need to explore methods that are more sympathetic to this possibility. Methods that give us some sense of being part of these processes; that can articulate this distributedness and allude to the vastly different rhythms of time that shape the course of progress. Methods that are less likely to trip over the hard edges of Things?