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Unpopular Culture

Cultures change in ways which some regret
and which please others—sometimes in ways
which seem to nobody's liking.
—Ulf Hannerz

Few management theories—indeed, very few theories in any branch of the social sciences—have much impact on the world that they purport to explain. Some do, however. Some alter the very fabric of the world in which we live, changing how people think and perceive in countless, if sometimes unexpectedly subtle, ways. The theory of organizational culture is one of these. Born twenty-five years ago in organizational sociology as the heir to such earlier studies of the informal side of organizations as Whyte (1955), Jacques (1951), Dalton (1959), Roy (1959–60), and Crozier (1964), the idea that there is culture in organizations passed through adolescence as a management fad and has since matured into a part of the common sense of corporate America and Britain. Indeed, after *Paramount Communications, Inc. v. Time, Inc.* (1989)—which set an important legal precedent by recognizing Time's right to spurn a merger with Paramount because of the possible threat of such a union to Time's distinctive culture—it has become a matter of law. Organizational culture is no longer a theory or a metaphor or a fad; it is a fact of business life. People in organizations now routinely talk about their culture and form opinions about it. And it is here that we find the greatest practical consequence of a quarter century of research about organizational culture. People in organizations now have one more thing to complain about—their culture.

This is not quite the impact that anyone intended, but it was, I would argue, inevitable given the way in which organizational culture entered the public domain. As consequences go, it may not sound very grand, but

it is no less interesting for that in what it reveals about the new lay ethnographers of the firm.

This book is about unpopular culture. It is about what happens, and what does not happen, when an organization does not like its culture. It is based on the ethnographic study of one such unpopular culture, the British Armstrong Bank (or BritArm).[1] No one in BritArm, from the chief executive down to the junior clerks, has a good word to say about that organization's culture. Never once during the fieldwork that I conducted in BritArm did I hear it mentioned in a positive context. There were none of the claims common in some organizations about the culture making for an interesting and pleasant place to work or serving as a competitive advantage. Indeed, in BritArm, very little positive is said about *any* aspect of the Bank. Negativity, on the other hand, is common. The Bank's managers and employees complain that it is too bureaucratic, too rules driven, not customer focused enough, not entrepreneurial enough, too inflexible, too prone to navel gazing, too centralized. And, it is added, too negative.

BritArm takes self-deprecation to levels extreme even by British standards. As I describe in detail in chapter 2, in a year when the Bank made profits of £1.6 billion—an increase of 61 percent on the year before—even the announcement of these figures was cast as bad news. Loyalty to the Bank, however, is high, and the same complaints regularly met with bonhomie when heard within the organization are decidedly unwelcome when coming from voices outside it. It is understood that one's dirty laundry is not to be aired in public and, for that matter, is not really to be washed at all. Even though the Bank has spent large sums on repeated (and sometimes overlapping) programs of culture change, the common wisdom holds that managers and employees come and go, assets are acquired and disposed, the organization is periodically restructured, jobs are redefined, and processes are redesigned, but "the Bank hasn't really changed in three hundred years."

To say that something is unpopular is to say two things. The first is that people express an opinion about it. The second is that this opinion is not

1. *British Armstrong* and *BritArm* are pseudonyms. Just as this book was going to press, I received permission to use the real name of the Bank. After considering the matter for enough time to realize that the choice is, indeed, a devilish one, I have uneasily decided to continue to use the pseudonym. This is partly to help protect the anonymity of the people in the Bank who were so generous to me with their time and confidence but partly also to reaffirm my own commitment to the broader, sociological themes and purposes of my work. While this work tells a business story, it is one that I am convinced transcends that of the specific organization that I studied.

