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Organization in the Age of Hysteria

Summary:

Civilization and organization require interplay between the spontaneous imaginary and the objective character of the symbolic, but these two are always in tension. Hysteria represents an attempt to end that tension through the destruction of the symbolic by the imaginary. A psychoanalytic theory of hysteria, based on the work of Lacan, Verhaeghe and Chasseguet-Smirgel is developed. The interdependence and antagonism of the imaginary and the symbolic are explored. Four aspects of this antagonism toward organization are discussed.

Writing of the difference between classical civilization and the Dark Ages, historian Thomas Cahill observed:

The intellectual disciplines of distinction, definition, and dialectic that had once been the glory of men like Augustine were unobtainable by readers of the Dark Ages, whose apprehension of the world was simple and immediate, framed by myth and magic. A man no longer subordinated one thought to another with mathematical precision; instead, he apprehended similarities and balances, types and paradigms, parallels and symbols. It was a world not of thoughts, but of images... They did not argue, for genuine intellectual disputation was beyond them. They held up pictures for the mind... By the mid-seventh century, the visible image has assumed far greater reality than the invisible thought. (Cahill, 1996: 204-5)

These patterns of mental activity are familiar to psychoanalytic theory. The mental sphere of the “intellectual disciplines of distinction, definition, and dialectic,” lies within the register Lacan called “the symbolic.” The symbolic comes to us through internalization of the father, who represents external reality and the order we have made to deal with that reality. The sphere of “similarities and balances, types and paradigms, parallels and symbols,” is characteristic of the imaginary. It has its roots in the early state of fusion between infant and mother before reality, represented by the father, intruded upon that intimate connection (Verhaeghe, 1999; Schwartz, 2003).

Optimally, the imaginary and the symbolic coexist with one another in a state of fertile tension, a tension whose specific resolutions give us the capacity to adapt to change through the creation of new form, which the sociologists call the diachronic aspect of society. Yet every tension may be seen as a confrontation of two forces, each of which is trying to dominate the other; and we may identify dynamics in which psychological life is organized by one or the other of these forces’ attempts at domination. When psychology is organized by the attempt of the symbolic to control the imaginary, we get what Freud called the “anal character,” the obsessive-compulsive personality. This is well known. What is less well known, and which I wish to assert, is that when the imaginary takes upon itself the task of dominating the symbolic, we get the mental configuration known as hysteria.

The question of which of these dynamics predominates is of critical importance to organization. The obsessive-compulsive dynamic is consistent with organization, though organization that gives no place to the imaginary may be lifeless, strained and destructive of the human spirit. The hysterical dynamic, however, is not consistent with organization at all, and in fact takes organization as its enemy. If it were to gain too much relative power and become dominant, that could mean the ascent of barbarism.

The Age of Hysteria

Not too long ago, received wisdom was that hysteria was long gone. For example, Wheelis (1966) maintained that the hysteria that patients presented in Freud's consulting room, in the form of apparent physical maladies with no discernible organic cause, had disappeared from the practice of psychoanalysts. Our times, Wheelis argued, were too psychologically sophisticated to support the kind of repression characteristic of Freud's time. As a result, hysteria, based as it was on repression, has become extinct by becoming impossible.

An alternative view is that hysteria is not only alive and well, but positively thriving, and has simply shifted its symptoms. The shift of symptoms is not some way that hysteria has hidden; it is precisely part of hysteria, and has been since it was given its name and thought to be the result of a moving womb.

This view is suggested, for example, by the work of Showalter (1997), who discusses the rise of widespread social movements that have certain sorts of fantasies at their core and irrationality in the mechanism of their promulgation. The narratives Showalter provides of these movements, which she calls "hystories," supports the view, though she does not fully draw this consequence, that hysteria is not a "disease" that exists entirely within the person, as for example cancer does, but is a form of relationship between the hysteric and the other.

In this sense, hysteria may be seen as a kind of collusion between the hysteric, usually a woman, and a person functioning as a doctor, or a therapist, or an expert of some sort, who is usually a man. The hysteric engages in a performance that is designed to bring a sympathetic response from those around her. On the basis of this performance, the expert diagnoses the malady of the hysteric in terms that reflect social concerns. These terms change over time and circumstance, and hence the performance that will create the effect changes; it is geared toward engendering that response. That is one reason that the "symptoms" of hysteria change; one principle of motion of the hysteric's womb.

Showalter finds hysteria in a wide range of contemporary social phenomena. Some of these, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and Gulf War syndrome, are close to the classic picture. Others, including the terrible fear about sexual abuse of children in day care centers and alien abduction, range farther afield. Still, disparate as they appear, these phenomena have a number of things in common.

For one thing, the collusive relationship between the hysteric and the expert never results in a "cure" of the hysteric. The symptoms always remain, though they may change a bit, and are always seen as, in some sense, mysterious. The function of the expert, then, properly speaking, is not to cure the hysteric, but to give a name to her condition. In this way, he legitimates it and makes it, in some sense, real. As such, he is not really an independent expert at all, but rather a part of the hysterical drama. I will call him a co-hysteric and the group consisting of the hysterics and the co-hysterics I will call the "hysterical group."

Second, these are very noisy affairs. There is no suffering in silence among these folks. Rather, such suffering is extremely assertive, constituting the basis of a demand that attention be paid to it.

Third, there is nothing outside of these dramas. They are taken by the hysterics to be the whole world, reducing everything else to triviality. The demand they make is, therefore, categorical and absolute, and is asserted without recognition of feasibility or circumstances or any other limitation that reality might impose.

Fourth, on the basis of this demand, a confrontation always takes place between established forms of understanding and the hysterical group, which claims special knowledge that established authority refuses to credit. In every case, the knowledge of the special group is legitimated on the grounds that the hysterics just know what they know. The claimants, that is to say, demand to be taken seriously in the face of a skepticism that asserts the accepted contemporary criteria of what counts as evidence. They feel abused, outraged, and personally attacked when they are not. Indeed, the institutionalized forms of understanding are seen as partly causing their suffering. The co-hysterics, of course, do take them seriously, which makes them part of the same confrontation.

