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Re-imagining Images of Organization: A Conversation with Gareth Morgan

Introduction

In his best-selling book, *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan (1986) set out what has subsequently become known as “the eight metaphors” (Morgan, 2011), namely: organizations *as* machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, systems of change and flux, and instruments of domination. In subsequent work, he has also considered organizations and organizing by reference to spider plants, termites and blobs out of water (Morgan, 1993). His body of work on organizational metaphors (see for example: Morgan, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1986, 1993, 1996, 2011) has had a significant impact upon management thinking and the study of organizations (Grant and Osrick, 1996; Osrick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002). It has informed and inspired literally thousands of academics, managers and students over the past three decades¹. Moreover, it has also stimulated the production of a vast array of metaphorical images, including thinking of organizations and organizing as analogous to, for example: theaters (Mangham and Overington, 1987), jazz improvisation (Zack, 2000), conversations (Broekstra, 1998), personalities (Osrick, Lowe and Jones, 1996), identities (Cornelissen, 2002), polyphonies, (Hazen, 1993) human entities (Kumra, 1996) military battlegrounds (Dunford and Palmer, 1996) and soap bubbles (Tsoukas, 1993).

Rather than offering a broad discussion of the role and status of metaphorical thinking in organizational analysis, this contribution focuses on Gareth Morgan perspective on metaphor and considers which particular metaphors have had significant purchase, which have endured, and whether any new and significant metaphors are emerging within the field. Given that we have known Professor Morgan for more than twenty years, and having written extensively on metaphor ourselves (see for example: Grant & Osrick, 1996; Osrick and

Jones, 2006; Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002), the interaction presented here unfolded as an emergent conversation rather than as a structured interview.

The ‘Eight Metaphors’ and Beyond

Following an initial discussion of parameters and definitional issues, our conversation offered some reflections on established organizational metaphors before going on to consider new ones. More specifically, we reviewed the status of the eight metaphors contained in *Images of Organization* and then we briefly explored the emergence of two new contemporary metaphors.

Foundational Images or Illustrative Starting Points?

Cliff: Okay. Did you want to talk about... we could talk about metaphors themselves. I’d be really interested in having a little chat about them. You previously mentioned the phrase, ‘the eight metaphors’². We ought to talk about how the metaphors have changed, whether the original metaphors still have purchase. So do you still think they’re relevant?

Gareth: Oh, absolutely. They’re relevant historically, right? If you want to understand organisation and where it’s come from and how organisation theory has developed, then obviously the eight metaphors are actually relevant to that. In many respects *Images of Organization* is an analysis of the history of organisation through metaphor, right? And that’s where I always start. But, the point is now that metaphors have different significance, it’s going back to the idea we have previously talked about in terms of context and the importance of metaphor in a context, so building upon what you’ve just said, it’s clear that organisations are shifting from hierarchical structures to flat networks. Basically, new metaphors are needed for understanding this. Sure you can get some degree of understanding networks through the images of the brain or of culture or of the

organism, but, obviously new metaphors are forcing themselves into our attention. So that metaphor [i.e. the 'flat network'] in particular, is one that's obviously very relevant.

David: Do you see them as new root metaphors, or metaphors that may emanate out of the original eight?

Gareth: Well, that becomes a little bit of a game really of whether you want to make the eight work, which you can to a huge degree. But, it would be stupid for me to defend just eight metaphors when the whole purpose of images of organisation is to say... to talk about the way of thinking and how, if you accept that the way of thinking is metaphorical, then why would you limit yourself, okay, and so I've always said that they're illustrative. So it becomes clear that we've got to add to them and different people are doing that and legitimately.

Big Data and Big Brother

David: Any examples [of metaphors that have been added to] that really work for you? That appeal to you personally?

Gareth: Yeah, well obviously the idea of the global brain, which is a variation, if you want, on the brain metaphor, but it's not really, it goes way beyond it, but clearly the internet as a simple example of that and then there is 'big data'. Big data in this world, that's hugely important. Think about the Foucauldian metaphor, the panopticon and the whole idea of discipline and self-discipline, punishment, surveillance. Link that now to big data, look at what all the big tech companies are doing...

