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***Perspective by incongruity in the performance of dialectical ironic analysis: a disciplined approach***

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## ***Perspective by incongruity in the performance of dialectical ironic analysis: a disciplined approach***

### **Abstract**

The importance of dialectic to sociological thought has been recognised by many of the discipline's most eminent thinkers. Adopting a dialectical world view infused with irony provokes insights revealing logical contradictions, so opening up possibilities for the development of alternative interpretations of the social world. There is, however, very little in the way of method to support the development of dialectical irony as a key analytical tool for the social sciences. This paper seeks to remedy this deficit. Drawing on three key examples (trained incapacity, functional stupidity and interpassivity) the paper examines Kenneth Burke's 'perspective by incongruity' as a means for interrogating the dialectical moment, so contributing towards the development of dialectical ironic analysis within a methodology of humour.

### **Keywords**

Comic frame, functional stupidity, interpassivity, methodology of humour, planned incongruity, sociological imagination, trained incapacity

### **Introduction**

Many eminent thinkers have alluded to the importance of dialectic to sociological thought<sup>1</sup> and while Louis Schneider (1971) admits that the term is troublesome for sociologists, he notes that what he calls a *dialectical bent* has pervaded much sociological thought for over two centuries. One of the more troublesome aspects is that dialectic has no clear and unambiguous meaning beyond a probable consensus that

reasoned argument and opposition are involved. In teasing out the ambiguities that surround the term, Schneider (1971:667) identifies a number of meaning clusters that are relevant to social scientists, including: unanticipated consequences; adaptations that once made obstruct more effective ones; contradiction, paradox and negation; goal shifts; and the dissolution of conflict in the coalescence of opposites (Schneider 1971:667). From this list it will be immediately apparent that dialectic is a key concept in the understanding of the world as irremediably governed by the law of irony, which Henri-Frederic Amiel (1906:np) sets out succinctly as follows:

...life is a perpetual combat; it wills that which it wills not, and wills not that it wills. Hence what I call the law of irony – that is to say, the refutation of the self by itself, the concrete realization of the absurd.

Indeed, for US philosopher Kenneth Burke irony is the literary form of dialectic (Burke 1941). Yet, Brown (1983) notes that it is only in relatively modern times that the link between dialectic and irony has been recognised, the reflexive moment of reversal inherent in dialectic only being seen as an essentially ironic movement by late eighteenth/early nineteenth century philosophers (notably Schlegel and his critics, Hegel and Kierkegaard). The link is irresistible:

[The ironist] simultaneously asserts two or more logically contradictory meanings such that, in the silence between the two, the deeper meanings of both may emerge. This deeper meaning is dialectical. It does not inhere in either the initial literal assertion or its negation, but rather in the dialectical tension and completion that ironic awareness sets off between them. (Brown 1983:544)

Dialectical irony is structural and provokes insights revealing logical contradictions which lead us towards a closer examination of our paradigmatic presuppositions

(Watson 2015a). Thus, the dialectical moment opens up possibilities for the development of alternative interpretations of the social world. From this the importance of dialectical irony to the development of sociological thought will readily be appreciated as a means by which to *de-realise* those meanings that have become reified in discourse. Arguably, it is the very ambiguity ‘infecting’ dialectic (Hook, 1939) that renders the dialectical world view so potent to sociological thought. But this still leaves another problem, since as Schneider (1971) notes, there is no dialectical method as such, at least no method that is of use to sociologists conducting empirical research. True, Gurvitch (1962, cited in Schneider, 1971) does refer to a number of analytical categories as dialectical method, but Schneider dismisses this as ‘glib’, as exposition rather than discovery, and ‘suggesting nothing of method’. Kaufmann (1965) too, in *Hegel: a reinterpretation*, rejects the notion of dialectic as a method of discovery but accepts such a thing as a ‘dialectical world view’ which he regards as ‘immensely fruitful’. Thus, while sociologists may arrive at important insights by adopting a perspective infused with irony this falls short of constituting a method for the investigation of the social world. If dialectical irony is acknowledged to be a key construct for understanding the social then neglect of this in empirical analysis constitutes a serious omission which threatens to reduce the ability of the social sciences to arrive at insightful theory. This goes generally for all research conducted within a *comic frame* which Burke (1984a:np) defines as ‘the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy’. Very few have heeded Burke’s advice that ‘whenever and wherever possible, one should write comedy’ (1974: 312). (Certainly not Burke himself, though he has his moments). Yet, to reject humour as a research methodology is to wilfully ignore something that is

integral to the human condition; at the very least to reject a potentially insightful methodological approach for the social sciences (Watson, 2015a).