Finally, the narratives of the hysteric, as adumbrated by the co-hysterics, always involve imagery of a certain kind of penetration. Specifically, we find the narrative of a penetration by an alien substance that is damaging to the hysteric or someone with whom she identifies. This penetration may come in a variety of forms; from children being raped, to penetration by a mysterious organism, to being sexually probed by alien beings. However, it is always present and almost always has an explicitly sexual referent, which is experienced with disgust.

We may recall that this was so right from the beginning of the psychoanalytic study of hysteria, when Freud found, or perhaps as a co-hysteric placed, the origin of the symptoms of his patients in sexual molestation by the father.

The one case that may be thought to be at odds here is the *history* of abduction by alien beings from outer space, who are thought to represent a superior form of life. There is penetration in this *history* through the defining narrative of being probed by these aliens, apparently for scientific reasons. This probing is experienced as sexual, but it is embraced and valued, and not seen as molestation. The reason for this difference is that these aliens are, after all, alien and superior. Penetration by them is not seen as debasing the hysteric but as raising her up. This is sex that she will allow, largely because it stands in sharp opposition to, and superiority to, what she can get from the local guys.

Yet rich as her descriptive material is, Showalter takes no clear stand on the causes of hysteria, referring to a variety of theories that posit, among other things, emotional distress, women's powerlessness, the authentic voice of silenced women, and so on. In the end, her argument borrows from the theory of hysteria as a disease, and the hysteric as a sufferer whose condition should elicit sympathy. In this way, she passes over the deeper realization, implicit in her own material, that hysteria is not an underlying condition to which attention must be paid, but rather a drama of an underlying condition engaged in for the purpose of garnering attention. To explore the question of where the need for that attention comes from, and the reason why it leads to the dramatics, we need to go beyond Showalter. Fortunately, we are able to do that.

Verhaeghe's Theory of Hysteria

Current understanding of hysteria owes much to the work of Jacques Lacan, whose impenetrability bids fair to be considered an hysterical manifestation in its own right. We are fortunate to have the work of a number of his students who have cast his thought in constructive and creative ways, and whose work stands on its own merits. In this connection, I will rely on the work of Paul Verhaeghe (1999).

For Verhaeghe, whose debt to Lacan I will take for granted and will not explore, what is characteristic of the hysteric is a discourse, a form of relatedness to the analyst. At its root, the condition of the hysteric arises from the fact that there is no signifier for the woman. This leaves her as a split subject, stuck in the contradiction between being herself and knowing herself, her life therefore bereft of stable meaning. She turns to the therapist, a term we can generalize to refer to the masculine expert, with the demand that he provide her with meaning, putting him in the position of the "one who is supposed to know." He takes up

this challenge and offers her a discourse within which she is supposed to be able to find herself. But all he has offered her is language and it therefore, as she makes manifest, always misses the point. The problem is that his language is always his language. It is always masculine, and with regard to her it never suffices. There is always something left over, which Lacan calls *object a*, which is part of “the real,” and which represents her spontaneity. So his discourse always fails, and she asserts her demand again.

What we can see from this is why the therapist always fails, and why he is not really functioning as a therapist or expert at all. The female subject always remains out of his reach, but by staying out of his reach, yet bringing him to function in the manner of “he who is supposed to know,” she comes to be dominant in the relationship. The confrontation between the hysterical group, of which he is a part, and the world of established meaning is therefore grounded in the spontaneity of the hysteric, which it can never capture. In a sense, it is a battle for control over who will establish the terms of her meaning, and of how they will be established. Hers is a bid to establish her meaning through this confrontation, defined only by her identification with *object a*, which the language necessarily misses.

What we see here is a refusal of the Oedipus complex, and of the father who represents the common meaning through which the world is organized, but which always leaves her unique and ineffable self out of its account. *Hysteria is her assertion of her unique self as against the common meaning that the father represents.*

But this analysis leads to a further question. Hysteria, I have said, is a conflict between one’s spontaneity and the shared meaning that makes up the world. But there is the basis for such a conflict in every human being. Why does hysteria seem to be a feminine preserve? How does sex come into this? For Lacan/Verhaeghe, this sexual differentiation arises from the fact that there is no signifier for the woman. But why not? What is there about being a woman that resists signification?

On one level, the idea is absurd. Obviously, there is a signifier for the woman. It is “the woman.” How is that not a signifier? But, of course, that is not what Lacan/Verhaeghe have in mind. What they surely mean is that “the woman” is a term that stands for the woman, but it does not signify. It gives meaning to no course of action. It is like a chain of signifiers with only a single link. It goes nowhere.

Now, to be sure, there are plenty of meanings that have been taken to follow from the idea of being a woman. One is a mother, a wife, and so on. The problem with these is that they provide a meaning for the woman only in the context of a relationship with a man, whose meaning has been antecedently, and presumably independently, established. Taken as referring to an independent self, the term “the woman” has no meaning. In other terms that Lacan/Verhaeghe would find useful, there is no desire specific to the idea of the woman that would structure a woman’s life. The structure of her life requires the desire of a man. That could drive anyone nuts. Hysteria is just what we call that particular brand of madness.

But why does “the woman” have no meaning, while “the man” does? Why is there no desire specific to the woman, while there is specific to the man? To answer this question, I will turn away from Verhaeghe/Lacan for a while and toward another French psychoanalyst, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1986)

For Chasseguet-Smirgel, the central feature of sex differences arises from different relationships to the maternal imago. The maternal imago, the primordial image of mother that we all carry, is the central figure in the psychic life of the child. As we imagine her, she is perfect and will make our own lives perfect. Her love is all we can ever need, and is indeed the end of need. From this arises the fact that her image is the most powerful in the psyche. What is more, her image is not only a powerful image, it is an image of power. Her very presence will make life perfect for us. Her power, and this is what marks feminine power off from masculine power, inheres in her simply being who she is. She does not have to do anything, but only to be. She is Aristotle’s unmoved mover.

