Introduction: Prisons, playgrounds and parliaments

THE sun never sets on the golden arches. These gleaming symbols of the iconic fast food giant, McDonald's, can be found scattered across the surface of the earth. They seem to have spread even further than the standards of ancient Rome, the cross of Christianity or the flag of imperial Britain. McDonald's is so ubiquitous that the film-maker Morgan Spurlock found that most children had difficulty recognizing the United States president and Jesus Christ, but they could instantly recognize Ronald McDonald. In the course of becoming the corporate power that it is today, McDonald's has transformed people's lives around the world in a way that emperors and governments have only dreamed of (Schlosser, 2002). It might be argued that it has swept away thousands of small businesses throughout the world and replaced them with chain stores; that it has applied the standardized techniques of mass manufacture to the job of cooking food and serving people; that it has systematically rolled back the rights of workers; that it has hastened the introduction of monoculture factory farming; that it has made fatty fast food a staple diet for millions of people; that it has aided the rapid decline in people's ability to prepare even the most basic food for themselves; and that it has even changed the shape of our bodies by encouraging obesity throughout Western nations. Whether or not we go that far, it is evident that the huge changes that McDonald's and other fast food restaurants have heralded reveal the kind of power that lies in the hands of the largest corporations. They have the power to change the landscape of business, the way we work, the way we eat and the way we live. Staring into the face of such an all-encompassing power might produce a sense of concern, disgust or even bitter outrage.

Such obvious bitterness would sit uneasily in the stomach of the listless customer as he waits for his drive-thru Mac attack. He might

stare forlornly across the car park into the suburban wasteland. Safely ensconced in his automobile he might imagine Ronald being crucified on his own sickly yellow cross. He might laugh to himself as he fantasizes about the pimply teenagers who work the grills, mocking the once happy clown as he writhes in agony atop the arches. But our cynical consumer knows that these are just flights of fancy. He shakes these follies from his poor head and focuses on the one thing that he knows is real – the delicious burger in his chubby hand. Inside the 'restaurant', the same kind of resigned cynicism plays on the mind of the migrant teenager as she flips what seems like the millionth burger patty of the day. This bored employee can't help thinking of the thousands of calories she is pumping into the greedy gullets of angry children. That cheesy manager with his 'motivational' slogans and plastic team talk certainly make our McWorker even more irate! She realizes that she simply has to accept this monotony and degradation if she wants to keep her job. But a small smile comes to her face when she thinks about the 'McShit' T-shirt that she is secretly wearing under her uniform.

Engaging in cynical flights of fancy and guerrilla T-shirt wearing is not the only way in which people have dealt with the bitterness they feel towards the golden arches. Many have turned their personal disquiet into action. In some cases this has involved individual consumer choices. Many consumers have pledged to avoid the golden arches at all costs. Some have begun personal crusades against fast food. The obese Californian, Steve Vaught, undertook an epic walk across the United States in an effort to shake off his fast food lifestyle. Countless others across the globe have engaged in more collective forms of protest. This includes residents in towns such as Torquay, Australia, who have fought a prolonged battle to keep McDonald's out of their community; protest groups such as 'Super Size My Pay' in Auckland, New Zealand, who have sought to improve the working conditions in McDonald's; activists such as Helen Steele and Dave Morris in London, who fought a gruelling legal battle to prove infringements on the part of McDonald's; and health campaigners, who have tirelessly pointed out the devastating consequences of fast food overconsumption.