This paper offers a contribution towards remedying this situation by positing Kenneth Burke's *perspective by incongruity* or, as he elsewhere has it *planned incongruity* (PI), as a means by which to examine the dialectical moment between oppositional terms in order to arrive at useful sociological knowledge. Dialectical irony involves constructing a statement that is open to ambivalent clarifications. Perspective by incongruity presents a means for capturing this dialectical moment, held in the contradictory space between oppositions. Through this PI affords explanatory power, provides a critique of commonly held assumptions, and opens up directions for further research. The paper thus contributes to the development of a methodology of humour (Watson, 2015a,b) in the social sciences. The paper proceeds as follows: first, I set out Burke's construct of perspective by incongruity. I then furnish some examples in the social sciences and conclude by gathering together the threads of my argument, putting forward a case for the significance of dialectical irony to research in the social sciences.

### **Perspective by incongruity**

Kenneth Burke is best known as a literary philosopher, but he has been 'lurking in sociologists' footnotes since the 1930's' (Overington 1977:131). Certainly, he has much to offer sociology though his idiosyncratic style has been considered an impediment. Indeed, Overington goes so far as to suggest that his work requires translation in order to make sense to sociologists. A more recent eclecticism among sociologists may render this statement less true than it was 40 years ago and we are perhaps more ready to appreciate his significance in the field of sociology, as I hope to demonstrate here.

As a philosopher Burke is difficult to pigeonhole and his enthusiasms range widely. His most significant contribution was the development of dramatism as a means to analyse human relationships and in this he was a key influence on Erving Goffman (Jaworski, 2000). A major concern was with motivation. Burke argues that associations of terms create particular meanings and determine certain courses of action. To call a death ‘murder’, for example, is to put in train a particular course of events, most notably a search for the perpetrator (Overington 1977). Thus, Burke constructs *motive* as a ‘distinctly linguistic product’ (Burke 1984b:35). Certain terms therefore ‘stick together’ creating an apparent coherence which, considered ideologically, constitutes our assumptions about the world and guides our actions. Burke proposes perspective by incongruity as a dialectical epistemology aimed at interrupting these associations in order to arrive at what he calls a ‘truer’ explanation of social relations.

Burke defines perspective by incongruity as,

a method for gauging situations by verbal ‘atom cracking’. That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category – and by *rational planning* you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to another category. (Burke 1984a:94; emphasis added)

Fittingly, the term ‘planned incongruity’ can itself be thought of as an example of PI, a tension existing in the dialectical moment generated by the juxtaposition of these unlikely conjoined terms in which rationality and absurdity meet. Before moving on, however, Burke’s understanding of what is meant by ‘rationality’ in the context of the ‘rational planning’ requires some attention, since it departs in some respects from common usage. Rationality, as commonly understood, is the application of reason and the search for ‘reason’s traditional consort, Truth’ (Williams 1998: np). Rationality seeks to close down argument by following a single train of reasoning to its ineluctable

conclusion. For Burke, however, ‘an excess of rationality as so defined adds up to a new level of irrationality’ (Burke 1974:319). Pushed to its limits, the logical conclusion is reduced to absurdity (Burke 1973). Indeed, this is the tactic of the satirist who ‘Taking conditions that are here already...perversely, twistedly, carries them “to the end of the line”’ (Burke 1974:318). Burke gives as example, the entirely rational argument that the more as a nation we consume, the greater our need for production, and from this, it follows, the greater our prosperity. While there is a limit to what a person may *use* but not what they may *waste* it follows that ‘If people can be taught to waste enough...business need never face saturation point’. Hence, ‘the maximum possible consumption is made possible by the maximum possible waste, and therefore...*culture depends upon a maximum of waste*’ (Burke 1974:308; emphasis original). From this Burke sees triumphantly, ‘the eternal bull market!’ A conclusion which gains a certain amount of ironic force in the light of events of the last decade or so.

As Burke sees it, the problem lies in rationality’s attempts at ‘purification’ of meaning and its stripping out of human motives and desires. Instead, Burke redefines rationality, de-privileging it, and by this means de-stabilizing ‘Truth’ (Williams 1998). For Burke, rationality is not about *resolution* of dialectical oppositions (*pace* Hegel), rather it is about multiplicity and perspective, encompassing both the semantic and the poetic meaning of a construct. Rationality, as Burke uses it in ‘rational planning’, achieves its analytic power through the paradoxical revelation that (like all language) it is irremediably dialectic, containing its opposite (‘everything is its other’, Burke 1973:77). Thus, an excess of rationality produces irrationality, and therefore to be truly rational, rationality has to be less than rational, encompassing the poetic meanings – the emotions and desires – inhabiting motives.