To again be merged with her is the ultimate object of all of our desire. By the same token, though, it is also the end of our separate existence. Yet since her power simply consists in her presence, the withdrawal of that presence means absolute devastation. Therefore, she is the object of our love, but for the same reason she is also an object of terror.

The boy and the girl relate to the primordial mother in different ways, though of course the difference is not absolute. The little girl loves the mother, just as the boy does, but she can imagine becoming a mother. The boy cannot do this; at least he cannot do it as easily. So the girl can identify with the mother and her power in a way that the boy cannot. Therefore, she does not need to fear the power of the mother to the same extent. The mother's power, in the girl's imagination, and of course this is all taking place within her imagination, is the girl's power.

The boy is in a much more difficult position. He cannot identify with the mother's power, at least to the same extent, but needs it. Yet his very neediness makes him absolutely vulnerable to the loss of that love. His attitude toward the mother, and therefore his attitude toward women, is marked by total ambivalence.

This ambivalence may be resolved in a number of ways. In Western culture, the traditional way is through the formation of an agenda, which will on the one hand offer fusion with the mother, but on the other postpone and detoxify that fusion through the project of doing something that will earn it on grounds that maintain the man's existence. He will make himself worthy of her love. He will do something she desires, and this will provide a reason for her to keep him around, to grant him the ground on which he can comprehend and maintain his own existence.

But what does she desire that will lead her to grant the ground of his independent existence? What, Freud famously asked, does woman want?

This is the question that breaks the matter wide open. It is the key to answering the question of why there is no signifier for "the woman," while there is for "the man."

The answer is that woman wants herself, or rather, she wants to be the self that she is in her fantasy. What else could she want? She is perfect in every way. Her very existence is perfection. She cannot want anything beyond herself because she herself is the very satisfaction of desire. She is the very meaning of the satisfaction of desire. She cannot have desire because, as Lacan says, desire requires lack; and she has no lack.

The man has plenty of lack. The desire to satisfy this lack provides the meaning for his agenda. What he lacks is her. She cannot have desire, but for that reason she can be the cause of desire. She wants herself; he will give her herself. She is omnipotent; he will create the conditions in which her omnipotence can be realized. These conditions are what we call home, and it will be the place where their fusion is realized. They will have children.

And all of this will take place within a symbolic framework appropriate to its time. The man will attempt to realize it within the world as it is, as he understands it through language as it is.

But he will always fail. The fantasy of fusion will always elude him. *Object a* will always be left over. Yet there is nothing for it but for him to try again. In the renewed hope of fusion, he will create new possibilities for thought and for action. In this way he will create the world as it becomes. It is this created world, insofar as she buys into it and accepts the terms he has created, or even as he imagines that she does, within which he grounds the basis of an independent existence.

Out of this grows the chain of signifiers, with her as their end. And the meaning that these signifiers have arises from their position within the chain, the chain which leads from him-without-her to him-with-her. That is why there is a signifier for "the man." It means that a man can find himself within the chain of

signifiers. And it is why there is no signifier for “the woman.” She cannot find herself within a chain of signifiers because a chain of signifiers leads to her, and she is already there.

Now what we can see from this is that the chain of signifiers, in its inevitable failure to reach her, will always be inferior to her. But she needs signifiers because without signifiers there can be no desire, and without desire there can be no directed action, there can be no structure for one’s life. One can only be overtaken by the upwelling of feeling and self-referential imagery that constitutes the psychotic dissolution of the self. Quite a problem. What will she do?

Well, traditionally, she has done the only thing she could do. If there cannot be female desire, but only male, she will find her place within male desire. She will define herself in the terms he has created to make sense of his own life. She will be a wife. And in this way, she will bring into herself his desire for fusion with her. She will see herself becoming the mother of his children.

More recently, she has fit herself into social structures, such as organizations of various sorts, created through male desire and, ultimately, given meaning by it. We can foresee that her place within these structures will always be occasioned by a certain strain, perhaps even an anomaly. This is a matter to which we will return.

Meanwhile, we must pause here to reflect upon how marvelously the traditional arrangement fits things together. Neither man nor woman, though for different reasons, has meaning without each other. Yet these two hopeless contraptions, taken together, provide meaning for each other and through that have created the world in which we all live. Without that, there would be nothing; take it away and nothing will remain. It is almost as if men and women, like penis and vagina, were made for each other.

She was full and lacked nothing. But lacking nothing, she was nothing. Being full, she was empty. He was nothing and needed her fullness to have the idea of becoming something. His attempts to do so created everything, for the purpose of filling her, as they both needed her to be. The world created in this way was and will remain imperfect; but world it is, and is there for all of us to enjoy.

We have not yet gotten to the discourse of the hysteric. We will get there, but first we must go farther in our reflections on this arrangement.

The woman’s desire for the man turns out to be her desire for herself, as mediated by the man. It is based on her recognition of the emptiness implied in her fullness. In the absence of an agenda, she cannot simply be herself because that would simply be psychotic explosion. Yet she cannot provide signification for herself because the entire signification that is available takes her as its purpose. It is all directed toward her pursuit and always contains the limitations of the man’s lack. Yet how can she be limited at all, since the whole premise of her need is her fullness?

She can resolve this dilemma by using her power as object of desire to influence the man. He may have an answer to who she is, but for the reasons we have just seen, this can never be a really good answer. His signifiers, after all, can only be his signifiers. They can never suffice to tell her who she is, since they will never fit. There will always be something left over, which is precisely her, or at least her as they both fantasize her to be — the object of desire in the first place. He must therefore renew his pursuit of her, refashioning its terms in the hope of success, and each time trying to refashion those terms to better represent her. In this way, she gains meaning by being the object of his attempt to make meaning, ever renewed through the relationship of this pair and the tension between them. End that tension and they both disappear.