As long as these protests remained small and relatively disconnected, McDonald's was largely able to ignore them. However, the mass pressure that has built up over the course of the last few years has

brought the issues of health, the environment, urban planning and worker rights to the forefront in debates about McDonald's and other large multinationals. Indeed, even mainstream discussions about McDonald's long-term future now routinely refer to the increasing consumer disquiet dogging the organization. There has even been some indication that McDonald's may be the target of a wave of lawsuits similar to those faced by the tobacco industry. In some parts of the world McDonald's is in major decline. Naturally, senior executives are worried. The grandees of the corporation have begun to take these threats seriously. They have withdrawn their super-size options, changed their ingredients (introducing free-range eggs, for instance), transformed their menu and introduced a range of more 'healthy' options, put a stop to some of the more brazen attempts to 'educate' children about the benefits of McDonald's, redesigned their restaurants to look more like postmodern inner city cafés and in some cases improved worker conditions. They have even begun to shift their investment into 'healthier' food businesses, such as the British sandwich shop chain Pret à Manger. Taken together, these changes represent a significant shift in corporate strategy, which can largely be attributed to the millions of acts of protest across the globe.

Struggle for the corporation

The saga of McDonald's reminds us that the largest organizations have astounding power over our working lives, our consumption patterns, our bodies, the economy and our very way of life. The story also reminds us that the power of large corporations is far from unchecked. Any organization like McDonald's faces a thousand swarming refusals, ranging from the disgruntled employee who mocks his/her officious boss to the social movement that unveils corporate misdemeanours in the international media. At the very heart of organizational life is the ongoing struggle between those in the corporation who seek to assert power and those who seek to resist and perhaps destroy this power. It is this struggle that gives organizations a sense of vitality and a life-giving political pulse. It is this struggle that is the topic of this book.

Those studying modern workplaces have long realized just how important struggle is in organizational life. There is a large and prodigious body of research on workplace politics examining how people gain, lose and disrupt power in organizations.[1] Underlying this broad

and complex discussion are three images of what power looks like in work organizations. Perhaps the most widespread image is that of the *prison*. If we take even the most cursory glance at the research on workplace power and politics, we find ourselves in a world of 'iron cages', 'cells', 'guards', 'wardens', 'panopticons' and 'imprisonment' (e.g. Weber, 1924/1947; Foucault, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The message is clear: when we enter an organization we intern ourselves and give away the freedoms enjoyed in the rest of our lives. We allow cretinoid managers to tell us what to say and when we can move our bowels. We adhere to a strict set of rules (both written and unwritten) that govern what we do and how we think. We accept the micromonitoring of everything from our keystrokes to our attitude. And, what is even more surprising, millions of us accept these mind-numbing and spirit-crushing regimes every day, and are often *grateful for it*. This image of the corporation as a prison has inspired countless studies of the ways people are controlled in and around organizations. Some typical forms of control include threats of violence, direct commands, the provision of incentives, technical systems, rules and regulations, group norms and various forms of ideology associated with corporate culture. Even the most 'free' workplaces, such as youthful 'creative' companies, have been shown to be replete with mechanisms of control (Ross, 2004). If we follow this line of argument, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that we live in a universal prison of organizational domination, from which escape is very difficult.

The view that we live in a prison of corporate control is certainly an important wake-up call to those who dream that the modern organization is the royal road to freedom. However, it does paint a rather pessimistic picture, a world of total corporate domination that would not be out of place in *1984* or *The Matrix*. Confronted with such a bleak dystopia, it is easy to resign ourselves nihilistically to keeping our heads below the trenches, enjoying what the system has to offer and accepting that we are doomed to be prisoners of work for the rest of our days. But such a wholehearted acceptance of corporate power takes the system far too seriously. It misses the many opportunities for misbehaviour and outright rebellion that are right under our noses. The recognition that organizations are, in fact, awash with various 'escape attempts' has led to the promotion of a second image: the corporation as *playground*. As a countermeasure to the pessimistic image outlined above, much research now focuses on worker resistance that pokes

fun at the corporation. This type of subversion includes practical jokes, ironic repartee, mating rituals on company time, wilful rule breaking, farting in front of a team leader, game-playing, theft, sabotage and now even corporate 'culture jamming' (Kane, 2004). These everyday acts of rebellion remind us that, like any large institution, the corporation creates a huge vacuum in which to challenge its existence from within. Indeed, those studying resistance have shown how organizations are consistently under attack from nearly every possible angle imaginable. Shareholders, senior managers, middle managers, shop-floor employees, customers and stakeholders all undermine and challenge the corporation in their own transgressive ways. If we cast a playful glance at what actually happens in the daily behaviour in and around organizations, we are struck by the fact that it might actually be better described as organizational *misbehaviour* (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Some have gone so far as to suggest that, if everyone soberly followed the rules legislated by managers, the machine would rapidly grind to a halt, and that it is only through this systematic misbehaviour, playfulness and rule-breaking that the corporation is able to continue functioning in a workable fashion (Bensman and Gerver, 1963).