In light of this, Burke advocates ‘conscientious irresponsibility’ (another planned incongruity) as the proper attitude of the academic engaged in comic criticism willing ‘to follow any idea to the end of the line not because you thought it was the whole story, but because you liked the dialectic exercise as such’ (Burke 1953:367). Conscientious irresponsibility acknowledges the complexity of the social and refuses to engage in reductive processes that strip out ambivalence and irony (Rueckert 1994). This for Burke is why the comic frame as an attitude is so important in critical analysis. The rational planning that PI requires cannot therefore be thought of as a systematic process, reducible to a formula for arriving at generative juxtapositions, despite Burke’s somewhat scientific metaphors such as ‘verbal atom cracking’ – he may, of course, be using this term ironically.

Perspective by incongruity is included in a section of *Attitudes towards history* called the ‘Dictionary of pivotal terms’, pivotal because, ‘taken together they constitute the terminological cluster comic critics need for the analysis of society’ (Rueckert 1994:114). ‘Pivotal’, as metaphor, draws attention to the dialectical intent of these terms, key among which for the sociologist are: *Bureaucratisation of the imaginative*, *Casuistic stretching* and *Clusters*. Paradoxically (in Borgesian vein), the ‘Dictionary’ constitutes a catalogue of terms for conducting an analysis using perspective by incongruity which includes perspective by incongruity as one of its pivotal terms, hence all these terms are equally implicated.

Bureaucratisation of the imaginative is the process by which one possibility, of many, becomes ‘embodied in the realities of a social texture’ (language, ritual, government etc) (Burke 1984a:235). At the outset, an imaginative possibility usually starts out as Utopian, but as it permeates the social it becomes subject to ‘bureaucratic fixities’ (228) (Burke draws on the metaphor *paving the cow-path* to illustrate this idea). At the same



time, the process by which this vision is translated into action can never be perfected and hence there arise compromises and ‘unintended by-products...useful for comic critique’ (Burke 1984a:227). Reflexively, Burke regards perspective by incongruity as itself an example of the bureaucratisation of the imaginative. Perspective by incongruity is, he says, a formula which ‘bureaucratizes the mass production of perspectives’. While he accepts this leads inevitably to a deterioration of quality by making perspectives ‘cheap and easy’ he argues that by ‘liquidating belief in the absolute truth of concepts [we are reminded] that the mixed dead metaphors of abstract thought are metaphors none the less’ (229). (Of course, it also serves to remind us that any attempt to reduce perspective by incongruity to method will likely undermine itself, thereby obeying Amiel’s law of irony.)

Casuistic stretching is a roguish strategy by which ‘one introduces new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles’ (Burke 1984a:229). Burke cites as example, Weber’s celebrated paradox outlined in *The protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism* (2002) (first English translation 1930) in which Weber posits that asceticism directly contributed to the accumulation of wealth and the rise of capitalism. In a subsequent ironic reversal this appeal to the protestant ethic was drawn on as justification for capitalist ideals. In this way, new ideals can be smuggled into the public domain by appeal to traditional virtues. However, casuistic stretching is always a double-edged and dangerous strategy, as Carlson (1992) notes in her historical analysis of the rise of feminism in America, in which the sphere of domesticity, as translated and reproduced in the world of work, served to legitimise women’s entry to the workplace while simultaneously constraining their position within it. Casuistic stretching is thus liable to ‘snap back’, rebounding on those who use it as a deliberate tactic to engineer

social change ‘especially when used by a group that maintains its piety to the established hierarchy’ (Carlson 1992:29). In more general terms, Burke argues that all metaphorical extension exhibits such casuistry. Thus, through casuistic stretching language attempts to veil its inherent dialecticism.

Clustering is the ‘significance gained by noting what subjects cluster about other subjects’ i.e. ‘what images b, c, d the poet introduces whenever he talks with engrossment of subject a’ (Burke 1984a:232). In this case, whatever the subject may say about ‘a’, his/her real feelings are displayed in the symbolic merger alluded to by the cluster b, c, d. Burke says, ‘By charting clusters, we get our cues as to the important ingredients subsumed in “symbolic mergers”. We reveal, beneath an author’s “official front”, the level at which a lie is possible’ (233), thereby exposing the author’s underlying motivation.

Pivotal terms act in the service of perspective by incongruity as a means to identify the dialectical moment drawing out its various meanings and exemplifying Burke’s predilection for multiplication and the ‘heaping up’ of terms. However, while acknowledging Burke’s undoubted creative outpouring, Macksoud (1969) makes the very reasonable point that Burke gives little away in terms of how to actually undertake a study employing perspective by incongruity. Of course, Burke was a one-off, endowed with an almost instinctive feel for language as poetry with no need of a systematic method to guide his analysis. He was no doubt aware of the dangers that such a reduction to method would give rise to (as the bureaucratisation of the imaginative). Others of a less esoteric bent have attempted to divine method from his writing with varying degrees of success. One of the inherent dangers of such a process

of rational purification is a loss of the paradigmatic comic frame within which a Burkean dialectical analysis is conducted. This is apparent, for example, in Berthold's (1976) cluster analysis of J. F. Kennedy's rhetoric. However, some guidelines may be adduced through example, as I now show.