So it is that we understand what the tension is all about. It is a contestation about the source of meaning. His meaning is the masculine meaning of the symbolic, which ultimately gains its meaning from its attempt to encompass her perfection, which it can never accomplish. Her meaning is derived from her identification with the primordial mother, which validates and even deifies the spontaneity of her imaginary, but which goes nowhere without the symbolic that only he can provide. It is through the conflict of this

tension that the imaginary and the symbolic interpenetrate each other and create the relationship without which both of them are nothing.

And so the tension is and has to be absolute. There is, as Lacan again puts it, no such thing as sexual rapport. And it's a good thing, too. There can, however, be rapport between human beings, who understand the meaning of this tension and recognize their individual dependence on this tension and therefore their mutual dependence on each other. This does not make the tension go away; it simply has its function understood. In effect, what has developed is a relationship between split subjects who know themselves to be split subjects, a form of relationship that we may call *existential*.

But where is the hysteric in all of this? What I have described here is the tension between the sexes. Hysteria may fit into that, but it is not the whole thing. Where do we draw the line between the hysteric and the feminine?

I think we draw it at the point where the meaning of the tension is not yet comprehended, where the dynamic is not yet seen as the eternal game that men and women play with each other, but is seen as being one-sided, as an invasion of the perfect female by the inferior male. We may therefore recognize it as a developmental stage, occurring at the point where sexuality is gaining its ascendancy in the female, but where the place of sexuality in adult relationships is not yet understood. It is therefore the characteristic dynamic of the teenaged girl, which we knew all along.

Now if the place of sexuality within human relationships is not understood, its meaning must be represented with imagery that gains its power from the girl's specific self-reference, both as a sexual being and as a plenum. Inevitably, then, the imagery will be that of penetration or invasion, and specifically sexual penetration by an alien entity that seeks to corrupt and dominate the girl's perfection and self-sufficiency. Her attitude toward it will be disgust and the rage to expel it. There we have hysteria.

Hysteria therefore represents, on one or another level of abstraction, the attempt to expel the masculine, with all of its desire and all of the symbolic order that it has given rise to, and its place within the relationship between men and women. Within the dynamic of hysteria, the masculine is experienced as a threat to her perfection and self-sufficiency, indeed to her very existence, by an inferior agency, which seeks to limit her through terms that do not represent her. The attempt to expel, therefore, comes with a feeling of righteousness and the assertion of the absolute self-sufficiency of her spontaneity — in other words, of her imaginary. But consider that the whole framework of the symbolic, of shared meaning, is a product and representation of that masculinity and you can see that we have gotten to what we were trying to show. Hysteria is the motivating force through which the imaginary attempts to subordinate and even destroy the symbolic.

This analysis helps to explain one of the more peculiar, but characteristic, features of the hysteric. It enables us to answer the question of whether the hysteric is lying when she makes charges that are patently untrue. The answer is that she is not lying. She is telling the truth as she sees it, but her idea of the truth is not the one that is characteristic of the symbolic. Truth is not, as it is in the symbolic, a correspondence between a statement and an objective fact. Her whole project, after all, is to deny and undermine the symbolic, and therefore to deny the validity of that form of truth.

Her criterion for truth is essentially aesthetic. For her, truth means the vividness of the imagery she is using to represent her experience of invasion. This imagery, at the time, is all she is about. There is nothing outside of it. If she says, for example, and sincerely believes, that she was raped by someone, that means that the image of that rape represents, for her, at that time, the experience of being penetrated that is the center of her psychic life. That is why another image could serve just as well, in another time, and one should not be surprised to find movement here, for precisely the same reasons that the ancients thought that hysteria represented the movement of the womb.

We shall now turn to consider the way hysteria opposes organization, but before we do that, there is one irony that needs to be mentioned. The hysteric, as we have seen, makes a life of expelling the symbolic, with its inevitably masculine root. But, in truth, she is as much in thrall to the masculine as is any housewife, since the structure of her life is the same as the structure of the male discourse she is trying to expel; it is only its negation. She needs that masculine discourse if her rejection of it is to give her life any structure at all. The difference between her and the housewife is not that she is free of men, but only that she is related to them in a different way: not collaboratively, but parasitically.

Hysteria and Organization

To understand the threat that hysteria poses for organization, we must recognize that organizational structure is part of the symbolic, the register of shared meaning. The root of its meaning is derived from objective self-consciousness (Schwartz, 2003), through which one comes to be able to see oneself from outside oneself, a way that represents reality, as the members of one's society define it. This form of self-consciousness, which begins when one comes to see oneself from the point of view of the father, is not objective in the sense that one sees oneself as one really is, but in the sense that one sees oneself as an object, as others would see you who have no subjective interest in you. Its terms represent the social conventions that have been negotiated as a basis of exchange. It is a way for members of the society to pursue their interests in a way that others can understand and which can serve as a pattern of exchange. When a node of this pattern of exchange acquires a certain stability, and when individuals come to rely on it and depend on it, and when they give it an identity and take steps to preserve it, it can be said to be an organization, and the agreed upon patterns can be said to be the organization's structure.

Organizational structure may be considered the synchronic aspect of organization – the specification at any given time of what behavior is expected of participants as part of their jobs and of how these individual behaviors coordinate with each other. The fact that these structural elements are within the symbolic means that we can step outside of them and consider their advantages and disadvantages with some objectivity. In and of themselves, they are not important to us. This makes it possible to design an organization so that it can attain a goal in the most efficient way. This is, of course the great advantage of the bureaucratic form of organization, an advantage that carries forward into their more organic successors — a transformation that can be thought of as representing only the rapidity with which bureaucratic design is reformulated.

This is not to say that the imaginary has no place in organization. On the contrary, it represents the principle according to which organizations move through time, both on the level of individual desire and on the collective level of refining organizational structure to pursue a collective goal. In either case, it contains the ego ideal, the motivational substrate that makes organizational behavior meaningful to participants and breathes life into what would otherwise be ritualized behavior. But an organization from which the imaginary excluded the symbolic is impossible. It can exist, so to speak, only in the imaginary, only as a fantasy. The attempt to get there would have to mean destroying organization insofar as it exists, and can possibly exist. Ultimately, that is the danger that hysteria poses to organization.