A careful reader who is knowledgeable about British banking (or who has strolled the High Street of virtually any village or town in England) may well be able to guess the identify of the organization. For this reason, it is worth my noting that no real names are used in the text and that I have taken some care to disguise identifying features and locations within the Bank.

favorable. For a culture to be unpopular, then, its members must have made public sense of it; they must have arrived at some idea (more or less shared) of what culture is and come to some characterization of their culture in particular. This sense, this idea, this characterization, can be called *lay ethnography.* An unpopular culture, then, is distinguished by the presence of lay ethnography and by that lay ethnography being evaluative and negatively so. Not all cultures will have lay ethnography. Culture, after all, deals with much that is taken for granted and, thus, passes without notice. Further, not all lay ethnography will be negative. Some of the stories that people tell themselves about their culture are purely descriptive; many are self-aggrandizing. However, the fact remains that organizations are likely incubators for negative lay ethnography. This is because there is an influential machinery, a popular literature with associated business school pedagogical materials and with a management consulting industry behind it, whose business it is to create the conditions for unpopular culture.

The practitioner-oriented literature on organizational culture rose to prominence with the publication in 1982 of *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (for a genealogy of this literature, see Barley, Meyer, and Gash [1988]). Combining management theory and consulting experience with a study of sixty-two of what they considered to be America's best-run companies, Peters and Waterman (1982, xiii) identified culture as being responsible for the success of these companies and argued that organizational cultures as excellent as theirs are "as rare as a smog-free day in Los Angeles." Well written, well timed—appearing just as American unemployment hit its worst level since the Great Depression and after a glut of books extolling the wonders of Japanese management had left American readers with an apparent appetite for homegrown role models (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996, 82)—and well marketed, *In Search of Excellence* sold over a million copies in eleven months and became the first business book to appear on the *New York Times* best-seller list. It helped establish the burgeoning genre of self-help manuals for managers, and it followed the successful rhetorical strategy typical of self-help of all kinds: it created awareness of a topic area; it persuaded readers that they had a problem in this area; and it suggested solutions to this new problem. Equally typical of the self-help genre, it proved more successful at the first two tasks, raising awareness of the issue and heightening discontent around it, than it did at the third, providing concrete solutions.

Roughly two decades after *In Search of Excellence,* the literature on organizational culture has still not delivered on its promise of telling managers with any certainty how they too can use culture to create pleasant, passionate, and profitable organizations. But it *has* had influence: it has

succeeded in making organizational culture a part of the socially constructed reality of corporate America and Britain. Pick up any edition of the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Economist,* and you will find literal and unselfconscious reference to the cultures of organizations. Moreover, it does not stop there. By now, to find mention of organizational culture, you can just as easily turn to *USA Today* or the *Evening Standard* or simply turn on the television. *Organizational culture* (and its synonym, *corporate culture*) has entered the lexicon of American and British popular culture. Awareness has been raised.

Packaged with the idea of organizational culture have been exemplars of organizations with excellent cultures. These are meant to heighten readers' discontent, to show them what culture can be and can achieve. Like the figure of the supermodel adorning the cover of a diet book or an exercise tape, however, these exemplary organizational cultures are largely unattainable. This is primarily because these organizations did not achieve their precious cultural qualities by following the advice given in books or by consultants. In fact, it is not clear that they actually achieved those qualities at all. Given the claim that the advantages bestowed by the right organizational culture are enduring, it is embarrassing that studies examining the subsequent performance of the sixty-two companies identified by Peters and Waterman found it to be more average than excellent (Clayman 1987; Ramanujam and Venkatraman 1988). More generally, although the basic messages of this literature have not changed much in twenty years (e.g., Collins and Porras's more recent best-seller *Built to Last* [1994] says little that contradicts *In Search of Excellence*), the companies used to exemplify them have had to be changed several times along the way as corporate fortunes and reputations have waxed and waned. This has proved to be a boon to the publishing industry as it shortens the shelf life of these books and means that old ideas can be resold, seemingly indefinitely, wrapped in ever new examples. The need for a stable of ever new examples does, however, call into question the validity of the claims made about the cultures described in previous editions.