### **Developing perspective by incongruity as 'method'**

Burke (1984b:74) uses the term 'piety' to mean a '*sense of what properly goes with what*' (emphasis original) giving rise to a particular 'interpretative network'.

Perspective by incongruity, by contrast, is 'impious', Burke's term for any action which 'attacks the kinds of linkage already established' (Burke 1984b:87). Impieties therefore interrupt the normalised assumptions underpinning interpretive networks. The religious allusion in the metaphor of impiety is suggestive of the heretical intent of PI as considered within the comic frame.

Impiety is clearly evident in the three examples discussed in this paper: trained incapacity (Burke 1984b; Merton 1940; Veblen 1914, 1918); functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012); and interpassivity (a condensation of interactivity and passivity) (Pfaller 2003; Žižek 1998). The 'moral' dimension in each of these terms is clearly apparent; in each case, a decently upright term is juxtaposed with one more dubious in its associations which, confronting each other, serve to set up the dialectical moment and the possibilities for ironic reversal in the space between the two.

#### *Trained incapacity*

The term 'trained incapacity' was coined by Thorstein Veblen, author of the classic satire, *The theory of the leisure class* (1994) (originally published in 1899), and

developed by Burke (1984b) who defines it as ‘that state of affairs whereby one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses’. Burke goes on,

One adopts measures in keeping with his past training – and the very soundness of his training may lead him to adopt the wrong measures. People may be unfitted by being fit in an unfit fitness. (Burke 1984b:10)

Increasing specialisation therefore ‘widens the candidate’s field of ignorance’ (Veblen 1918:147).

While there have been many studies that have drawn on the construct of trained incapacity (e.g. Aylett 2013; Herppich 2012; Kanter 1977), Merton’s (1940) classic analysis remains the most faithful to the Burkean comic frame, opening up the multiplicity that dialectical analysis demands. Merton draws on trained incapacity and two related planned incongruities, Dewey’s ‘occupational psychosis’ and Warnotte’s ‘*déformation professionnelle*’ (professional deformation) in an examination of Weber’s sociological analysis of bureaucracy, showing how these constructs actively, and ironically, undermine the goals of the organisation. Organisational psychosis, according to Burke (1984b:38), was used by Dewey to mean a conditioning of the mind in response to particular historical modes of production; nobody knows what Warnotte meant by *déformation professionnelle*, as it was published in French<sup>2</sup>. Weber’s classic analysis of bureaucratic institutions offers a rational account of organisations in an era of modernity (and even in today’s supposedly post-bureaucratic society is still highly relevant) paving the way for all the inherent irrationalities that this gives rise to.

Merton (1940:562) writes,

The concepts of Veblen and Dewey refer to a fundamental ambivalence... Weber is almost exclusively concerned with what the bureaucratic structure attains: precision, reliability, efficiency. This same structure may be examined from another perspective provided by the ambivalence.

Thus, Merton demonstrates how bureaucratic organisations demand ‘methodical, prudent and disciplined’ attention to work, depending ‘ultimately upon infusing group participants with appropriate attitudes and sentiments’ (562). This results in a displacement of goals such that an instrumental value becomes a terminal value. Thus, rules become an end in themselves, giving rise to rigidity and an inability to adjust to circumstance. Conformity to the rules leads to the fetishisation of red tape and the birth of the ‘bureaucratic virtuoso...who never forgets a single rule binding his action and hence is unable to assist many of his clients’ (563). Here Merton, the skilled magician<sup>3</sup>, conjures his own nicely ironic incongruity. The bureaucrat therefore fails to see beyond a narrow horizon to the genesis of rules and regulations: ‘He does not understand that every rationalized order is only one of many forms in which socially conflicting irrational forces are reconciled’ (Mannheim 1960:105).

The bureaucratic virtuoso raises efficiency to an art form. Efficiency is another of Burke’s pivotal terms (Burke 1984a:248) defined as an ambivalent construct which ‘endangers proper preservation of proportion’. Thus efficiency, as an ‘abstract essence’, seeks to remove all but the inessential. (Burke, in a whimsical moment, proposes the smile of the Cheshire Cat as exemplifying, through processes of abstraction, an ultimate

efficiency of ‘smiliness’.) In the same way the bureaucrat virtuoso efficiently abstracts the values underpinning rules, as optimal procedures undertaken according to prescribed norms, leaving behind an essence of pure red tape.

The bureaucrat virtuoso’s identification with work as a way of life gives rise to a ‘*process of sanctification*’ (Merton,1940:565; emphasis original),

This is to say that through sentiment-formation, emotional dependence upon bureaucratic symbols and status, and affective involvement in spheres of competence and authority, there develop prerogatives involving attitudes of moral legitimacy which are established as values in their own right, and are no longer viewed as merely technical means for expediting administration.