The antagonism between hysteria and organization plays out through four phases, each of them representing the increased power and danger of hysteria. I will refer to these as *individual hysteria*, *organized hysteria*, *cooptational hysteria*, and *internalized hysteria*. In what follows, I will discuss each of them.

Individual hysteria

As was intimated before, what we can see from this is that the organization must be the site of a permanent confrontation between its behavioral expectations and the hysteric's experience of herself. She will always experience these demands as other and as alien, having no way to align herself with them in pursuit of an

ego ideal. She will experience the organization as constraining her in an intolerable, stupid, and even destructive way. Her allegiance will be limited and she is liable to be seen by others as having a permanent chip on her shoulder, or perhaps to be a bit screwy. She will see making personal progress within the organization as a way of removing encumbrances to her being herself. Her orientation to the organization will be marked by an attempt to personalize her relationships with powerful figures, especially men, in this way bringing the organization's symbolic under her dominion and have it revolve around her

Of particular note with regard to the hysteric's reaction to the organization are those confrontations that come under the form of charges of "sexual harassment." In saying this, I am referring to "hostile climate" sexual harassment and mean to clearly exempt the sort of sexual harassment that is generally called "quid pro quo." The latter represents the demand for sexual favors under color of authority, and should be seen as a form of extortion.

The charge of "hostile climate" sexual harassment is something else entirely. The American Bar Association defines it this way:

This occurs when an employee is subjected to comments of a sexual nature, offensive sexual materials, or unwelcome physical contact as a regular part of the work environment. Generally speaking, a single isolated incident will not be considered hostile environment harassment unless it is extremely outrageous and egregious conduct. The courts look to see whether the conduct is both serious and frequent. https://www.abanet.org/publiced/practical/sexualharassment_hostileenvironment.html

But what the courts will establish as a valid claim is not entirely predictable and is expensive to find out. As a result, as well as for reasons arising from the shared hysteria, organizations tend to follow very conservative approaches in addressing claims of sexual harassment, which has the effect that often simply the claim of having been sexually harassed invokes the presumption of guilt.

This, obviously, is a situation tailor-made for the hysteric, whom we have defined through the fantasy of having been penetrated by masculine meaning, which is to say by the symbolic. This may easily lead to the experience of violation even where it has not occurred, either through interpreting innocent or consensual behavior as invasive, or through the fantasy that such behavior has occurred. These seem to often mark experiences with figures of authority, which may lead us to the hypothesis that it is the penetration by authority itself, as an agency of the symbolic, that is often experienced as a sexual violation. The destructive consequences that can follow from this, in the form of the damage authority itself suffers, and in the wreckage of working relationships that often occurs, are clear enough.

Organized hysteria

The second form of the conflict between hysteria and organization develops when hysteria becomes organized.

The idea of organized hysteria may appear to pose a problem for us. Organization must depend on shared meaning. Yet if hysteria is a revolt against shared meaning, how can it be organized?

Hysteria can be organized through shared imagery. It represents shared subjectivity, rather than shared objectivity, as organization based on the symbolic represents. It rests on identification and analogy, rather than a common framework of exchange.

Hysteria consists in the experience of being penetrated by masculine meaning, and the attempt to expel it, undermine it, and destroy it. But how that meaning is defined and experienced is susceptible to infinite representation. When hysterics share a representation of that penetration, that forms the beginning of a form

of organization. Such organizations proceed through the promulgation and elaboration of the imagery and the social appeal of which it forms the base. They tend toward the informal, which is not surprising given the hysteric's general antipathy toward organizational structure, but they can be quite extensive nonetheless. For example, with regard to the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome history:

Patient support groups started up in the United States, England, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Norway, and South Africa.... In 1996, [Hillary] Johnson [author of *Osler's Web: Inside the Labyrinth of the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Epidemic*] claimed that two million Americans were afflicted and that the epidemic was moving worldwide. CFS organizations for patients sponsored social activities that made chronic fatigue almost a way of life – outings, coffee hours, self-help groups. (Showalter: 124-5)

But this is only half the matter. The other half proceeds through activities aimed at the expulsion and undermining of masculine meaning. The destructive potential of organized hysteria arises from its power to gain the emotional energy of large numbers and in the belief they hold in common that they are in hostile combat with standard frameworks of meaning, which often have organized forms that are seen as aiding, if not identical with, the penetrating force.

Thus:

Hillary Johnson [author of *Osler's Web: Inside the Labyrinth of the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Epidemic*] charges that powerful members of the scientific establishment and Centers for Disease Control are biased against patient accounts or have their own turf to protect. She argues that medical and scientific explanation is a fetishized worship of method and laboratory evidence. When doctors at the Mayo Clinic suggested that CFS could be caused by stress reactions or emotional problems, Marc Iverson, a young banker with severe CFS symptoms, who had spent thousands of dollars at the clinic, was indignant: "There can't be anything in the world they don't understand—because they understand everything! They read their printouts, but they never really to what you're saying. It's the worst of modern medicine." (Showalter: 125-6)

And:

...chronic fatigue histories have always staged a conflict between patient and doctor, with the skeptical doctor as the enemy of the helpless patient.... Every year patients and advocates intensify their attacks on the medical establishment, and find new links in their theories of conspiracy.... In August 1996, the conflict came to a head with an uproar over a televised confrontation on the BBC between ME (i.e. CFS) and a skeptical physician. On "The Rantzen Report," host Esther Rantzen, the mother of an eighteen-year-old-daughter with ME, staged a shouting match between patients and Dr. Thomas Stuttaford, a former Tory member of parliament and *Times* medical columnist, who represented 75 percent of the British physicians who view ME as a psychological problem. Audience members, some in wheelchairs, but most looking surprisingly fit, hissed and booed when Stuttaford called ME a form of depression. "I was set up, no doubt about that," he later told reporters. "There I was in my red socks and dark blue suit, typifying the English Trad. I was like Daniel walking into the lion's den..." (Showalter: 128)

In all this, one must bear in mind that there is no reliable objective evidence that there is such a thing as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome:

In a 1993 study of 13,500 people who had been diagnosed with CFS... Rumi K. Price and Carol S. North of Washington University School of Medicine found only one person who met the CDC's criteria. Medical problems, psychiatric complications, or side effects of medication could have accounted for the others. (Showalter: 124)

Cooptational Hysteria

As I have said, because of the antipathy that the hysteric feels toward organizational structure, organized hysteria tends to be rather informal. It eschews division of labor, hierarchy, and so on. The result is that, while it may be quite powerful, its power is limited to what can be accomplished through the direct application of mobilized emotion, as well as subjected to the instability and lack of focus that always attends emotional force.