Not only are exemplary cultures less timeless than they appear, but their beauty and shapeliness may also be merely a trick of the light. The cultural descriptions that inform the practitioner literature are typically based on interviews with executives, company publications, and third-party accounts. More detailed organizational ethnographies, such as Van Maanen (1991) and Kunda (1992), have shown that, behind the glossy facades that these sources present, the cultures as experienced by those who live in them can be quite different. And there is a large academic literature devoted to bashing the "seductive promises" (Martin and Meyerson 1988, 94) of practitioner-oriented writing on organizational culture as

"slanted and biased application[s] of the concepts" (Meek 1988, 454) "rooted in a distorted theoretical focus" (Young 1991, 90) and so forth. Organizational ethnography and critical organization theory, however, are less read and recounted in organizations themselves than is management self-help, so what those who live in organizations are left with is the idea of culture—a vague and uncertain idea of culture at that—and a set of impossible ideals cast as role models against which they are told to form opinions about the organizational cultures in which they themselves are immersed. It is no wonder that organizations acquire a cultural inferiority complex. The very way in which organizational culture has entered the public domain has planted the seeds of unpopular organizational culture.

In spite of this, both the academic and the practitioner-oriented literatures on organizational culture have systematically ignored the possibility of unpopular culture. The literature aimed at practitioners tends to imply that strong cultures (i.e., those that are persistent and widely shared) are, by definition, well liked by organization members. Peters and Waterman (1982, 77) are typical, noting: "The excellent companies are marked by very strong cultures, so strong that you either buy into their norms or get out." Less desirable and even dysfunctional organizational cultures are not excepted from the rule that cultures persist because they are popular. The longevity of dysfunctional cultures is explained by the fact that they are overvalued by organization members who, because of either arrogance, complacency, or nostalgia, are blinded to, or in denial about, the need for change. The key to changing culture, then, is to overcome this satisfaction with the status quo—in other words, to make the culture unpopular. As one widely cited guide to organizational culture says: "When members of the current culture are at least open to change, it is almost miraculous what . . . change can be brought about just by listing desired norms, because members often start acting out the new norms immediately after they are discussed" (Kilmann 1985, 366). Unpopular culture is, in this view, not just rare; it is inherently unstable.

The academic literature is more cautious and critical in its claims, but it suggests, by omission, that unpopular culture does not exist. Roughly speaking, there are three stances that have been taken toward lay ethnography in academic writing on organizational culture. The first, and most popular, has been to ignore it. In part, this simply reflects differing empirical agendas, but, in some cases, it also derives from a theoretical stance that emphasizes those parts of culture that are taken for granted by members of the culture. Schein (1992, 11–12), for example, argues that the essence of culture is a set of shared basic assumptions and notes: "We tend not to examine assumptions once we have made them but to take

them for granted, and we tend not to discuss them, which makes them seemingly unconscious. If we are forced to discuss them, we tend not to examine them but to defend them because we have emotionally invested in them." Lay ethnography is, thus, defined away either as not touching on the essence of culture or as being rare and predictable—and, in either case, uninteresting. Negative lay ethnography is ruled out.

The second stance has been to critique the positive lay ethnography found in some organizations as reflecting corporate propaganda that is at best misleading and at worst dangerous. For example, in an ethnography of one of Peters and Waterman's original "excellent" companies, Kunda (1992) described the hidden side effects of the constant need to express positive feelings about the organization and its culture. These included overwork and burnout for those whose feelings were consistent with the carefully codified, authorized view of the organization's culture and confusion, a loss of authenticity, and a feeling of exclusion for those whose feelings were not so consistent and had to be repressed. In other words, Kunda found the dysfunctional effects of the cultural prohibitions against negative lay ethnography in organizations lauded for their exemplary cultures.