Cliff: Yes, but it seems to me that it's one of those metaphors that has been a bit of a slow burn metaphor, to use a metaphor to talk about metaphors, that when I talked to managers and students, 10, 15, 20, 25 years ago about the idea of surveillance and disciplinary power, a lot of them just couldn't get that idea at all. I think it's one of those metaphors

that's come of age with the increase in the actual prevalence of surveillance in society [e.g. the proliferation of video cameras in public spaces] and greater awareness of the power of institutions.

Gareth: Exactly.

David: Well I think it's freed up, it's left it shackles behind, if you like, of... it was mixed up in discussions about Neo-Marxism and control in the workplace, which is a different thing. It's that ideological bent that's got left behind, so that when you're talking about surveillance now, you're talking about surveillance in so called free world... we're supposedly never... have never been as free as we are in many ways, but are actually constrained.

Gareth: Yes, I agree with that. But, it's interesting because there are two elements to this. It seems to me, it's external surveillance, which we can all see, but in the Foucauldian model as well, it's how this becomes self-surveillance and so the way in which we are looking...

Cliff: Self-discipline, yeah....

Gareth: ...self-disciplining, right, which is incredibly powerful in terms of the way things are working out and also I think we have to recognise how big data and how the big companies like Google and the like, and the collection of data, are basically another form of surveillance in the sense that they're understanding...

Cliff: How people behave.

Gareth: ...how they behave, what their interests are, what they do, what they buy, etc. etc. etc. And, what they're actually doing in many respects is not feeding back the differences, what you don't think or what you don't like, they're feeding back stuff that reinforces your point of view. So if you want to take this on it becomes... we're in a self-affirming bubble, where the external reality that we're encountering all the time is reinforcing

whatever patterns that we've got. So there are very, very interesting implications of this, so clearly this becomes a major line of development.

Cliff: Yeah. I also think, and you may not agree with me here, but the power of some of the metaphors is when they're juxtaposed. I don't mean blended or multiple lenses, but they are just held in tension. So the kind of, the machine metaphor and the organism metaphor are best understood in relation to each other and when we start to talk about the panopticon, I wonder about the kind of emergence of social movements and the whole idea of activism as a response to some of the disciplinary power issues and the panopticon. So in other words, just as you have a play between the organic metaphor and the mechanistic one, that you have this sort of... these things almost grow in relation to each other as ways of thinking, so I wonder whether the kind of...

Gareth: Symbiotic, almost? To use a metaphor, but yes.

Cliff: Symbiotic, yes. Possibly, because I do think... I kind of introduced it there but, I don't know how you think or what you think the kind of... the social networks, activism, mobilisation, all these kinds of... they seem to be very pertinent ways of thinking about a new form of organisational metaphor.

Gareth: Yes, linking into the concept of self-organisation, right, of emergent organisation and complex adaptive systems thinking has got a lot to contribute to this, but here you get into, where's the driving metaphor? Where's the root metaphor in it all? I think that's hugely important to understand those social movements and what the driving metaphors behind them are. It's utterly fascinating. So clearly new metaphors are being developed and rightly so.

Images of Media-ization?

Gareth: There's one other metaphor I've got to put on the table, because you asked me what metaphors that I think are important and I said, the global brain... and we discussed the panopticon. The other one is this notion of organisation *as* media.

David: Oh, yes.