A great advance in the potential power of hysteria is accomplished when an hysterical movement gains a formal structure, not by developing one through its own processes, but by gaining control over an existing organization. I call this cooptational hysteria.

A fine example of cooptational hysteria arose recently at Harvard University. The context was an invited address that Harvard President Larry Summers delivered on January 5, 2005 at the National Bureau of Economic Research (available at <https://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2005/nber.html>). In that speech Summers set himself the task of explaining the relatively low percentage of women "in tenured positions in science and engineering at top universities and research institutions." His argument, which he stated was intended to be provocative, offered three hypotheses concerning this distribution. In his words:

One is what I would call the ... high-powered job hypothesis. The second is what I would call different availability of aptitude at the high end, and the third is what I would call different socialization and patterns of discrimination in a search. And in my own view, their importance probably ranks in exactly the order that I just described.

His second hypothesis was the one that got him into trouble. He said:

It does appear that on many, many different human attributes—height, weight, propensity for criminality, overall IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability—there is relatively clear evidence that whatever the difference in mean—which can be debated—there is a difference in the standard deviation, and variability of a male and a female population.... If one supposes, as I think is reasonable, that if one is talking about physicists at a top twenty-five research university, one is not talking about people who are two standard deviations above the mean. And perhaps it's not even talking about somebody who is three standard deviations above the mean. But it's talking about people who are three and a half, four standard deviations above the mean in the one in 5,000, one in 10,000 class. Even small differences in the standard deviation will translate into very large differences in the available pool substantially out.

Now, Summers moved immediately to distance his feelings about the data from the data themselves. He called it an “unfortunate truth” and said “I would far prefer to believe something else.” And he also said “I would like nothing better than to be proved wrong...” But, as we shall see, these demurrals had no effect on mitigating the storm that followed.

In assessing that storm, one should bear in mind that when he was speaking about the greater variability found among males, Sommers was saying something that has been known since Charles Darwin made the observation in *The Descent of Man* (Kleinfeld, 2005). It is one of the best established findings in all of behavioral science (Browne, 2002). It is against the background of this rock-solid finding that the furor against Summers needs to be understood. The point I wish to make is that, from the outset, it was pure organized hysteria.

Let us begin at the beginning, which was the moment that an MIT biologist named Nancy Hopkins walked out of the talk. This is from a January 19 account in the *Washington Post* (Dobbs, 2005):

“I felt I was going to be sick,” said Nancy Hopkins, a biology professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who listened to part of Summers’s speech Friday at a session on the progress of women in academia organized by the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, Mass. She walked out in what she described as a physical sense of disgust.

“My heart was pounding and my breath was shallow,” she said. “I was extremely upset.”

“When he started talking about innate differences in aptitude between men and women, I just couldn’t breathe because this kind of bias makes me physically ill,” Hopkins told a sympathetic *New York Times*. (Chapman, 2005)

And again that if she had not left the room, she would have “either blacked out or thrown up” (Bombadieri, 2005a)

The classic hysterical character of Hopkins’ demonstration is clear enough and commentators soon pointed it out. For example, this is from an article called *Harvard Hysterics* by the political columnist George F. Will (2005):

Is this the fruit of feminism? A woman at the peak of the academic pyramid becomes theatrically flurried by an unwelcome idea and, like a Victorian maiden exposed to male coarseness, suffers the vapors and collapses on the drawing room carpet in a heap of crinolines until revived by smelling salts and the offending brute’s contrition?

But aside from the dramatics, there were other signs of hysteria that will be familiar to us. Most notably is that Hopkins’ response was not directed at the truth of Summers’ statements, but at the feelings that they were imagined to represent. And these feelings were rejected in favor of a set of feelings said to be endangered by them. Thus, Hopkins is reported to have said: “It is so upsetting that all these brilliant young women (at Harvard) are being led by a man who views them this way,” (Associated Press, 2005) This was despite the fact that, as I noted above, Summers took pains to assert that the data did not represent his feelings.

On the next day, headlines reflected the outrage over his remarks felt by many, first among the attendees, second among the female faculty members at prestigious universities, and third, all over the country, if not all over the world. In general, the criticism focused, as had Hopkins, on the feelings Summers was supposed to have and the unacceptability of the consequences, in terms of the feelings that his feelings were expected to engender.

For example:

A leading female astrophysicist at Yale, Meg Urry, says she and her female colleagues in science “have talked of little else for days.” In the Bay Area, members of the East Bay chapter of the Association for Women in Science “discussed this around the table” at their latest meeting, says their chapter secretary, Paula Shadle.

