Doing Free Jazz and Free Organizations, "A Certain Experience of the Impossible"? Ornette Coleman Encounters Jacques Derrida

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Key words: Derrida; deconstruction; Coleman; harmolodics; organizational

democracy; management improvisation.

TRACK 1: A CERTAIN EXPERIENCE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

It is common, perhaps typical, for managers in their day-to-day work to experience

several conflicting, yet equally legitimate demands at the same time. In other words,

they often find themselves in 'no-win,' 'damned if I do, damned if I don't' situations

(Hoggett, 2006, p. 186). In such circumstances, recourse to an ethical framework,

code of conduct or a more pragmatic solution proves deeply unsatisfactory, for there

is *no* one, clear and straightforward course of action (Becker, 2004; Jacobs, 2004;).

Perhaps the easiest response to such a troubling situation is to pretend you are

improvising, and then stick to a familiar path. Two of us have been managers in the

past, and both of us have indeed stayed with the familiar many times. More

challenging, however, would be to undergo what Jacques Derrida, called 'a certain

experience of the impossible' (Derrida, 1992a, p. 328) to work through the conflicting

demands.

But what might a certain experience of the impossible mean in an organizational

context? What might it feel like for those involved in it? And anyway, what is the

point of attempting to work through such a discomforting experience? These are the

sorts of questions our paper seeks to answer. And it does so, in the main, via a re-

enactment – we compare a certain experience of the impossible with a radical form of

musical improvisation: Ornette Coleman's *Free jazz* [1] – inspired by Jacques Derrida's

encounter with Coleman (Coleman and Derrida, 2004; Derrida, 2004; Lane 2013;

Malabou and Derrida, 2004;).

Many business school scholars before us who have attempted to make jazz relevant to

an organizational audience (see especially the 1998 Special Edition of *Organization*

Science as well as, for example, Bastien and Hostager, 1988; Hatch, 1997, 1999;

Humphreys, et al., 2012; Kamoche et al., 2003; Lewin, 1998; Mantere et al 2007;

Moorman and Miner, 1988; Weick, 1989, 1993). However, we seek to extend this

literature by considering the more radical version of jazz improvisation associated

with Ornette Coleman. There is a sense, then, that we shall be working (or to use a

more musical [indeed, perhaps a more Derridean] metaphor: *playing*) on the margins

– the margins of Derrida's philosophy (though see Royle, 1998) – as well as on the

margins, perhaps, of both music and organizations (though see Cobussen, 2003;

Cobussen 2001; Rhodes, 2007; Subotnik, 1996). Nevertheless, we trust that, in the

end, to play on these margins will be to do the kinds of things Derrida did – as well as

to perform something new, in our own language and in our own voice (Derrida, 1996,

p. 217/8). In particular, we propose a way to increase creative improvisation within

organizations and management practice in a manner that may be (we hope) both

radical and ethical (see also Cunliffe, 2002; Hansen et al., 2007). In doing so we have

tried to remain faithful to Derrida's work in being able to show:

> a future which [like Free jazz] does not allow itself to be modalised or
>
> modified into the form of the present, which allows itself neither to be fore-
>
> seen nor programmed; it is thus … the opening to freedom, responsibility,
>
> decision, ethics and politics [while it is] … also the *experience of the*
>
> *impossible* … the least bad definition of deconstruction (Derrida, 1992b, p.
>
> 200; italics in original).

TRACK 2: "DECONSTRUCTION AND X" OR "SONG X" [2]

In an intriguing juxtaposition, amongst a list that puts 'some order into all the

sentences or all the texts which would come forward in the name of "Deconstruction

and X'' (Derrida, 2000, p. 283), Derrida mentions management and music, almost, as it were, in the same breath:

> deconstruction *and* literature, deconstruction *and* right, or architecture,
> or management, or the visual arts, or music, etc. (Derrida, 2000, p.
> 283; italics in original).

We find his juxtaposition of management with 'the visual arts, or music etc.' productive. We think it is productive, even though neither the discipline of organizational studies and management, nor the field of music are especially prominent in Derrida's work. As far as we can determine, Derrida hardly ever mentioned organization, business and management anywhere else explicitly in the whole corpus of his work;[3] and, although he said a little more about music, what he *did* say on the subject often stressed his own lack of musical knowledge and competence. Once, for example, Derrida reflected: 'I like cinema very much; I have seen many films, but in comparison with those who know the history of cinema and the theory of film, I am, and I say this without being coy, incompetent. The same holds true for painting, and it is even more true for music' (Derrida, Brunette and Wills, 1994, p. 9).[4] Incompetent, perhaps, but his incompetence should not be taken to imply a lack of interest in the musical. Far from it – later, in the same interview, he went on to say:

> music is the object of my strongest desire, and yet at the same time it remains
> completely forbidden. I don't have the competence, I don't have any truly
> presentable musical culture. Thus my desire remains completely paralyzed. I
> am even more afraid of speaking nonsense in this area than in any other.
> Having said that, the tension in what I read and what I write, and in the

treatment of the words I just spoke about, probably has something to do with a
nondiscursive sonority, although I don't know whether I would call it musical.
It has something to do with tone, timbre, voice, something to do with the voice
(Derrida, Brunette and Wills, 1994, p. 21).[5]