Rules become sacred, to be followed with a religious fervour. Merton remarks an ‘impersonality’ arising from this sanctification, which manifests as an air of detachment from the client. This, he claims, arises from a tendency to categorise problems as types with specific associated remedies, whereas the client tends to see their case from a personal perspective requiring a unique solution. Thus, the bureaucrat-client conflict ‘often derives from interaction on impersonal terms when personal treatment is individually demanded’ (Merton 1940:568). This can produce a charge of arrogance which may be relevant to today’s apparent mistrust of experts in the current context of ‘post truth’<sup>4</sup>. The rhetoric of ‘service’ (to ‘the people’/clients) which underpins claims to action by politicians, civil service and professionals of all kinds, could form the basis of a cluster analysis: the sense of humility implied actively contradicted in the experiences of those on the receiving end of this ‘service’. Adherence to rule-bound

procedures of the bureaucrat virtuoso creates loyalty to the institution but stifles creativity. Trained incapacity arising out of bureaucratic structures thus gives rise to the interesting unanticipated consequence that too much commitment to the organisation results in stagnation and the inability to adapt.

Merton's analysis has, however, been subject to critique. Subsequent empirical investigations have not fully endorsed his findings of the power of bureaucracies to mould workers' 'personality' as Merton asserts. Moreover, Schoenberger (1997) argues that trained incapacity does not necessarily produce resistance to change and stagnation *per se*, but may equally exist in a dynamic situation in which the entrenched cultural norms of the organisation drive dysfunctional, though no doubt highly efficient, restructuring processes. In these situations trained incapacity does not lead to sanctification of the rules, but instead drives organisations down narrow conduits as a result of the bureaucratisation of the imaginative (an instance of paving the cow-path). However, Merton's analysis can be viewed as a satirical account of the 'ideal-type' bureaucracy (Mannheim 1960) and the limits to rationality of the bureaucratic organisation. Merton adopts a Burkean 'conscientious irresponsibility' in following the idea to the end of the line for the sake of the dialectic exercise, and by so doing reveals the *reductio ad absurdum* inhabiting the truly rational. The analysis thus lies squarely in the comic frame producing the optimistic message of the triumph of the humanly irrational over the rational efficiency of the bureaucracy: the most ardent adherents of bureaucratic organisation in the end orchestrate its subversion and ruin. Trained incapacity trumps instrumental rationality.

Though not all social scientists have embraced fully the stance of ‘conscientious irresponsibility’ in their analyses, trained incapacity has proved to be a fruitful and enduring construct in the analysis of organisational behaviours and has spawned a number of related planned incongruities. Thus, Louis Schneider’s (1975:331) ‘incompetent competence’ of the educational professional is based on the notion that, ‘You hurt where you are supposed to help, and you show some aptitude for doing so via the instrumentalities and skills that are supposed to be helpful’. This could be developed as a theoretical tool to examine professional practices more widely; Argyris (1986:74) coined the term ‘skilled incompetence’ ‘whereby managers use practiced routine behaviour (skill) to produce what they do not intend (incompetence)’. Argyris helpfully sets out the ‘Four easy steps to chaos’ – but warns this should only be attempted by the skilled manager. An extensive literature has developed around paradox and decision-making in organisational contexts (Watson 2013), indicative of the intrinsic ambivalence which infects all attempts to organise (the term ‘organisation’ certainly engages in a bit of casuistic stretching).

### *Functional stupidity*

A more recently coined PI which retains some affinities with trained incapacity is provided by Alvesson and Spicer’s (2012) ‘stupidity-based theory of organizations’ in which they develop a theory of ‘functional stupidity’ as

*inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways. It involves a lack of reflexivity, a disinclination to require or provide justification, and avoidance of substantive reasoning. (Alvesson and Spicer 2012:1202; original emphases)*



Functional stupidity is seen as an attribute of today's post-bureaucratic organisations ('post' here signifying 'development of', rather than 'break from'). Stupidity is clearly understood to be an organisational imperative rather than a personal attribute, defined as an 'organizationally supported inability or unwillingness to mobilize one's cognitive capacities' specifically in the areas of: reflexivity, justification and substantive reasoning (1199). It becomes functional in what the authors term the 'economy of persuasion' characterised by a focus on the manipulation of symbols 'often in the form of attempts to develop strong corporate cultures and identities, corporate branding, and charismatic leadership, exercised often through *stupidity management*' (1202). Through these persuasive forces, employees become aligned with the visions and values of the organisation, engaging in what amounts to a willing suspension of disbelief, effectively leaving their critical faculties at the door. Through functional stupidity 'organizational members are able to adopt a more relaxed attitude to reflexivity, critical scrutiny or justification' which frequently assists the smooth running of the organisation. Hence, employees in knowledge intensive businesses develop habits of 'stupidity self-management'.