Gareth: Which is one that I've floated around, because I've been very...not very involved, I've been flirting, I guess, with Marshall McLuhan³ for the best part of 20, 30 years. I don't know if you can do much more than flirt with the ideas because the whole notion is that there's... it's much more of a source of provocation and all the rest of it. Anyway, it fits very well with my type of thinking and the whole idea that we have a society that historically has been built up on the concept of literacy and so the written word and taking the bureaucracy as the embodiment of the written approach to organising through the rules, etc. etc. and all of the conventional science and perspective based thinking and the linearity that comes with that. The whole idea of fixed objective reality, all connected with this world of literacy and the digital revolution and the shift in to electronic-mediated, multi-sensory modes of understanding to a degree that we've never experienced before, has got to be a force, not in a technologically determined way, but has to be a force that demands a completely new mode of thinking in how we understand the world that's going on around us and McLuhan came up with the notion of the global village as a very, very early metaphorical understanding of what's going on, but there are many, many more ways of thinking about this and of capturing this movement which is as important as the trend to media-ization, and so if you start to see this as part of the ground which is in motion here, all those metaphors that are going to be needed to capture this, it's just phenomenal.

Cliff: Yeah, and I can see that, and I think it's always interesting to then sort of look at the second order metaphors. So, for example, the 'organization as family' metaphor

encourages us to look at second order comparisons such as paternalism, the maternal figure, family feuds, and family values. Following through on that organisation *as* media take, companies used to talk about mission statements, the written. Now it's about brands and a brand isn't an...

Gareth: It's an image...

Cliff: ...it's an image, and do you know what, brands are consumed as much by employees as they are by external agents these days. So it kind of plays to the idea that if there's media metaphors taking... really taking hold, then we find some of these artefacts that are around that move away from mission statements to, what's our brand? And our brand is something you can't easily capture in just a written form, and a mission statement is exactly that. It's a statement that's written and it's that literacy thing and the media thing really does play into things like, as I say, brand.

David: I think the thing that you're capturing there is that we're moving towards a much more sensory approach to understanding, which is interesting in itself, because it may be almost a full circle, going back to what we were talking about earlier. So without the literal [written word approach], we're much more reliant on our five senses.... And that either... I'm not quite sure, but it either creates the potential for new metaphors or it takes us back to some of the original real basic metaphors that we're founded on and reinterpreting those, coming up with different metonymical outcomes, if you like.

Gareth: No, it's fascinating, because it will potentially revolutionize the whole of science and the whole scientific thinking and the notion of research and...

Cliff: Have you heard of these things called 'emojis'?

Gareth: Emojis?

Cliff: Right. Emojis are symbols that you use in text messages. Teenagers use them on their mobile phones – smiley face, sad face, heart, etc. there are hundreds of them on phones. You can represent happiness, sadness, love, anger...

Gareth: Nothing written.

Cliff: No, and as I understand it kids are sending complete text messages, which have no words and consist only of a string of images.

Gareth: I love that. You see it's just a little illustration of how this is all unfolding in a way that we can't possibly appreciate. So it's clear that *Images of Organization* is not about the eight metaphors, but it's about that type of thinking that can help us get into this... deal with this world a bit faster than we might otherwise would, particularly as academics.

Concluding Thoughts

There are several main inferences that can be derived from the interaction presented in this paper. The first concerns Gareth Morgan's reflections regarding the production and consumption of the eight metaphors contained in *Images of Organization*. It is clear that his metaphors continue to be popular and relevant. Indeed, the *Human Relations* journal have a special issue planned which is devoted to Morgan's eight metaphors (Ortenblad, Putnam & Trehan, forthcoming). For Morgan, the continued allure of his metaphors is their historical relevance as a collection of insights that help to make sense of how organization theory has developed. He states in our discussion that: "...in many respects *Images of Organization* is an analysis of the history of organization through metaphor". Although the eight metaphors have an enduring historical significance, it is also apparent that Morgan wants them to be seen as illustrative rather than exhaustive images and, as such, that they are deployed going forwards as a basis for generating further insights and ways of thinking. In this regard, his metaphors simultaneously work as 'relatively static reflections' (i.e. they capture the essence

of the history of organization theory) and ‘relatively dynamic projections’ (i.e. offering a reference point and/or trigger for further metaphorical entailments and developments).