The third stance toward lay ethnography has been to examine the views of members in subcultures within organizations who do not share the positive or neutral views of the organization's culture held by the majority. In some cases—for example, in the bank described by Smith (1990)—this is an elite subculture made up of executives who have decided that, for strategic reasons, the organization's culture needs to be changed but who face resistance from middle managers or employees who view the existing culture more favorably. In other cases, the negative lay ethnography comes from members of deviant, marginal, or minority subcultures who are excluded from participating fully in the purported benefits of the organization's dominant culture and who create identities for themselves within the organization by simultaneously embracing and opposing that culture (for examples, see Martin [1992]). This duality, of expressing loyalty and dislike at the same time, is very similar to what I observed in BritArm. But what has not been considered is that persistent negative lay ethnography need not be restricted to elite or subordinated subcultures, that it may be widespread and may be, if you will forgive my using the phrase, part of the popular culture of the organization.

It should be clear by now that *unpopular culture* is not the opposite of *popular culture.* The opposite of *popular culture* is *high* or *elite culture.* The adjective *popular* has four meanings, and they are all relevant to this discussion, although *unpopular* is the antonym of only one. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2d ed.), the word *popular* may mean (1) "constituted or carried on by the people," (2) "intended for or suited to ordinary people," (3) "finding favor with or approved by the people," or (4) "prevalent or current among, or accepted by, the people." It is this last sense that Berger (1995, 19) has in mind when he refers to popular culture as a "redundancy" because "without at least *some* currency (i.e., popularity) culture would become idiosyncrasy or a curiosity." The word *unpopular* is the antonym of the third sense and means "not possessed of popular favor." It is the first two meanings, however, that animate sociological debate about popular culture and that give popular culture its dual sense of culture made *by* the people (or *folk culture*) and culture made *for* the people (or *mass culture*).

This distinction between popular culture as folk culture and popular culture as mass culture captures the argument in the sociological literature over whether the people are best thought of as active producers of popular culture, through acts of either creation or selection, or as passive consumers who are offered no real choice and, thus, have popular culture imposed on them. If popular culture is something made *by* the people themselves, then it is legitimate to see it as a possible expression of autonomy from the official culture prescribed by elites and as an authentic source of opposition to and liberation from it. If, on the other hand, it is made *for* them, then it is better seen as a form of diffuse social control that ensures the continued reproduction of the established order by pacifying the masses and systematically denying them a view of alternatives to current arrangements. If it is made by the people, then popular culture's (sometimes) unifying effects can be seen as an expression of shared values and beliefs that bind diverse interest groups. If it is made for them, the same phenomenon looks to be homogenization.

Although both these extreme positions—popular culture as purely folk culture and popular culture as purely mass culture—retain their adherents, it is the complicated theoretical ground between them that has proved most fruitful in studies of American and British popular culture writ large (for reviews of this work in sociology and anthropology, respectively, see Mukerji and Schudson [1986] and Traube [1996]) and that is most useful for the present study. This middle ground is a contested one where people are recognized as active in their selection and use of particular modes and forms of popular culture but where attention is also given to the cultural apparatus that shapes the variety of legitimate cultural resources made available to them.

The resulting picture is exemplified by Willis's (1977) ethnographic description of twelve working-class schoolboys in an area of Britain that he refers to as "Hammertown." These "lads" disdain their studies and oppose the authority of their teachers and the norms of the school by

bending the rules at every opportunity and by maintaining a stream of humor, banter, and aggressive sarcasm. Willis shows that their rebellious attitudes have the twin unintended consequences of committing these boys to unskilled and unrewarding jobs and of preparing them for that life. Their rejection of the formal socialization into the middle-class values of the school turns out to be an informal socialization into the working-class values of the shop-floor culture where they are headed. This channeling of working-class boys into working-class jobs could not be more effective if it were the school's manifest function. But, here, it is the act of opposition to the school, and to the established order for which the school stands, that performs the task of reproducing that order.