Thus, while he never studied it in detail or wrote much about it, music was,
nevertheless, something that Derrida was passionate about – especially, as we shall
see, Free jazz. Indeed, a personal friend of his, Wills (2006, p. 31) recounts how,
after discovering that he and Derrida shared a love of jazz, 'from then on [in their
personal conversations] jazz became as much a point of reference as cinema had
before'. It is not altogether unsurprising, then, that in spite of his fear of speaking
nonsense about music, Derrida publicly provided another angle on his relation to the
object of his 'strongest desire' during a question and answer session with the audience
after the premiere of the film *DERRIDA* [6] at Film Forum, New York, in October 2002.
Answering the question, "What kind of music do you listen to, and why do you listen
to it?" Derrida gave the following response, albeit, with reluctance; or, at least, with
reluctance at first:

No, no, no, no – I usually don't answer such questions. What would that
mean? I love jazz and Bach and Mozart. You shouldn't ask such a question. I
love music but I'm not an expert or anything. I have no real musical expertise,
in the professional sense, but I love music and I listen to music all the time.
And well, Free jazz or Bach or Mozart.

Speaking of Free jazz, once in Paris I appeared in public with Ornette
Coleman. He asked me to come to one of his performances. We met in a

hotel. There was a big discussion and he told me he was interested in my

texts, so we met. Then he invited me to come to one of his concerts and to say

anything I wanted and he would accompany me, improvising. So, I was quite

scared. … Finally, I said yes. Although against it, I said yes. So I prepared a

text, and Ornette Coleman started the concert and, as we agreed upon, at some

point he called me onstage. And once onstage, I started reciting this special

text that I'd written for this occasion as he accompanied me, improvising. But

his fans were so unhappy with this strange man coming onstage with a written

text that they started, uh, whistling? Sorry …

KD [Kirby Dick, one of the directors of DERRIDA]:   Catcalling?

Booing?

JD: So it was a very painful experience. But finally it turned into a happy

event because the day after, in the newspapers, everyone mentioned this as

something interesting. But, in fact, it was a painful experience for me.

        So, I love Ornette Coleman – he's a good friend of mine – and that's

the kind of music I like, among others.

(Dick and Ziering Kofman, 2005, p. 115)

The aim of this paper is to read the encounters between Coleman and Derrida in a

manner orientated towards the interests of those concerned with organizations. We

proceed as follows. First, we examine improvisation as *the* core ingredient of jazz

before introducing Free jazz and Ornette Coleman's harmolodic approach to music.

We do this in order to make a space in which we can discuss some of the

organizational significance of Derrida's initial meeting with him in which an interview took place (Coleman and Derrida, 2004), as well as the event a week later at which Derrida improvised "vocals"[7] onstage with the Coleman group.[8]   In particular, we explore the notion of improvisation as practice; that is, something that has to be performed, *done* (indeed, Derrida *did* an improvisation onstage with Coleman, however much it scared him to do so). And, as practice, we link improvisation to managing and participating in organizations – something else one must also *do* rather than merely read about. As Mintzberg (1975) has famously shown: 'managers work at an unrelenting pace … their activities are characterized by brevity, variety and discontinuity, and … they are strongly orientated to action and dislike reflective activities' (p.50)

Thus we read Derrida's/Coleman's practice of improvisation – what Derrida referred to as a 'unique event that is produced only one time [but which] is nevertheless repeated in its very structure' (Coleman and Derrida, 2004, p. 322/3) in ways that might contribute to *doing* in an organizational context. We achieve this, in part, via examples based on what we think were "experiences of the impossible" two of us have had as managers – as well as through a wider consideration of participation in organizations. The intent is to show how Coleman's form of improvisation, adapted for an organizational context, has the potential to help us through experiences of the impossible in order to produce unique events – similar to the event between Derrida and Coleman – unique, if still, necessarily, repeated (that is codified) in their very structure (Ramshaw, 2006).

TRACK 3: IMPROVIZATION, ORNETTE COLEMAN AND DERRIDA

Hatch (1999, p. 78), in her paper on the value of the jazz metaphor in the study of

organizations, argues that improvisation 'constitutes the distinguishing feature of

Jazz'. She goes on to describe a typical performance as:

> structured around the playing of tunes which themselves are loosely
>
> structured via partial musical arrangements called heads. The head of a
>
> tune defines, at a minimum, a chord sequence, a basic melodic idea, and
>
> usually an approximate tempo... Improvisation centres around the head,
>
> which is usually played through 'straight' (without much improvisational
>
> embellishment) at the beginning of the tune, then improvised upon, and
>
> finally returned to and played again as the ending. The head gets a tune
>
> started by suggesting a particular rhythm, harmony and melody. The tune
>
> is then built from this starting point via improvisation within which
>
> different interpretations of the initial idea are offered and new ideas and
>
> further interpretations can be explored.

This description represents the broad structural context of improvisation within a

range of jazz styles variously described by critics as New Orleans, Swing, Be-Bop

Hard-Bop and Modern. Furthermore, individual numbers would generally be

structured in a way in which each member of the band would in turn take improvised

solos while being supported by the rest of the band "comping." [9] The musician soloing

would effectively be the leader of the band – for that moment at least.[10] However, as

Hatch (1999, p. 84) notes, 'with the advent of Free jazz, structure became so subtle as

to be practically undetectable to any but the most sophisticated listener, including

many traditional jazz musicians'. Berliner (1994, p. 338) further explains that 'Free

jazz groups express concern for democratizing jazz [and] minimize or eliminate the

distinctions between soloists and accompanists at times involving band members in

constant simultaneous solos throughout performances.' In other words, there is

(ostensibly at least) no one leader in Free jazz – a point to which we shall return later

in the paper.