A further interesting aspect of our conversation was that it highlighted two new organizational metaphors that resonate with contemporary organization life, namely: ‘the global brain’ and ‘organization as media’. The ‘global brain’ metaphor draws attention to the neural-like interconnectedness of a digital world combined with the increasing significance of ‘big data’. This metaphor also reveals the dark side of ‘big data’, in the Foucaudian sense of disciplinary power and surveillance, as ever more intrusive phenomena for individuals as employees, consumers and citizens. The ‘organization as media’ metaphor draws from Marshall McLuhan’s work – especially the idea that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964) – to provoke a consideration of the demise of the written word as a cornerstone of organizing (e.g. job descriptions, rules, mission statements and so on) and a shift towards what Morgan describes as “electronic-mediated, multi-sensory modes of understanding”.

If we reflect upon the characteristics of the ‘global brain’ and ‘media’ metaphors it appears that they are very different to Morgan’s ‘eight metaphors’. The earlier metaphors seem to be far more bounded insofar as it is possible to conceive of an individual organization as a discrete metaphorical entity (e.g. as a machine, organism, culture or brain). By contrast, it is hard to envisage a single organization as a ‘global brain’ or ‘media’. Instead, they are more easily depicted as synonymous with organizations at an aggregated level. Moreover, these new metaphors can be appropriately positioned as ‘images of society and social life’ as much as ‘images of organization and organizational life’. Somewhat ironically, this perhaps, at least to a certain extent, is in itself a reflection of living within a digitally connected world with increasingly blurred boundaries between organizations (and between business and society more generally). Hence, we posit that new organizational metaphors are

not organization-specific and that they are largely driven by wider social and technological changes rather than organization-centric imperatives.

When we reviewed the transcript of our meeting we noticed that the discourse concerning established metaphors (i.e. the machine and the organism) and the new metaphors did not entirely adhere to the conventional wisdom on metaphor-use where the process is presented as involving the projection of a relatively concrete ‘source domain’ (i.e. a specific metaphor) onto a relatively abstract ‘target domain’ (i.e. an organization) to generate insight or new ways thinking (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1980, 1986). More specifically, it appeared that the process of elaborating upon, and projecting a metaphor typically required the concurrent articulation of an inverse or opposite metaphorical image. So, for example, the discussion of machine metaphor incorporated the concomitant use of the organism metaphor. Equally, the discussion of ‘big data’ (i.e. ‘the global brain’ – control and surveillance) was accompanied by a discussion of ‘big brother’ (i.e. ‘social movements’ – autonomy and resistance). And, the discussion of ‘organization as media’ based upon “electronic-mediated, multi-sensory modes of understanding” (e.g. images, sounds, feelings) was juxtaposed with ‘the literal’ (i.e. the written). This might suggest that rather than seeing the metaphorical process as a two-part projection (i.e. from ‘source domain’ to ‘target domain’) we might further explore the metaphorical process as a form of tripartite correspondence (an interplay between a ‘source domain’, a ‘shadow source domain’ and a ‘target domain’).

Finally, this last point leads us to a final closing provocation: If, as Morgan has indicated, the metaphors produced in *Images of Organization* should be utilized to generate further ways of thinking, we could further rethink the established metaphorical process (i.e. a transfer from a metaphorical source domain to an organizational target domain) in terms of the extent to which it can thought of as being fixed and relatively discrete. By adopting a

dynamic perspective of movement from one metaphor to another (i.e. source domain to target domain to source domain and so on) and embracing the notion of multi-directionality⁴ (i.e. target domains can also project on to source domains) we can create more playful and less constrained ways of using metaphors which are likely to produce more innovative ways of thinking and create new images of organization.

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Notes

1. For example, the first edition of *Images of Organization* sold just under 250,000 copies.
2. The eight metaphors refers to those contained in *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 1986).
3. Marshall McLuhan formed the notions of the “medium is the message” and the “global village” and is credited with predicting the advent of the internet (see McLuhan, 1964).
4. A multi-directional view of metaphor has been developed within cognitive linguistics (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002), but has not really permeated through to management and organization theory.

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