Willis's study is instructive for the present one because, as Giddens (1984, 289–97) notes, by virtue of contesting the authority relations in the school, the lads actually acquire more knowledge about the social system than the conformist children do. Furthermore, the discursive forms that characterize the boys' behavior—the "pisstakes," "kiddings," "windups," and so on—are expressions of this knowledge about, for example, the bases of the teachers' claims to authority and the points at which those are weakest, the exact limits of the insubordination that will be tolerated, and the sorts of spurious justifications that will be adequate if insubordination is taken too far. In other words, they constitute a running commentary about the school culture, a form of lay ethnography and one expressed largely in negative terms. The parallels between the Hammertown classroom and the BritArm banking hall are obviously imperfect (for one thing, the school's teachers do not join in the "piss taking" and "winding up" the way the Bank's managers join in their employees' chorus of complaint). But the same fundamental question that Willis asks of the discursive forms that he hears is one that we must ask of the modes and forms of the unpopular culture heard in BritArm: To what extent and in what manner—in both intention and effect—do these discursive forms serve to reproduce the culture that they critique, and to what extent do they serve to stand in opposition to it?

The answer to this question lies in the cultural competence required to complain effectively about the culture in the Bank and in the sanctions that deter the misuse of complaint. It lies in the ways in which the different types of negative expression about the culture are themselves culturally patterned. To be socialized into the Bank's culture is to come to know not only the way things are done around here but also the way they are complained about. It is to learn not only the official ideology of the organization but also the right and wrong ways to account for it, derogate it, diagnose it, and deprecate it. As Goffman (1974, 575) says: "When we

are issued a uniform, we are also issued a skin." Although the skin of cultural disaffection and role distance is accepted as all the more authentic because the uniform of ideology seems artificial, it is just as much a cultural provision. As I argue in detail in the chapters that follow, the cultural norms and prohibitions surrounding complaint in BritArm ensure that, for the most part, far from provoking changes in the culture, legitimate complaint serves to reinforce the culture. Cultural complaint is neutered by the cultural norms that regulate its appropriate use.

To understand the relation between culture and complaint, we must distinguish between four different types of negative expression found in BritArm and elsewhere that reflect different attitudes and intentions of the speaker and have different uses and effects on audiences within the Bank: derogations; deprecations; accounts; and diagnoses.

Derogations are put-downs. Exemplified by the sort of good-natured complaints that we might make to each other about the weather, they are complaints in a broad sense, but they are not calls for any sort of action on the part of the audience. Rather, they are a way of drawing people together through allusion to shared experience.

In contrast, *deprecations* are complaints that express a desire for some kind of redress. Thus, they have the potential for provoking change. However, there are in BritArm strict norms of tact and discretion regulating deprecations, norms that have the effect of making clear, direct deprecation rare. I describe the ways in which the ambiguity between the various types of negative expression is used—with varying degrees of success—politely to disguise deprecation as derogation or diagnosis while preserving its message.

Accounts are explanations of unanticipated or untoward events or behaviors. Unlike criticisms, which draw attention to whatever is untoward, accounts attempt to deflect attention away from it. What is interesting in an unpopular culture like BritArm is the way in which good news is as likely as bad to be unanticipated or untoward and, therefore, to require explaining. An example is the announcement of the Bank's profit figures mentioned earlier.

Finally, like accounts, *diagnoses* are explanations of problem situations. Unlike accounts, however, which seek to justify or excuse the situation so as to make it seem less problematic, diagnoses are analyses of the problem to determine what caused it. Diagnosis is patterned in BritArm by taboos concerning blaming others for problems rather than accepting responsibility oneself. Of course, this bank is no exception to the general rule that blaming others for problems is a highly useful, and occasionally even honest, mode of diagnosis. It is invaluable, therefore, to develop the

considerable cultural competence required to be able to blame others or, sometimes even better, to blame the target that cannot talk back and that everybody already agrees is at fault for much else: the culture.