Ornette Coleman is an African American musician, who (eventually) found fame in

the late 1950s and early 1960s with landmark recordings such as *The Shape of Jazz to*

Come and the eponymously titled 1960 album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvization.*

Coleman expressed his approach to music (and life) by coining the term

"harmolodics", which, in a rare (and brief) article in the jazz magazine *Downbeat,* he

defined as: 'one's own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the

musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group…harmony,

melody, speed, rhythm, time and phrases all have equal position in the results that

come from the placing and spacing of ideas' (Coleman, 1983, p. 54). Thus, Coleman's

harmolodic approach to music seeks to offer 'an aesthetic (but not aestheticized)

democracy like that which operates within his performing ensembles' (Murphy, 1998,

p. 90). And as Heble (2000) further explains:

> Coleman came along and swept away[11] the set harmonic structures and tightly
>
> knit patterns … which had dominated the music of his contemporaries (2000,
>
> p. 49) … Melody, then, [in Free jazz] is privileged over harmony to the extent
>
> that the tune itself becomes the pattern of the composition. (We might be
>
> tempted here to make an analogy with Derrida's *différance* …) [because]
>
> Coleman's jazz is a proliferation of meanings, a valorization of the signifier'
>
> (2000, pp. 50/51).

Indeed, just as it may be possible, however tentatively, to link Free jazz with

Derrida's neologism *différance*, we might also be tempted to make a range of other

analogies between the two figures themselves. For example, both have a substantial

fan base (let's use that term for each of them) across the world – just as both have also

attracted deep controversies within their respective "mainstream" communities.

Coleman, for example, has been publicly castigated by his peers for allegedly lacking

technical proficiency in basic musicianship and advocating an "anything goes"

approach to improvisation (Wills, 1998). As Collier (1978, p. 462) commented on

Coleman's early career 'his attempts to sit in with jazz bands…were met with

hostility. Sometimes musicians walked off stands when he came on to play. Dexter

Gordon once peremptorily ordered him off the stand' (cf Ake, 1998). Such stories

echo the *ad hominem* attacks Derrida received from the analytical mainstream in

philosophy when the University of Cambridge proposed to award him an honorary

degree (Derrida, 1995, pp. 399-421). Indeed, the cat-calling Derrida received from

Coleman's fans are reminiscent of similar attacks on Coleman. As the translator's

note to Derrida's improvised performance at the Coleman event points out: '[t]he

irony of this [Derrida being jeered off stage] was undoubtedly not lost on Coleman,

who has himself been the object of more abuse and ridicule than perhaps any other

musician in the history of jazz' (Derrida, 2004, p. 331).

In biographical terms, too, there are similarities, some of which they discussed at their

interview with one another. Both were born in 1930 within marginalized

communities (Coleman grew up in an underprivileged black family in Texas, USA;

Derrida was an Algerian Jew) and both suffered from the effects of racial prejudice as

young men. (For biographies of Derrida and Coleman, see Peeters (2012) and

Litweiler (1992) respectively.) It seems likely then, that both might be seen as

radicals who were driven by their shared experiences as marginal outsiders. Thus, as

Nettlebeck (2004, p. 199) observes, Coleman and Derrida are:

> 'outsiders' who, paradoxically, have come to be seen as highly representative
>
> of the cultures they have attempted to reform. Coleman, as the principal voice
>
> of the Free jazz, 'New Thing' movement, had reclaimed for jazz its territory of
>
> radical creativity. Derrida was not just France's leading revolutionary
>
> philosopher, but a thinker whose theories of deconstruction and difference
>
> (sic) had helped to redefine, globally, the parameters of epistemology in the
>
> humanities and social sciences.

On the other hand, it is equally possible to see *contrasts* between the two figures. For

example, unlike Derrida, Coleman has produced little written output.[12] Derrida's

interview with Coleman is therefore different in tone when compared, say, to the

published conversations between Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim (Barenboim

and Said, 2002). Barenboim has written on music and its relationship with wider

political issues, and one gets a sense of the meeting of similar minds – conversations

between two individuals who share comparable orientations toward, and

understandings of, the world (see also Guimaraes-Costa et al., 2009).[13] Derrida and

Coleman, however, appeared to have had less in common – at least in terms of their

respective temperaments and approaches to life. For example, in his interview with

Derrida, Coleman emphasizes the importance of *doing*; thus, in response to

Coleman's statement:

> [f]or me, being an innovator doesn't mean being more intelligent, more rich,
>
> it's not a word, it's an action. Since it hasn't been done, there's no use talking

about it … [Derrida says] … I understand that you prefer doing [*faire*] to

speaking (Coleman and Derrida, 2004, p. 327).

One detects the same kind of contrasts in Coleman's response to the following

question from Derrida:

…last night I read an article that was in fact a conference presentation given

by one of my friends, Rudolph Burger, a musician whose group is called Kat

Onoma. It was constructed around your statements. In order to analyze the

way in which you formulate your music, he began from your statements, of

which the first was this: "For reasons I'm not sure of, I am convinced that

before becoming music, music was only a word." Do you recall having said

that?