The idea that the corporation is a playground gives us hope. It reminds us of the potential spaces of freedom possible in even the most oppressive corporate environments. However, overemphasizing the potential playfulness of corporate life runs the danger of ignoring the fact that, despite our everyday challenges, systems of control and domination continue to whirr on. By focusing only on play we begin to lose sight of the more profound political processes that fundamentally shape our organizational lives. Indeed, we miss how the space in which we play is made possible and even encouraged by the very forms of domination we seek to escape. Ultimately, by concentrating on jocular acts of subversion we ignore the structural political processes that make up organizations. In order to account for these processes, we would like to suggest a third guiding image for the study of politics and power in the workplace: the organization as a *parliament*. A parliament is an arena in which actors 'struggle' to have their voices heard as the latent conflicts of the social well-up. We hope that this image draws the reader's attention to how the 'prison' of corporate power is inextricably interlocked with the 'play' of resistance. Power functions only to the extent that it is engaged in a struggle with some form

of resistance and transgression. Indeed, as expounded in a profound insight of Michel Foucault (1980), power works only insofar as people do not completely follow its demands. Conversely, resistance has an impact only insofar as it wields a degree of power (no matter how minuscule).

When we approach politics as an ongoing interplay of struggle, we are not led into either surrendering to the power of the corporate prison or whiling away our days in self-indulgent play (or heterotopia, as the case may be today (Hjorth, 2005)). Rather, we recognize that we are always implicated in an ongoing struggle to establish a particular kind of organization. Precisely because this is a struggle, the results are always precarious and open to challenge, compromise and reversal. There is always the possibility of asserting another form of organizing in face of the status quo. There is always the possibility that the organization elites currently enjoy will be torn asunder and replaced. When we approach organizational politics as struggle, we can begin to deconstruct the dualism of power and resistance, and focus on their interplay and mutual constitution. At this level, power and resistance begin to blur. Moreover, we suggest that the issue of struggle is at the heart of some of the keenest concerns we experience in the workplace: what are we struggling for, how do we engage in struggle and where are our struggles best placed? It is these questions we aim to address in this book.

The structure of the book

This book was written with four intentions. First, we hope to provide the reader new to the field with an introduction to the political dynamics of organizational life. Second, the book aims to provide an exploration of some of the most important forms of struggle that characterise contemporary organizations today. We now live in the age of the cynical knowledge worker, the gay office activist, the MBA (Master of Business Administration) who cannot face re-entering the ranks of the corporate dead zone, and the high-tech union organizer. Theories of social justice are only now catching up with the new social movements challenging corporate power. Third, we aim to contribute to current theories of workplace power and resistance by introducing the concept of struggle. We do this by adapting recent theoretical advances developed in the work of Slavoj Žižek, Peter Sloterdijk, Ernesto Laclau,

Nancy Fraser, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among others. And, finally, we hope that this work is a step towards building a genuinely critical social theory that takes us well beyond the cul-de-sac of post-modernism, a project that certainly began with a genuinely radical spark, but has subsequently matured into a veiled apologetic for the status quo.

In order to achieve these rather ambitious and admittedly daunting goals, we have organized the following nine chapters into three parts. The first part of the book outlines our theoretical framework. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the literature on power in organizations. We argue that power has been conceptualized in four ways: as coercion, manipulation, domination and subjectification. Instead of privileging one 'face' of power over another, we suggest that each represents a dimension that is of equal importance in organizational life. In chapter 2, we consider the different theories of resistance that have been discussed in organization theory. Paralleling the four faces of power, we identify four ways of thinking about resistance in the workplace: as refusal, voice, escape and creation. Chapter 3 proposes that power and resistance are underpinned by a deeper dynamic that we call 'struggle'. This chapter works through the political philosophy of struggle, and applies it to the politics of organizational life.