To complain about the Bank's culture is to display affinity with it, not alienation from it. You must know the culture well and be a part of it to be able to complain about it and get away with it. In fact, you must complain about the culture to be a part of it: the sanctions against complaining too little, and being seen as too stiff, too stoic, or just too strange to be completely trusted, are as real as those against being too negative. These rituals of complaint—for that is what they are—do have their uses. They offer legitimate means of bonding and blaming and, occasionally, back stabbing—if not universal human needs, certainly important operations for achieving success in organizational life. What is more, they are a mechanism of self-positioning. They provide breathing space within what might otherwise be a suffocating culture, space where, according to Goffman (1961b, 139), "the individual constantly twists, turns, and squirms, even while allowing himself to be carried along by the controlling definition of the situation." They are a way of displaying one's personal stance toward the organization and its culture, a way of positioning oneself in its landscape of overlapping subcultures and in its status hierarchy. They are a way of asserting one's individuality that is accepted as individual and authentic because it masks cultural conformity and constraint with the bluster of cultural complaint.

When we talk about rituals and masks, we need to be clear about one thing: their efficacy does not depend on anyone being naive or being fooled. The disguise can be seen through, but it must still be put on. To return for a moment to an earlier example: complaining about the weather oils social interaction only if there is agreement that the weather is poor (this agreement is, by the way, culturally bounded and need not be universal: I come from sunny San Diego, where it is often said that you can spot the natives because they are the ones complaining about the weather); it will fail to work if it is clear that the complainer has little idea or interest what the weather is like at the moment and is simply (desperately) trying to make conversation. In the same way, for complaint about the culture to be effective in bonding or blaming or self-positioning, it must be, to use Bourdieu's (1990, 126) term, *misrecognized* as a valid and genuine complaint. Misrecognition implies active symbolic work on the part of both the speaker and the audience to maintain the pretense that is required by the ritual. It is tempting to summarize this symbolic work as, "I pretend to complain about the culture, and you pretend to care," but this captures only half the story. The complaints are real, as they must be, just as the audience must see the complainer as deserving of the

redress ostensibly requested by his complaint. It is merely that no one involved has any expectation of that redress being forthcoming or even being desired.

In this sense, complaints in the Bank can be compared to cockfights in Bali. In his classic description of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz (1973a, 443) quotes Auden as saying that "poetry makes nothing happen" and notes that the same is true of the cockfight. That is, although the spectacle of "a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits" looks like a competition for status among the men with their cocks, it turns out to be exactly that: something that *looks* like a competition for status. No matter how glorious it is to win a fight or how humiliating it is to lose, no one's status really changes as a result of a cockfight. Real rivalries and hostilities are activated—they must be to produce the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, and the pleasure of triumph that Geertz argues are essential for the cockfight to be effective. But, as the Balinese peasants themselves know, it is just play, it is only a cockfight, and what it effects is not a status reordering or even a reinforcement of the current status ordering. Instead, Geertz claims, "It provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (448). It is lay ethnography.

The cockfight offers its (human) participants excitement, diversion, and a chance to affirm ties of kinship and friendship. But Geertz's claim is that these are not enough to explain why the Balinese find it so *interesting*. To understand that, we must consider the "sentimental education" that it provides about status in the culture. What the cockfight teaches about status is not what it reveals most easily: who has won; who has lost; who is up; who is down. This literal level of commentary about status is irrelevant because the results of the competition have no implications beyond the cockpit. The interesting lessons that the cockfight offers—first and foremost that status is a matter of life and death—are those that are not told but displayed.