OC: No. (Coleman and Derrida, 2004, p. 328)

We enjoy Wills's (2006, p. 36) wry aside, then, in which he suggests of their

encounter, that 'one can imagine … the serious philosopher preparing himself early in

the morning … while the Bohemian musician gets up just in time for the meeting,

presuming he can take it as it comes'. Indeed, it is of interest to note, that in the

context of the others who have collaborated with Derrida (ordinarily, academics or

writers with broadly similar interests and orientations) Coleman's particular

understanding of, and emphasis on, *doing* is unusual, indeed, almost alien. This

contrast seems to have been noticed by Derrida; in a letter to Catherine Malabou,

written shortly after the gig, Derrida told her that the encounter with Coleman: '[w]as

in Paris, [that is, in Derrida's home city] but no voyage will have ever taken me so far

away, myself and my body and my words, onto an unknown stage, without any

possible rehearsal or repetition.' (Malabou and Derrida, 2004, p. 97(n)).

But it is for this very reason we think that Coleman's preferences – for doing and

action (a preference that Derrida acknowledged, and with which he complied by

actually appearing onstage with Coleman) – will resonate with the attitudes of many

managers (Byers and Rhodes, 2004; Mintzberg 1975). Furthermore, in their

interview, Coleman and Derrida talked at length of Coleman's necessary involvement

with the music business – as Derrida (2004) put it in his prepared script to read as the

Coleman Band was playing:

> In the long conversation I had with him the other day, he never stopped
>
> repeating to me, as he always does, that he didn't want to have anything to do
>
> with the institutions and powers of the music business, and that even when he
>
> deals with the commodity, he never gives in to it; and when that power of
>
> marketing or the media is too strong, he doesn't wage war against it, for
>
> Ornette is a free[14] man, a sort of non-violent revolutionary, innocent and
>
> wounded, so he does not respond to violence, he leaves … he goes and plays
>
> elsewhere and creates elsewhere, which he has done all his life: going
>
> elsewhere and arriving elsewhere, and always here, like tonight (Derrida,
>
> 2004, p, 333/4).

That Coleman *is* different from a more typical Derridean collaborator – both as a doer

(as opposed to a writer) and as someone intimately connected with (the music)

business (even as he resists some of the implications of his connections) – represents a

reason in itself for suggesting that Derrida's encounters with him may be of special

interest for readers with an interest in organization. So, in the next section we

consider how *doing* harmolodic improvisation – as understood by Coleman and

Derrida – informs the way we might *do* management in organizations.

TRACK 4: DOING IMPROVISATION AS A MANAGER –

ORGANIZATIONAL DEMOCRACY?

In their book, *The End of Management and the Rise of Organizational Democracy*

Cloke and Goldsmith (2002, p.3) suggest that 'managers are the dinosaurs of our

modern organizational ecology. The age of management is finally coming to a close.

The need for overseers, surrogate parents, scolds, monitors, functionaries,

disciplinarians, bureaucrats and lone implementers is over'. Given that more than a

decade later many organizations still operate with managers exhibiting these sorts of

characteristics, it would be fair to say that their claim was premature. Nevertheless, it

is also apparent that there are a growing number of people who are more sensitive to

issues of employee power, participation and control within the workplace. The tide

may be turning against hierarchical, top-down organizations in favor of alternative

forms of organization that promote freedom, individuality and offer the potential for

improvisational decision-making (cf. Reedy and Learmonth, 2009).

Many of the strongest ideas relating to autonomy and control in the workplace involve

explicitly introducing democratic or participatory procedures. These procedures can

be used in different ways, and to varying extents, within an organization. Indeed,

Pateman (1970, p. 68-70) suggests that there are (broadly speaking) three different

types of workplace participation – types that seem to us to have parallels in improvisational jazz.

Workplace Democracy and Improvisation?

First in Pateman's list is pseudo-participation. In this mode of management, participation (allowing questions and discussion about what might be done) is used as a way of convincing workers to accept a decision that has already been made. Ramsay (1980, p. 51) suggests that in the UK, the *John Lewis Partnership*, despite many observers suggesting otherwise, is representative of pseudo or 'phantom' participation. He suggests the partnership is 'suffocatingly paternalistic in its apparent benevolence [and that opportunities for participation within the scheme]…may turn out to produce a redistribution [of power] but not in the direction of employees'. Such pseudo-participation in the world of organizations has parallels in jazz, where one can sometimes observe the tyranny of a soloist who invites suggestions on what will be played but ultimately imposes his or her will on the group and does what he or she prefers (see Humphreys, Ucbasaran and Lockett 2012). Thus, this approach to organizational democracy (and its parallels in jazz) allows managers to give employees an illusion of freedom and self-determination while masking increased managerial control.

Pateman's second type of workplace democracy involves 'partial participation'. In this model, two or more parties (composed of management and employees) can influence decisions but ultimately the final 'prerogative of decision making rests with the permanent supervisors, the management' (Pateman 1970, p. 69). Employee voice schemes of participation in the workplace often fit into this categorization (Dundon et

al 2004; Dyne et al 2003). Individual workers are given the opportunity to voice

dissatisfaction and contribute to decision making but as the organization is not fully

participative the implications of speaking up are often perceived as riskier (Detert and

Burris 2007). Many 'labor managed firms' or co-operatives like Mondragon (see

Reedy and Learmonth 2009) work along similar lines, offering employees an

opportunity to participate in decision making while ensuring that they remain

constrained (and frustrated) by an active management structure (Luhman 2006).