“The reaction was frustration, disappointment, and no surprise,” said Shadle, a quality assurance consultant to the pharmaceutical industry who has a doctorate in biochemistry from UC San Diego. “One person said, ‘Maybe this attitude explains why Harvard hasn’t been able to attract women.’” (Davidson, 2005)

In all this, we can see a second index of hysteria. The symbolic has been brushed aside, its existence not recognized. Summers’ statements are not acknowledged to have any significance as objective propositions, but only as conveying his feelings, which represent the only reality that needs to be taken into consideration. And the remedy for the low representation of women is also said to be in the realm of feeling. Thus, an essay critical of Summers, written by the presidents of MIT, Stanford, and Princeton, said “‘until women can feel as much at home in math, science, and engineering as men, our nation will be considerably less than the sum of its parts... ‘low expectations of women can be as destructive as overt discrimination.’” (Bombardieri, 2005b)

Interestingly, Summers’ remarks appeared to be only the latest in a string of offenses, which had caused his enemies to feel aggrieved. What were these offenses? In a report on a faculty meeting called to hold Summers to account:

Most speakers took aim at Dr. Summers for what they described as an autocratic management style that has stifled the open debate that is at the

core of the university's values. (Rimer, 2005)

But an article by law professor Daniel J. Meltzer (2005) offers some insight into what this is about:

Faculty complain that Summers is intimidating, and there is no doubt that he can be. Complaints that he has silenced people, however, need to be rounded out. He seems not yet to have fully found his way in making the transition from faculty member to President, and, alas, the two are not the same; criticism from the President feels different than criticism from a colleague. But that is different from refusing to tolerate dissent. I've crossed swords with him in more than one setting, and while being criticized directly and forcefully by the President can be unnerving, especially in the company of others, one can criticize him back just as directly. That, indeed, is one of his great virtues; he seems to care not about the fact that someone is expressing disagreement but instead about whether the disagreement is persuasive. ...So while undeniably there is room for improvement in his leadership style, the cries of silencing seem somewhat misleading.

Here again, Summers' crime was to speak from within the symbolic, with the offense being felt within the imaginary. Having felt penetrated, it moved toward his expulsion. As I write, it has largely succeeded. Summers has kept his position, but the symbolic has not.

From the outset, Summers knew exactly how to grovel:

I deeply regret the impact of my comments and apologize for not having weighed them more carefully... I was wrong to have spoken in a way that has resulted in an unintended signal of discouragement to talented girls and women. (Summers, 2005)

But, by itself, groveling would not do. Summers appointed two committees, packed with his critics, to look into rectifying the situation at Harvard. He accepted their recommendations. Among the concrete results were that Harvard set aside \$50 million to address the "gender imbalance," despite the fact that Harvard had already been doing as much as any university to deal with that already, and there was precious little yet to do (MacDonald, 2005). But they had to do something, and what they did was to enshrine the hysterical criticism within the very structure of the university.

This took the form of implementing some of the proposals of the task forces he created. Among them was the establishment along with a number of new deanships, of a new Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity. This new Vice Provost would participate in all faculty appointment and tenure decisions, and would have the responsibility of improving the climate for women and minorities. Among other ways to improve the climate, she would "create a training program to teach professors involved in faculty searches about research indicating that even well-meaning people can harbor hidden biases against women and minorities." (Bombardieri, 2005c)

So what do we have here?

One does not want to raise alarms without certainty, and pointing to the ways in which institutional arrangements will play out in the future can never be assured of anything more than mild probability. Yet it is difficult to see these organizational developments as anything but the institutionalization of a system of commissars who would have control over the hiring and promotion of faculty, and therefore over the main process through which the university defines itself and specifies appropriate behavior. The impetus behind this transformation was hysteric, and therefore the source of its legitimacy lies in hysteria. Its mission would be to push this hysteria forward. What is more, it represents the authority to overrule policy on the basis of feelings that are presumed to underlie what would otherwise be, at least ideally, rational deliberation. Control over \$50 million, by itself, represents a base of power with which to move the institution as one likes.

One could go on, but the point of the matter is fairly simple. Going beyond the limited capacity to organize present in hysteria itself, hysteria has gained great influence in an already existing powerful institution that has the full panoply of institutional arrangements necessary to get work done efficiently and reliably and to plan for the future.

Hysteria has coopted Harvard University, the foremost university in the United States.

Internalized hysteria: Hysteria as a philosophy of management

The final phase of the conflict between hysteria and organization comes when hysteria is adopted as a philosophy of management. I call this *internalized hysteria*.

Internalized hysteria may begin with a campaign against the organization waged by those who see its processes as penetrating them, or to use the term commonly employed, oppressing them. Often it is built, as campaigns of the imaginary often are, by anecdotes and stories that relate instances in which the oppressed individuals or groups felt violated. Those who identify with them amplify the force developed here. As of yet, this is nothing but organized hysteria taking place in an organizational context. It becomes internalized hysteria when the management of the organization identifies with them and becomes a part of the hysterical group.

However, internalized hysteria can turn against the organization in an even more basic way, attacking it, not for oppressing this or that sub group within the organization, but for oppressing those who belong to the group consisting of the employees of the organization. When that happens, it can take the organization's structure, the organizational necessities that the work requires and imposes, as oppressive, as penetrating the subjectivity. Through this, the organization's energy can be mobilized toward the end of expelling the system's impositions. When that happens, an organization's processes are redirected toward the organization's own destruction, which is to say the destruction of the organization in its aspect of shared meaning developed through the process of exchange.

I believe that this redirection encapsulates the purpose of much of what is called "critical management theory," a way of thinking about organizations that now has a large following in schools of business, especially outside the US. The cultural trend that it represents, however, may be found in contemporary organizational management.

Hirschhorn (2004) describes a case of this at the *New York Times*. The story revolves around the role of Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., who became publisher in 1992.

Sulzberger, Jr. took up a role that had been defined by previous members of the Sulzberger family in terms of its position in the management and leadership of the institution. Hirschhorn shows how Arthur Sulzberger, Sr., in accordance with this tradition, subordinated himself to the transcendent, shared meaning of the work of the *Times*, permitting his interactions to be circumscribed and defined by the necessities of his position within that framework of meaning.

Arthur, Jr., however, a child of the sixties, redefined the role so that the work of the *Times* was given short shrift in favor of a project that Hirschhorn calls moralization, whose object was the transformation of the *Times* itself.