The second part of the book examines various forms of resentful struggle that currently characterize contemporary workplaces, especially in this age of high risk, cynical disappointment and low trust. In chapter 4, we focus on struggles around identity. We investigate how employees frequently engage in 'cynical distancing' as part of their struggles against empowerment, cultural controls and other forms of identity management that are currently *en vogue*. Chapter 5 considers struggles around sexuality in the workplace. Drawing on a case study of a call centre, we argue that sexuality is not necessarily a space of liberation but an object of ongoing contestation. Chapter 6 examines struggles around space and place in the same call centre. We unpack what we consider to be a fascinating contest over how the space of work is defined, controlled and resisted in organizations. We suggest that the division between work and private life is especially pertinent in this struggle.

The third part of the book moves away from resentment and identity politics to those forms of struggle that are overt, organized and collective. Chapter 7 discusses struggles around corporate language and the

discourse of globalization. In particular, we examine the collective action undertaken by social movements protesting the commercialization of a public broadcaster in the name of globalization. In chapter 8 we propose that the question of justice underpins many forms of organizational struggle. In order to make this argument, we demonstrate how the campaigns of three prominent social movements (port workers, gays and shareholder rights campaigners) were all driven by strong and well-articulated social justice claims. In chapter 9 we discuss struggles for commonality. Drawing on recent political philosophy and the empirical studies outlined in the book, we consider how organizational struggle appears to create social connections and common causes whereby specific concerns are linked to broader, society-wide narratives regarding justice, equality and fairness.

Because this book is aimed at a number of different readers, we think that it should be read in different ways. For those of you who are relatively new to the field, we suggest beginning with the first and second chapters. They provide an introduction and overview of the current literature on power and resistance. These chapters should equip you to deal with the key debates and problems that are subsequently addressed in the remainder of the book. For more advanced readers who are interested in our theory of struggle, we suggest you begin with chapter 3. It provides an in-depth outline of our particular theoretical approach. For those who are more interested in our empirical work on this topic, we suggest you look at chapters 4 to 8. Each of these chapters is built around empirical case studies that examine how struggle unfolds in contemporary organizations. Finally, for readers interested in practical strategies of collective struggle, chapters 7 to 9 are recommended for both reformist and radical struggles in today's work organizations.

PART I

Theoretical framework

1 *Faces of power in organizations*

> Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert.
>
> (Arendt, 1970: 44)

Whenever we gather to undertake a task in common, power appears. This is because we all have different ideas about how even the most mundane and simple task should be accomplished. Just think how difficult it is to get a handful of people to agree upon a common time and place to meet. Our experience of coordinating a meeting of friends would lead us to expect no-shows, dissent, frustration, absolute uproar and even revolt. If such a simple task is troublesome, imagine coordinating hundreds or thousands of people in contemporary organizations. Interestingly enough, however, much mainstream organization theory views organizations as places where thousands of diligent souls work contentedly towards a universally accepted goal. If political squabbles appear, then this is the fault of a power-hungry manager, a few deviant subordinates or an organization that is in terminal decline. In this otherwise perfect world, good people in good organizations do not engage in politics. They just work towards the common good. But is organizational life really like this?

The widespread assumption that organizations are groups of people working together to achieve a common goal is naive. All the evidence suggests that, though we work together at times, we also frequently work against each other (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981, 1992). Indeed, there is rarely lasting agreement or understanding even about what the 'common goal' we desire actually is. Instead, there is contention around how people should labour, how the benefits should be distributed and how the products of our efforts should be consumed. To be blunt, power and politics are endemic in organizations.

In this chapter we argue that organizations have, in fact, become one of the most important sites of power and politics in contemporary