Again, there may be parallels in jazz. Here, just as in work organizations, partial

participation might involve the lead musician genuinely listening to, and being

influenced by, his or her fellow players, while retaining power over what is finally

played. We might see this approach exemplified for example, in the music of Charlie

Parker, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins or John Coltrane. These artists were incredibly

innovative and achieved their innovations, at least in part, by being able to use and

respond to the ideas of their fellow musicians. But they, like most conventional

managers, retained (artistic and managerial) control of their bands. Indeed, as we saw

earlier, Dexter Gordon had the authority peremptorily to dismiss Ornette Coleman

from the stage – a highly autocratic, managerialist act (judged in terms of organization

and management theory).

A third type of workplace democracy identified by Pateman (1970, p.70) seeks to

minimize managerial control by offering 'full participation', a 'process where each

individual member of a decision making body has equal power to determine the

outcome of decisions' (cf. Barross, 2010). In this type of organization there are no

longer two opposing sides but a group of individuals who deliberate and make work-

related decisions democratically. (For examples of organizations where full

participation is something that is aspired to see http://www.worldblu.com/). To continue the jazz parallels, we think that a fully participative workplace of this kind would most resemble Coleman's Harmolodic approach to improvisation where everyone is freely soloing together. The role of the manager in an organization where there is full participation would, perhaps, be to ensure that these procedures work and are carried out according to pre-agreed rules such as upholding norms of equality of participation and freedom of speech.

However, it is important to note that as well as identifying three different types of participation in the workplace, Pateman also identified two different levels of management where these can be applied – where managers can do things and make things happen. The lower level of management 'refers broadly to those management decisions relating to control of day-to-day shop floor activity, while the higher level refers to decisions that relate to the running of the whole enterprise' (Pateman 1970, 70). Thus, there may be a mix of pseudo, partial or full participation at the higher and lower level of management that complicates the overall position. To apply the jazz analogy, the higher level management may refer to the style of music the group plays and the make-up of the group itself. The lower level, on the other hand, might refer to the choices made by individual members in terms of the composition that they play or improvise upon. So it could be argued that Ornette Coleman allowed full participation on lower-level management issues, such as the improvisation of musical compositions through harmolodics, while maintaining a firm grip on higher level management issues. For example, his band was always referred to as the "Coleman group"; all releases have his name and face on their covers and he seems to have control over the nature and musical direction of the group. Indeed, we wonder why Ornette Coleman

uses his name to identify the band at all. Why not simply 'artist formerly known as OC'? Are we to believe that he is permitted to play democratically, even if he wanted to? Perhaps then, the band could be called `Free Ornette Coleman'. [15]

Thus, in many respects the example of Coleman further illustrates just how difficult it might be to be fully participative at both levels in a democratic organization. As an organizational example of this difficulty, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) discuss a call centre in which employees are asked to "just be themselves", in relation to their sexual identity, the way in which they dress and various other lifestyle differences that might ordinarily be designed out of the workplace. They suggest that while these 'fun' features of the job are presented as altruistic and liberating, they are actually employed to increase normative control and distract employees from poor working conditions. In instances where informal mechanisms are used, then, what we tend to find is that there is an illusion of worker autonomy rather than anything substantive that would challenge traditional management practices (see also Costas 2012). Perhaps even Ornette Coleman in controlling the business side of the group finds himself in 'an experience of the impossible', as he promotes and markets himself in various ways while trying to uphold his harmolodic ideals.

TRACK 5: COLEMAN'S HARMOLODIC MUSIC LESSON FOR FREE ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

In spite of the difficulties involved, *doing* – making things happen – is what any kind of jazz (or organizational) performance is all about. As Hatch (1999, p. 82) puts it, '[j]azz happens. It is an activity, not just an abstract category. As an activity, jazz is something to be entered into, participated in, experienced'. In this section, therefore,

we move to discuss how Coleman's encounter with Derrida might inform how we do

things (and experience things) differently in organizations – even though the

experience may well be a discomforting one. Indeed in the lyrics of his own

performance with the Coleman group, Derrida started by talking of his uncertainties

and fears – along with the necessity of improvisation in this context – as well as

emphasizing what is *happening*:

> Qu'est-ce qui arrive? What's happening? What's going to happen, Ornette,
>
> now, right now? What's happening to me, here, now, with Ornette Coleman?
>
> With you? Who? It is indeed necessary to improvize well … I knew that
>
> Ornette was going to call on me to join him tonight, he told me so when we
>
> met one afternoon last week. This chance frightens me, I have no idea what's
>
> going to happen. It is indeed necessary to improvize, it is necessary to
>
> improvize but *well*, this is already a *music lesson*, your lesson, Ornette,
>
> (Derrida, 2004, pp. 331/2; italics in original).

Derrida's emphasis on being unsure – even frightened – and his consequent need to

improvise well is resonant of the kind of dilemmas which can similarly frighten us in

their production of a certain experience of the impossible. We briefly illustrate the

kind of dilemma we have in mind in an organizational context through retelling

stories of our experiences in the following vignettes (Figure 1). The first comes from

a time (almost 20 years ago) when, as a health care manager, author 3 was asked to

introduce a computer system into clinical areas; an introduction that involved changes

to the way that nurses worked. The second example is Author 2 (from over twenty

years ago) illustrating his fear of being placed in a senior management role.