On one level, this moralization took place under the now-familiar concept of increasing “diversity,” whose emotional significance derives from the idea of the organization as an instrumentality for repairing past injustices. Thus,

[W]hen he first took the publisher role Sulzberger told a journalist “that his greatest challenge will be to bring more racial diversity and sexual equality to the paper”.

Hirschhorn comments:

What is striking about this statement is that Sulzberger did not say that his most serious challenge was to sustain the quality and excellence of the *Times* while creating profits for the Times Company. If he failed in this goal, the goal of seeking diversity would be immaterial. It is as if he took the work of the *Times* for granted...

But he goes on to suggest that, for Sulzberger, the morality of oppressed versus oppressor is only a part of a broader project of moralization. In this regard he quotes the journalist as continuing:

“He wants more minority positions. He wants more women in executive positions. He wants a less authoritarian newsroom and a business side that is more nimble. He wants each member of the staff to feel empowered as part of the team.”

Evidently, Sulzberger sees this project in which staff are “empowered as part of the team” as part of the same process of moralization in which the oppressed will prevail over the oppressors. Hirschhorn goes on to show that the object under moral assault in this campaign is the *Times*’ authority structure, which undermines its necessary function within the work of the *Times* itself.

For instance, he describes a town hall meeting in which embattled editor Howell Raines faced the *Times* staff over his handling of the Jayson Blair fiasco, in which an African-American reporter had been found to have been fabricating and plagiarizing stories on a wholesale basis, as well as other shortcomings on his part:

Strikingly, at the “town-hall” meeting at which Raines first confronted the staff, Sulzberger unfortunately played a similar role. There was a sense in which he did not convene the meeting with dignity. Participants complained in harsh terms about the way Arthur had conducted himself. As one participant asked, “Why hold a meeting where it was certain to become a spectacle. Or say, when asked his opinion of the situation, something as coarse and inarticulate as “it sucks?” Or not put on a necktie? Or worst of all, reach into a paper bag and take out a stuffed toy moose—apparently a tool out of some management manual, symbolizing the ‘moose in the room,’ that nobody wants to talk about, used to loosen things up—and hand it to a perplexed Raines?” The participant is suggesting that Arthur behaved disrespectfully, in a manner not befitting his “office.” It is plausible that by behaving this way Sulzberger stimulated the participants to behave disrespectfully to Raines. This may be why their fury was unchecked and what gave reporters license to complain about the *Times* and Raines on unrelated web sites—an assault that the family, as protector of the newspaper’s institutional standing, could hardly tolerate. This may also be why Maureen Dowd, a columnist for the *Times*, said that the attack on Raines reminded her of the novel, *Lord of the Flies*, in which young boys, in the absence of adult authority, form groups that engage in primitive and destructive acts. This suggests that the staff tried to express regret for their destructive behavior, when Raines, at a

subsequent meeting, announced his resignation,

Thus while Raines acted counter-culturally so did his boss Sulzberger. In this sense, we can say that Raines derived his authority to attack the culture of the *Times* from the publisher of the *Times*.

In brief, as Hirschhorn puts it, Sulzberger “elevated insubordination as a principle of leadership.”

All of these destructive processes came to a head through the case of Jayson Blair, whose systematic lying had been known to the *Times* for several years before his case became public. In this regard, the subordination of the *Times*' work to the process of moralization was deeply implicated. Figures at the *Times* simply could not hold Blair accountable because the moralization program had undermined the shared meaning of the work when the two came into conflict. It had placed the realistic discussion of his deficiencies under the taboo of race, and in that way wrecked the meaning of the work of the *Times*, as defined within the symbolic and the process of exchange:

The result of such taboos is that people are unable to make meaning together on issues that deeply concern them. Such restrictions on shared meaning-making alienate people from one another, make them feel powerless, and undermine the psychological sense of community. This helps explain why the editorial community at the *Times* could never come together to create a shared picture of Blair's frauds, and their implications. The taboo undermined such meaning making.

In analyzing the causes of this moralization, Hirschhorn notes the culture of

“personalism” [which] elevates the salience of feelings in institutional life. This trend is rooted in the currents of a post-modern culture with its emphasis on subjectivity and psychic depth.

And also:

long standing currents in Western thinking associated with utopian thought and strivings—the idea that social life can be constituted so that conflict can be eliminated; that people can live in the social world without experiencing any alienation, any distance between what they wish to experience and express and what opportunities others afford them.

Taking these together, we can see the elevation of the imaginary as a principle of organization. With personalism, we see the apotheosis of individual spontaneity. With the utopian element, we see the guarantee that individual spontaneity may be safely followed, and therefore that objective self-consciousness is not necessary. Psychoanalytic thought leads us to see that the omnipotent, benevolent mother must be the source of that guarantee. What it suggests is that the image of the group implicit in this model, the “empowered team,” in Sulzberger's terms, is indeed a group: it is a fusion of infant and child, together with their associated identifications.

Taking this as a model for organization would certainly lead to the idea that the demands of exchange, demands based on a negotiated shared meaning which, by definition, is not our own, would be seen as an imposition, a violation, and a penetration. This draws the linkage with hysteria that we have come to recognize and leads us to appreciate the threat it poses to organization.

Conclusion

The descent of Europe into the Dark Ages was not occasioned merely by the onslaught of Germanic tribes. By the time the barbarians sacked Rome, Roman civilization was already hollow and its army was itself composed of Germanic tribes. In the long descent from its height, it had lost something vital. What was that? Edward Gibbon (1909), speaking of the *Pax Romana*, put the matter this way:

The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. (Volume 1, page 70)

The great emperors of Rome governed under a sense of fealty to, and indeed subordination to, the laws and institutions, the symbolic, of Rome. They saw themselves, and were seen by others, as agents who expressed the authority of shared meaning. The deconstruction of shared meaning, which is now such a prominent part of our political process, is a matter that should concern all of us.

As Kenneth Clarke (1969) has put it:

Civilisation requires a modicum of prosperity—enough to provide a little leisure. But, far more, it requires confidence—confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and confidence in one's own mental powers.

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