Similarly in BritArm, the rituals of complaint reveal much about the organization's culture, but not usually in the literal claims that the complaints make about the culture. These all too seldom go beyond parroting the popular wisdom about what an "excellent" culture should be like: thus, BritArm is too bureaucratic, not customer focused enough; too inflexible, not entrepreneurial enough; and so on. Rather, the interesting lay ethnography comes in the form of what the choices of complaints, the styles of complaining, and the reactions of audiences (both at the time

and later, as stories of complaints are told and retold) *display* about the culture: specifically, about status, hierarchy, and the exercise of power; about subcultural boundaries and group identities; about basic assumptions concerning what it means to be British, what it means to be a banker, what it means to be a banker in BritArm, and what it means to serve British banking customers. And, of course, about the norms of tact and discretion that are strict even by the standards of a country known as "the land of embarrassment and breakfast" (Barnes 1985, 101). Taken individually, each complaint reveals as much about the complainer and the audience and how they position themselves vis-à-vis the culture as it does about the culture itself. As an ensemble, the complaints dramatize the culture for the lay ethnographers of the firm who are both its actors and its audience (and also for the so-called professional ethnographer watching over their shoulders).

So complaining about the culture in the culturally acceptable ways should not be seen as an act of opposition to that culture. Rather, it is a cultural form that is useful for several reasons and that has the effect of enacting the very culture that it ostensibly criticizes. This is not to say that, when people complain about the Bank being inflexible, they do so inflexibly or that, when they complain of too much bureaucracy, they do so bureaucratically—although ironies such as these are favorite anecdotes within the Bank. It is, rather, to say that the performance of a complaint and the reaction to that complaint display and, if the complaint is effective, reinforce certain cultural norms, beliefs, and assumptions. These include, for example, the beliefs that precision is more important than efficiency (making a customer wait is one thing; getting his balance wrong is quite another); that money is not like other commodities in the temptation and opportunity there is to steal it; that the sort of people who are attracted to work in a bank like BritArm prize security over advancement, comfortable routine over challenge or change. When taken together, these norms, beliefs, and assumptions produce the macro-level phenomena of bureaucracy, centralization, and inflexibility that the popular view of organizational culture teaches us to disparage and that are complained about in the Bank. In other words, complaints reinforce the assumptions that produce the very thing being complained about.

There is the danger of overstatement here in that not all complaint is neutered in its opposition to current cultural arrangements. There is always the possibility for heretical complaint, for complaint that is, by the standards of the culture, illegitimate. This possibility is not, however, easily realized. It is hard to be heard over the din of innocuous complaints, and, when you shock people sufficiently that they hear you, they are likely to refuse to listen because you are being rude and possibly dangerous. It

is here that power figures importantly in the analysis. Not everyone has equal influence over the provision of meaning in the organization, and, in general, but with important exceptions, those higher up in the hierarchy (i.e., those at the "Centre," in Bank parlance) have a greater ability to shape how the culture is viewed and to change what is considered legitimate and illegitimate, orthodoxy and heresy. This power is never absolute, however, and the influence seldom sure or straightforward. The messages of this cultural apparatus—and the plural is important here since it seldom speaks with one voice—can become distorted and their impact diluted as they are interpreted and appropriated by their audience. What is more, those with the greatest ability to reshape cultural norms and assumptions may be those with the least interest in doing so, especially since ritual complaint usefully serves to euphemize their power. We see elements of each of these factors when examining the Bank's failed culture-change programs and the cultural implications of other changes in the organization. It may not always be true that, the more people complain in BritArm, the more the culture stays the same. But it does seem that, the more things change, the more unpopular they become.

To sum up: The consequence of raising awareness about organizational culture and presenting a model of what that culture should look like is less a creative tension that inspires change than it is the provision of a new cultural resource that people will appropriate for their own—culturally specified—uses. Ultimately, the impact of the collision between management theory and popular culture has not been to lead us to the promised land pointed to by management gurus or to the brave new world feared by their critics. Instead, it has been more modest, if more insidious: to produce a new form of discontent that plays out differently in each organization and that reveals more about the culture than it changes directly. To say more than this, to put flesh on the skeleton that I have provided here of culture and its discontents, requires reference to descriptions of actual practices and experiences, and it is to this task that I turn in chapter 2 with a cultural vignette that sets the stage for what follows by giving a glimpse of the unpopular culture in action.