Paulsen (2016) has conducted an ethnographic investigation of the Swedish Public Employment Service, a technology of the State for monitoring and 'activating' the unemployed, in which functional stupidity is drawn on as a theoretical tool to explain a marked degree of employee disengagement. Paulsen distinguishes functional stupidity from other modes of compliance (specifically despair, cynicism and authoritarianism) and concludes:

the employees are aware of shortcomings and absurdities in the organization, what separates functional stupidity from other modes of compliance is that the reflective awareness is – momentarily – pushed back to make room for myopic focus on instrumental issues. (Paulsen 2016:204)

Thus, in effect, Paulsen's workers understood full well the contradictions and irrationalities in their work but adopted a functionally stupid attitude in order to get the job done. (Much in the same way that social scientists, the vast majority of whom will have written a paper on some aspect of neoliberalism or 'the New Public Management', are well aware that they are immersed within the same discourses in the university but embrace it anyway). In effect, we may say that Paulsen's workers are knowingly aware of the bureaucratic diktats that pervade even the most 'post' of post-bureaucratic organisations yet perform as if they buy into it – they are ambivalent bureaucrats. In particular, employees in the study adopted functional stupidity when applying organisational procedures for dealing with clients. On reflection they fully understood the futility of these processes in terms of providing solutions to their clients' problems, but while at work they not only applied the prescribed procedures but were capable of defending them too. Functional stupidity is therefore the rational response to the irrationalities presented by an organisation which retains the word 'Service' while operating, in the words of one of Paulsen's research participants, as a 'giant control apparatus' (195). Functional stupidity therefore affords a Kafka-esque analysis, giving rise to a 'grotesque humour' (Reiss, 1949).

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) suggest that recognising the efficiency of functional stupidity, many organisations engage in 'stupidity management' to encourage an

unreflective approach to work, specifically through curtailing the critical attitudes of workers (though they also point out that too much stupidity may have its downsides). Functional stupidity therefore offers a much bleaker satire on organisations than trained incapacity, becoming an insidious mechanism for managing and limiting substantive rationality (the extent to which organisations support the development of individual agency).

### *Interpassivity*

Interpassivity is the outsourcing of (passive) enjoyment through the delegation of passivity to some other object (Pfaller 2003; Žižek 1998). The concept derives from Lacanian psychoanalysis and the idea expressed by Lacan in his *Ethics of psychoanalysis* that after a busy day at work, ‘...preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the check you will have to sign the next day’, you can go to the theatre and the (Greek) chorus will do your emotional feeling for you,

Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you...Therefore. You don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the chorus will feel in your stead (Lacan 2008:310)

An undoubted pleasure is obtained in the condensation of the oppositions contained within interpassivity which points to the joke as the paradigmatic framing of any analysis using this construct. As Pfaller (2007:38) notes, Žižek's philosophical method makes use of the joke as a theoretical tool: ‘it makes visible a theoretical structure in the original idea which, before, it was not easy to discern or which was even hidden by

another structure that appeared evident'. Thus, Pfaller says, self-confessedly misappropriating Freud, interpassivity is doing theoretical 'joke-work'. This is exemplified in Žižek's (1989) classic example of interpassivity, the Tibetan prayer wheel. A prayer is written on paper and inserted into the wheel which turns it automatically, thereby allowing the one praying to passively delegate the enjoyment of prayer, while they are able to get on (actively) with something else. (Being Žižek, of course, he suggests this allows the pray-er to 'indulge in the most dirty and obscene fantasies' (1989:34) at the same time as they are objectively praying). Other examples cited include: downloading films onto a recording device which are then never watched; the canned laughter in sitcoms that replaces your own; and, curiously, the dog that eats your cake in your place (Pfaller 2003). (In my household my husband fulfils this role.) The academic's habit of printing off research papers which are then never read (in effect outsourcing this pleasure to the printer) would also qualify. Thus, Žižek says:

I am passive through the Other. I concede to the Other the passive aspects (of enjoying) while I can remain actively engaged. I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR [video cassette recorder] passively enjoys for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased's fortune while the weepers mourn [in my stead]. (Žižek 1998:10)

The sense of 'enjoyment' here is predicated on the idea that our enjoyment is never spontaneous but emerges from the super-ego imperative 'Enjoy!' In this way interpassivity relieves us of this 'monstrous duty' we experience so often as a burden in our consumer-oriented culture as the command to self-actualise (whether through our buying habits or our work) (Žižek 1998: 9). Crucially, in ritually outsourcing the act of

enjoyment the interpassive giver does not really believe the other prays, eats, reads, laughs etc in their place but they act *as if* they do. Interpassivity is thus a ritual act which involves a ‘double delegation’: passive enjoyment is transferred to another object, while the belief that this is possible is delegated to some unidentified naïve observer. This belief is ‘an illusion without a subject’ (Pfaller 2003),