Author 3: Health Care	Author 2:Education
As a health care manager I had been tasked with implementing a new ward-based MIS system. What I had assumed would be minor changes in nurses' work in exchange for substantial gains in terms of the management systems was seen very differently by the nurses themselves. They argued that looking after patients would be seriously compromised, to an extent that far outweighed what they thought were the cosmetic gains in having a slicker administrative system. Whatever the rights and wrongs, it was clear that the political benefits to the top managers in being seen as leaders in MIS meant that there was no question of not implementing the new system. During the implementation, I happened to overhear two nurses expressing to one another their strong personal animosity against me because of my involvement. The realization of their hostility left me quite shocked and hurt. I had not anticipated it, and at the time, could not work out why it should have been so vociferous.	After a career as a teacher I had progressed to a senior lecturer post in a teacher-training institution. My role was managing all the science postgraduate staff including training, placements, assessments and teaching practice. After being in this role for five years or so I felt comfortable, in control of my section and generally felt that I was doing a pretty good job. Unfortunately my senior managers also seemed to think that I was performing well and I was approached by the faculty Dean who offered me the position of Head of Department – a much bigger management role with responsibility for many more staff and students as well as financial and resource accountability. I asked for time to think about it and the Dean rather reluctantly gave me 24 hours. If I accepted the offer I knew I would face staff meetings full of conflict, endless committees and difficult encounters. If I turned it down I would alienate the Dean and senior managers. The next day I turned down the promotion, permanently souring my relationship with the Dean.

Figure 1: Short vignettes of managers' experiences of the impossible

We think these situations –where you are damned if you do and damned if you don't – are commonplace in organizational life. In other words, they might be seen as experiences of the impossible. But in an effort to make sense of such experiences, we believe it may be productive to reflect back on the three levels of workplace participation identified earlier and use them (with their parallel forms of jazz improvisation) to consider what authors 2 and 3 might have done differently.

In this light, it now seems clear that one of the central problems with author 3's

scenario was that the nurses had no participation in the decision making process. The

concerns they raised had not been listened to, nor had they had any recognizable

influence on the outcome. It had been no more than pseudo-participation. Author 3

was acting like a jazz soloist with a pre-determined composition, imposing his will on

the group with no consideration of the implications on their working lives. The nurses

had seen through the act and the resulting feeling of powerlessness had led to the level

of spite and anger leveled at him.

Perhaps an alternative route would have been to use a process that could be described

as partially participative, in which the nurses could be listened to and influence the

nature of the overall decision. If we continue the analogy with jazz, conventionally,

what a skilled manager might have been expected to do in such a situation is to come

up with a brilliant solo that brings everyone back into the groove. Unfortunately, in

terms of jazz improvisation this situation might be thought of as what Hatch (1999, p.

83) calls a 'trainwreck': 'where the musicians so interfere with one another that they

cannot go on playing the tune'.

We believe that an approach incorporating full participation – to which Coleman's

harmolodics approach aspires – may have been a better option. Perhaps it would at

least have had the potential to break down the barriers between groups and given the

nurses an equal and fair contribution to the overall decision. As mentioned above,

Coleman's Free jazz is a helpful illustration of the kind of improvisation we believe

could occur in such an environment and why it might be so valuable (but also risky)

for managers encountering an 'experience of the impossible'. Harmolodics suggests

that an alternative action to author 3's experience of the impossible would have been

an improvised response that was collective and democratic. In other words, in our

example, a harmolodic jazz (i.e fully participative) ethos would have suggested

working with the nurses and the other people involved to explore different alternatives

– where all of them would be allowed to be soloing at the same time – even when they

disagreed: an experience of the impossible then?

What, then, might a harmolodic approach have meant if author 3 had acted following

its inspiration in this particular situation? In what sense could he have encouraged

full participation by those involved or affected by the decision? We suggest, most

fundamentally, that it would have necessarily involved getting all those in the

situation together – the minimum condition of being able to jam. And if they *had* all

improvised together in the radical way implied by harmolodics, this would suggest the

encouragement of a *free* exchange of views. We think that such an exchange might

well have felt deeply emotional. Doubtless, it would have involved arguments,

shouting, tears as well as prompting a consideration of systems, efficiency and other

more codifiable issues (Griffin 2011). As Hatch (1999, p. 89) argues, '[t]he jazz

metaphor suggests that whenever we interact, communication rests as heavily upon

emotional and physical feeling as it does on the intellectual content of the messages

involved'. The shared risks of such improvisation and collaboration are vividly

evoked by Mengelberg (1995) who argues that:

> Part of improvization, of the act of improvizing, playing with other people, has
>
> very much to do with survival strategy. You have, of course, all your

22

expectations and plans destroyed the moment you play with other people.
They all have their own ideas of how the musical world at that moment should
be. So there are two, three, five, six composers there at the same time
destroying each others ideas, pieces. (Mengelberg in Corbett, 1995, p. 236)

 Similarly, author 2 would have preferred a harmolodics approach in dealing with his
own experience of the impossible. He would have been much more comfortable
recruited into a 'harmolodic collective'.   He plays alto sax in a seven piece band and
is very happy improvising as part of the collective horn section, but he is extremely
reluctant to take solos, preferring to stay in the background comping while others
eagerly take their solos. Just like his management dilemma he wants to avoid the
limelight, but in doing so he disappoints other members of the band – he would be
much happier with a democratic (i.e. harmolodic) response. It would be a response
allowing for the possibility of everyone soloing together. *Together*, albeit with
different melodies – melodies that don't necessarily have to be in the same key, or
even share the same time signature. In organizational terms author 2 was invited by
the Dean to take on the role of a high profile soloist. But he would have preferred a
collective organizational role where harmolodic improvisation was the norm – a
situation where everyone was in the spotlight simultaneously.

However, in Free jazz (or in Free organizations) there will also always be a significant
element of risk involved.; which is to say that improvising may well not succeed –
and so there is necessarily a need to trust to the future. Not, as Derrida explains,

a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But….a

future, l'avenir (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is

totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally

unpredictable (Dick and Kofman, 2005, p. 53).

So, in author 3's example of the MIS system would a resolution necessarily have been

found? Would the computer system have been implemented more quickly – or at all?

In author 2's example, would it have been possible to have a fully participative and

harmolodic Head of Department role in which multiple individuals shared

responsibility, accountability and decision making duties? Well, we just don't know –

the future would have been a future to come. The important point is that the

managerially-defined aspects of the problem would have not been allowed to solo

over the nursing or other interests – including each individual's own views. In other

words, harmolodic improvisation is an experience of the impossible because it is not

a way of finding definitive 'answers' – such improvisation cannot replace uncertainty

with confidence; indeed, harmolodic improvisation *always* has a high degree of risk

and uncertainty. However, the harmolodic approach implies that the chances are, that

what you lose through risk, you more than recoup through gains in improved

creativity.

TRACK 6: CODA

In recognition of this unpredictability, we would like to suggest that Derrida – and his

concept 'democracy to come' – may have something to offer us here, as a

participatory space where the 'experience of the impossible' is not buried or managed

away, but confronted and even embraced. The idea of a 'democracy to come'

(perhaps in a similar way to Coleman's album *The Shape of Jazz to Come*) is built

around the uniqueness of the notion of democracy, in that it is 'the only system…in

which, in principle, one has or one takes the right to publicly criticize everything,

including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history and its name' (Derrida 2003,

p.127). Derrida calls this criticism 'auto-immunity' or the 'strange behaviour where a

living being [or system], in quasi-suicidal fashion, "itself" works to destroy its own

protection, to immunize itself against its "own" immunity' (Derrida 2001, p. 94). This

tendency towards constant self-critique is what makes radical forms of democracy in

organizations seem so impossible (i.e. chaotic, difficult and fragile), especially in

comparison to authoritarian alternatives. But self-critique is also what enables

democracy's improvement over time, towards a betterment that would not otherwise

come ('a democracy to come').

It could be argued that in harmolodics, musicians take a 'quasi-suicidal' leap into the

unknown with their fellow players in an improvised and ultimately democratic

fashion. Inevitably the chance and the promise that this leap opens up can just as

easily end with failure than success. And, of course, whatever happens, not everyone

will like it. As one reviewer of a Coleman group recording suggests:

> "collective improvisation?" Nonsense. The only semblance of collectivity lies
>
> in the fact that these eight nihilists were collected together in one studio at one
>
> time and with one common cause: to destroy the music that gave them birth.
>
> Give them top marks for the attempt (Tynan in Walser, 1999, p. 255).

For many people in organizations, the risk of destruction will seem far too great, and

so, either traditional hierarchical management will be retained or more subtle

normative controls will be introduced through the pseudo-participative measures

discussed earlier. But for other organizations (often, but not exclusively, smaller

ones) the risks involved are considered much lower than the potential for creativity

that can be delivered through fully democratic systems. For example, organizations

such as Valtech (Denmark) and Davita (U.S.A.), both have regular town hall meetings

involving staff in which they can discuss and challenge company policy. Thus, all

staff take key decisions through democratic votes – votes that could directly go

against the wishes of senior management. Other companies such as Nearsoft (U.S.A)

and Semco (Brazil) even allow staff to hire fellow workers and managers through

democratic means. They integrate staff members into the hiring process, by asking

them, for example, to write the job description and set the wages so that new members

of the group can be found that fit properly with existing members and existing needs.

Other democratic organizations such as Tafʾeel (Malaysia) give all employees full

access to company accounts and salaries, and share profits equally depending on

involvement in various projects (For all of these examples of democracy in the

workplace and more, see www.worldblu.com).

However, as we have seen in Coleman's attempt to be democratic, there is an ongoing

tension between free expression and getting things done. This is because the manager

(or musician) is torn between a freedom to make decisions and a desire to treat their

collaborators as equals in the act of creating and perfecting something as a collective.

Interestingly, Derrida addresses this tension in democracy by suggesting that there

could be a process of 'taking-in-turns' (Derrida 2003, p.46). It is here that he also

invokes the idea of a 'free spinning wheel', by suggesting that even in taking turns

and curtailing our freedom of expression to get things done, we are in fact doing so of

our own accord and therefore continuing to act out a certain kind of freedom (Derrida

2003, 46-47). Each of these Derridean concepts of 'taking-in-turns' and the 'free

spinning wheel' can act as metaphors for the type of democratic improvisation we

might find within free Jazz and free organizations, leading to the promise (and the

risk) of something entirely new.

Doing something about these sorts of experiences of the impossible in a harmolodics-

inspired Free organization might achieve a shifting and an opening-up of our settled

modes of thinking and feeling (Argote 2005; Bailey, Ford and Raelin, 2009).

Harmolodic improvisation, after all, involves trying really hard not to try too hard –

which is to say that it calls for us to be both active and passive i.e.to 'do' and to be

open to others 'doing'. Preparedness is absolutely necessary yet it is also the case

that, for it to be successful, Free jazz improvisation is a collective activity which

requires that the musicians are surprised by the music that emerges. Harmolodics,

then, has two necessary conditions – it can occur only if we have prepared for it, and

yet it will work only if the event of the improvisation exceeds our preparations and

takes us unawares. As Coleman told Derrida:

> What's really shocking in improvized music is that despite its name, most
>
> musicians use a "framework" … as a basis for improvizing. I've just recorded
>
> a CD with a European musician, Joachim Kühn, and the music I wrote to play
>
> with him, that we recorded in August 1996, has two characteristics: it's totally
>
> improvized, but at the same time it follows the laws and rules of European

structure. And yet, when you hear it, it has a completely improvized feel.

(Coleman and Derrida, 2004, p. 321)

As managers who have had experiences of the impossible in difficult situations, should we also be aiming at a similar 'completely improvized feel'? We hope that harmolodics read in the light of deconstruction might inspire a move towards what one might call Free organizations – as places which have a completely improvised feel, while still following the 'laws' and 'rules' of conventional organizational forms.

Notes

1 Readers of Derrida might be particularly sensitive to the possibilities for double readings of the formulation "Free jazz". For example, "free" can be read both as an adjective and a verb. Murphy (1998, p. 88) points out that read as a verb: 'the title would act, not as a description of the performance, but as the guiding purpose of the performance: the musicians do not play "Free jazz" they play in order to "free jazz". But to free jazz from what? From itself, I would claim, from its presumed identity'. Furthermore, in our contemporary music downloading culture, "Free jazz" might also imply free in the sense of free-of-charge. While his recordings are not free in this sense, Coleman, nevertheless, has a complex relationship with the commercial aspects of his work – see note 11.

2Deconstruction and X' brings to mind Ornette Coleman's 1986 album, with Pat Metheney: *Song X*. Another echo, of which there are many, is Coleman's album *The Shape of Jazz to Come* and Derrida's concept 'democracy to come'.

3 Indeed, we hope that this paper will contribute to the debate about the utility of Derrida's ideas for organization and management – a debate that has occurred in the pages of this journal (e.g. Weiss, 2007; Weitzner, 2007), as well as, of course, more widely (e.g. Boje, 1995; Cooper, 1989; Kilduff, 1993; Kilduff and Kelemen, 2001; Kilduff and Mehra, 1997; Learmonth, Lockett and Dowd, 2012; Martin, 1990).

4 Who knows, had Derrida ever been asked explicitly about management and organization theory, he might have talked similarly of his incompetence in this field too!

5 Perhaps it is of interest to compare Derrida's statement with the account given by Green Gartside (lead singer of the post-punk band Scritti Politti), who met Derrida following the release of the Politti track, 'Jacques Derrida' (available on *Songs to Remember* [Virgin Records, 1982]): '[w]e were talking about music and I asked him why he had never written a book about music expressly, and he said that it is the most difficult thing. In a slippery Derridean way, he said something to the effect that his books aspire to the condition of musicality, that's the loftiest aim he had'. Source, 'My dinner with Derrida' p.3; available at: www.aggressiveart.org/sp_uk/interviews/spuk_1999_6.htm [accessed 3 Feb 2008]

6 Directors: Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman

7 An English version of Derrida's (French) vocals (as he drafted them) has been

published (Derrida, 2004). However, it is not clear what Derrida actually said onstage

with Coleman. The point at which he was cut short was not recorded, and it is clear

from the published transcript that the vocals were intended as the basis for

improvisation – presumably, then, he did not read this transcript verbatim.

8 The event took place at a Coleman performance held at La Villette in Paris on 1st

July 1997 (Malabou and Derrida, 2004).

9 Hatch (1999, p. 79) explains comping as follows: [w]hile one musician solos,

others may accompany them ...providing rhythmic or harmonic support to the soloist's

improvisation, and occasionally offering (or feeding) the soloist ideas which may or

may not be incorporated into the solo.

10 The nature of leadership in jazz has received critical attention in Humphreys et al

(2012).

11 We would not entirely agree that Coleman 'swept away' the musical structures of

his contemporaries. The majority of current young jazz musicians are much more

influenced by the music of the Hard Bop musicians of the 1950s and 1960s and the

music of Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, than the music of Ornette

Coleman. We suspect that Heble's statement is something like saying of

deconstruction's influence on the social sciences, that it has 'swept away' positivism.

12 Even in the jazz community, Coleman is seen almost as an anti-intellectual. According to his contemporary, saxophonist Steve Lacy, for example: 'when Ornette hit the scene [in the late 1950s], that was the end of the theories. He destroyed the theories [about jazz improvisation]. I remember at that time he said, very carefully, 'Well, you just have a certain amount of space and you put what you want in it'' (in Bailey, 1992, p. 55)

13 It is interesting to speculate as to the potential conversation Derrida may have had with another contemporary Free jazz pioneer Archie Shepp who was "A college graduate with a special interest in literature…a spokesman for the young black avant-garde musicians of his time" (Collier, 1978, p. 471).

14 Again, the ambiguity of the word 'free' here is significant. Is this, for example, a statement of Coleman's jazz preferences or an indication that he considered himself free from constraining management influences of the major record labels? In relation to this latter point, see Mackey (1995, p. 77), in which jazz is discussed as the 'erasure of black inventiveness by white appropriation'.

15 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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