With the help of an objective, anonymous illusion we can interpassively delegate all our pleasures and acts of consumption... to an interpassive medium. Somebody else - an anonymous other, not we - believes, then, in the equivalence and thinks that we were enjoying; and this anonymous belief in our enjoyment brings about the deep satisfaction that we experience when we never watch our VCR tapes.  
(Pfaller 2003, np)

In this way the delegator is able to escape (momentarily) subjectification within the discourse, deriving a secret pleasure which Pfaller calls *diebische Freude*, a strict translation of which is ‘thievish joy’ (Walz, et al 2014). In effect, we recoil from what we are commanded to enjoy and hence derive satisfaction from outsourcing this enjoyment to an Other. Pressures to enjoy are legion. We do what we can to escape this, in the process deriving a small measure of gratification.

Interpassivity as a theoretical tool has been taken up quite widely in analysing human behaviour in a range of contexts e.g. cynicism at work (Johnsen, et al 2009); marketing ‘guilt free’ food (Haynes and Podobsky 2016); religious belief (Mackie 2013); social media use (Muhr and Pedersen 2010); and digital gaming (Jagodzinski 2004).

Walz et al. (2014) draw on it to frame their analysis of consumer behaviour in relation to ethical brands, a major marketing trend in recent years. Most research into this behaviour assumes that the purchaser gains feelings of pleasure arising from superior morality/altruism and that this forms part of an identity project. However, Walz et al. (2014) draw on interpassivity as an analytical tool to explain some counterintuitive findings of research which suggest that many consumers do not believe the claims made for the ethical products they purchase but behave *as if* they do. (Thus, they may know that the product has really been produced in a third world sweatshop but they are able to ignore this.) Walz et al. propose that interpassivity contributes to a more ‘comprehensive’ understanding of the pleasure of buying ethical brands while providing an explanation for the illusion perpetrated in the act of ‘buying into’. In effect, in an ironic reversal, purchasing ethical brands ‘offers the individual a momentary escape from the obligation to be a responsible consuming subject’ (59). The ethical consumer both delegates the passive enjoyment of behaving ethically and the belief that this is possible, and in the process derives ‘thievish joy’ from being disburdened (momentarily) of the responsibility of being an ethical consumer. Thus, ‘the wish to escape the pressure of being a consumer, not self-actualization, is the primary focus of the interpassive subject’ (70). Although the analysis is developed specifically in relation to ethical brands, Walz et al. suggest that it may be applicable more widely to consumer behaviour.

### **The contribution of perspective by incongruity to dialectical ironic analysis**

In all three examples given here, the potential of perspective by incongruity to contribute to sociological knowledge through affording explanatory power, providing critique, and opening up spaces for further research is clearly evident. Other examples

too may be drawn on which support this. Goffman's use of the 'misplaced adjective' (Fine and Martin, 1990) has clear affinities. Fine and Martin describe this as a form of 'literary terrorism' (99), exploding the claims being presented, as for example in his use of the term 'courtesy stigma' – the contamination of the 'normal' by association with the stigmatised (Watson 2015a). Anderson and Warren (2011) make use of Schumpeter's term *creative destruction* to analyse CEO of budget airline Ryan Air, Michael O'Leary's, entrepreneurship. The authors use the term to analyse ambiguities in the construction and performance of entrepreneurial identities and conclude that 'the idea of creative destruction has some explanatory power outside its normal domain of the evolutionary replacement of product or service' (605). By contrast, Scoles (2018) coins her own term *dynamic stability* to characterise the 'knowings-in-practice' and 'learning strategies' of engineers in an emerging industry who had to navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting arenas of practice in their daily work. Similarly, in a study of professional learning in an online masters-level course for teachers which was explicitly designed to develop critical thinking, the authors note the *polite criticality* shown by participants in online discussion forums (Watson et al 2016). While some research suggests that such politeness stands as a barrier to the development of critical thinking, the authors demonstrate that, conversely, politeness was used collegially as a means to enable self and other to 'perform criticality' within the online space, thereby questioning the common assumptions of the field and opening up avenues for further research and pedagogical innovation.

It may be argued that while these examples clearly draw on incongruous juxtaposition to provide novel sociological insights they do not explicitly refer to Burke or employ *planned incongruity* in Burke's sense of 'rational planning'. This points to the

possibilities promised in the development of PI as a methodical approach: deliberately constructing incongruity through ‘verbal atom cracking’ in order to expose the dialectical moments inherent in the data, potentially offers a rigorous approach to sociological analysis.

As has already been remarked, in yielding a method Burke gives little away. However, Overington (1977) manages to glean a three-step guide for dialectical analysis from Burke’s writings. First, ‘identify the modal motivational framework’ i.e. uncover the dominant discourses and ideological affiliations evident in the language. This will yield a collection of master terms relating to the ‘ruling elites’ and the associated ‘pieties’ that cluster around these terms. Second, develop an ‘ironic motivational terminology’ by constructing incongruous phrases from this list of master terms and ‘from whatever terms one’s own inventive genius will supply’. This will yield the dialectical clusters which open up the data and interrupt the pieties that normalise conceptualisations of the social. (The pivotal terms may then provide guidance in structuring this analysis). The third step is to offer the analysis up for public consumption, in order to give a ‘truer’ (at least alternative) explanation of human actions/events as a way of prompting avenues for change. In modern parlance this amounts to a consideration of ‘pathways to impact’. Planned incongruity may therefore be viewed as a means by which to operationalise C Wright Mills’ ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1959) the essence of which lies in the ‘combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable’ (211). Offering something a little more concrete than Mills’ advice that one should re-arrange one’s filing system periodically all the while maintaining an ‘attitude of playfulness’.

## **Conclusion**



Perspective by incongruity constructs a world governed by the law of irony in which unanticipated consequences; adaptations that once made impede more effective ones; development through conflict; contradiction, paradox and negation; goal shifts; and the dissolution of conflict in the coalescence of opposites are commonplace (Schneider, 1971). In considering this list, Overington (1977) says Burke is concerned only with the oppositions arising through incongruity. This might appear to limit the insights to be gained from applying a Burkean methodology. However, it could be argued that all Schneider's 'meaning clusters' can be subsumed within the idea of opposition as a dialectical epistemology. Thus, Schneider (1971:677) writes, 'no dialectic would have any value that did not indicate precisely how, say, vice becomes virtue or virtue, vice'. This is evident in each of the three planned incongruities discussed here in detail, allowing us to understand how too much loyalty disadvantages organisations; how values become displaced giving rise to goal shifts; how the realisation of values may lead to their renunciation; how entrenched cultures prevent the uptake of new ideas and so on. In short, the infinity of ways in which the social world is subject to the unintended consequence, which Merton (1936:894) says 'has been treated by virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought' and Schneider argues is *the* most important issue the social sciences have to deal with. By drawing on the ontology of the comic frame situated within 'humorous discourse' (Mulkay, 1988), perspective by incongruity makes manifest the ambiguities, tensions, multiplicities and paradoxes which characterise social organisation. Without this perspective we find ourselves in the position of one of Franz Kafka's heroes, 'seeking to unravel the mysteries of the irrational by rational means' (Reiss 1949: 542). The contribution of PI as method to sociological inquiry is therefore through prescriptive un-direction as attunement to the irrational.

Perspective by incongruity as methodology and method, of course, has its limitations. Brown (1983:543) writes, 'sociological theory, when it is good theory, illuminates its audience and its subject matter with dialectically ironic insights', the extent to which a PI constitutes a good analytical tool is dependent on the theoretical suppositions it dialectically juxtaposes. Moreover, perspective by incongruity is a process which itself tends towards bureaucratisation of the imaginative in the same way that metaphors become deadened through incorporation and so lose their force, as was noted earlier. Finally, one may note Schneider's (1975:332) caution that though this form of analysis offers a valuable contribution we should, in seeking to preserve an 'essential sanity', be wary of an excessive and (unnecessary) 'irony-mongering'; but he concludes, soberly, that with 'the appropriate restraints the disciplined sociologist should be able to exercise, ironic outlooks...can be highly stimulating to sociological thought'. Quite so.

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<sup>1</sup>. Space precludes an in depth examination of these thinkers. Ball (1973) cites among them Simmel, Tocqueville, Weber, Park, Mead, and Freud. To which we should certainly add Karl Marx. Marx himself was



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clearly something of an ironist as his famous epithet about history repeating itself first as tragedy and then as farce, attests.

<sup>2</sup> Josephson (1952:111) provides a footnote. '...Later, Warnotte also referred to the bureau as a little community, with an atmosphere of secrecy and anxiety. In his study of "professional deformation" he has described "tragedies" of the "internal life" of bureaucracy. Daniel Warnotte, "Bureaucratie et Fonctionnarisme," *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie*, No. 2 (April-June 1937), pp. 219-260.

<sup>3</sup> Born Mayer Robert Schkolnick, Merton changed his name as an amateur stage magician, having been advised that Merlin was rather clichéd (Watson, 2015a).

<sup>4</sup> Following the Brexit vote in the UK (2016), Michael Gove, leading 'out' campaigner, wrote: 'People in this country have had enough of experts' *Financial Times*, 03.06.16, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>. This appeal to populism was taken up by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign.