**Circuits of power/knowledge[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

Knowledge and organizational learning may be said to move in and through circuits. I shall demonstrate that macro-events frame the development of forms of organizational knowing and knowledge, learning and capabilities. Using an ideal typical approach, in which certain aspects of reality are artificially accentuated for analytical reasons, the implications of two major relatively recent crises will be examined: the collapse of the USSR and the Global Financial Crisis. Very different lessons flow from understanding these crises. After presenting brief histories of the present I shall turn to discussion of the relations between social and system integration and the new social media, before drawing some conclusions with implications for thinking about circuits of power/knowledge.

**Key words: power, social integration, system integration,**

**Power**

Power is not a thing: it is relational. There are two types of relations in which power is constituted. The crudest form of power is either one of direct violence, or one of violence deferred, which is coercion. Permanent relations of domination require something more sophisticated than this: they require a systemic set of relations that can be become routinized. There has to be a set of rules of the game which all are familiar with. Furthermore, actors have to embody certain predispositions, presupposing a shared system of social knowledge. Hence, as Foucault termed it, we should always consider power/knowledge relations. The essence of modern power/knowledge relations resides in their condensation and differentiation through many organs and capillaries, which constitute and channel the rules of the game, defining the constitution of social, knowing subjects.

I am going to focus on the difference between societal power/knowledge relations that are skewed towards social integration and societal power/knowledge relations that are skewed towards system integration. Social integration occurs largely through the medium of knowledge, of ideas; system integration occurs principally through the medium of practices of discipline and production.

The model of circuits of power defines the normal workings of power, in relatively stable systems. However, in situations of shock to the system the circuits may, if I can use the metaphor, “short-circuit”. In some instance this may entail a reversion to more primitive power, that of coercion and violence. Alternatively, short-circuiting may question the rules of the game and the identities of the players. In what follows I shall focus on two relatively recent historical cases, one of which saw a crisis largely in the circuit of social integration, the other largely in the circuit of system integration. The former is an instance in which there is a reversion to primitive power (violence and coercion) and in the latter, a knowledge crisis. Having discussed the nature of these crises I shall draw out the theoretical implications for management as a practice constructed through circuits of power/knowledge.

**Circuits of social integration: Back in the USSR**

A classic example of surprising institutional fragility and apparent institutional strength is provided by events in the postwar history of eastern Europe. For much of the twentieth century the eastern part of Europe was constructed as a series of state socialist societies institutionally centred on the Communist Party, which framed everyday practices in a seemingly tight hold.

These institutions were subject to the domination of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. On a number of occasions, such as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Party forcibly intervened to repress resistance to the domination of its institutions. The military of the Soviet Union sought to ‘normalize’ the social construction of the institutions being challenged. Resistance demonstrated these existing institutions had failed in guiding, influencing, and routinizing processes of institutional sensemaking but they were able, nonetheless, to marshal powers that could impose an objective reality on the inter-subjective strivings of the resisters.

The Soviet Communist Party was characterized by a limited number of central symbolic constructs. These included rational myths about the superiority of state planning and central control of the economy under the direction of a Party with a monopoly of state power. These myths supported claims to legitimacy that become widely adopted and diffused in east European and Soviet state politics.

The Soviet Communist Party, as Marxist-Leninist, intended to achieve hegemony over the many separate nationalities and languages brought under its remit in the wake of the Second World War. The Party sought to overrule these sources of differentiation with a political system unilaterally imposed. Dramatic punctuations of the Soviet imperium contested the central symbols of the Party in eastern Europe when national movements asserted their autonomous ability to make strategic choices.

There were many instances of collision between the central Communist Party Organization and its subsidiaries: 1953 in Berlin, 1956 in Hungary, and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. In 1968, Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia was ‘normalization’ by the Party on the one hand while on the other hand it was seen as as brutal repression of student and worker demands for liberties and socialism with a human face. In the case of the Prague Spring, events contingent on Dubček’s actions entangled both exogenous (the Brezhnev led Soviet Communist Party) and endogenous (Dubček and the Czech Reformists) definitions of the complex situation. In Czechoslovakia in 1968 Soviet tanks forcibly intervened in the recently modified Czechoslovakian subsystem. Husák’s “normalization”, following Soviet “liberation”, squashed Czech “freedoms” for another twenty years. Normalization, liberation, freedom were different politically loaded terms for making sense of the same events.

The Soviet Union had been built as a complex system of networks dominated by a single elite organization, the Communist Party. Hence, the central significance of the system was the communication of an ideology that sought to integrate different levels of practice, from the micro to the macro, through a vast panopticon that flourished on the surveillance of people’s capacity to act as if they believed what they were told. That many did not was evident in the sub-culture of Soviet jokes that flourished at this time.

Communication flowed from the elite of the Party centre. These flows were shaped by the in principle monopoly command of the means of communication. The coercive elite of the KGB and other repressive state apparatuses attended to communication breakdowns. Clusters of overlapping ‘command situations’ generated and sustained elite ‘power centres’ linked to one another through demographic processes of interaction and circulation. Chernobyl was the litmus test indicating the failure of Soviet technocracy and the limits of its gerontocracy.

When Gorbachev assumed the presidency he represented a generational change, signalled by the introduction of *glasnost*. Potentially, *glasnost* opened up new circuits of power reaching from the micro-level of everyday talk to the commanding heights of the state. *Glasnost* was an opportunity for organizational learning at a system level, as the Party scrambled to be in the vanguard of events it could not control. It sought to allow miniscule elements of a small-scale market economy while maintaining a one-party state organization and a command economy. Gorbachev enabled what had hitherto been underground and samizdat communication to circulate publically. Loosening control initially exacerbated the problems it was designed to solve; in addition, it threatened the basis of the Communist state system as an attempt to impose a singular ideology on almost all aspects of life. The technocratic, military and security elites that held the networks together increasingly revealed internecine rivalries and structural decomposition.

Gorbachev sought to control and manage widespread change of the Soviet system. In doing so he initiated fragmentation and the rise of political opportunism, best seen in the rise and then fall of Boris Yeltsin, Putin’s predecessor. Once the Party began to fragment, anxious local administrators, protecting their own interests, fractured it further. *Glasnost* weakened the tight social integration that had characterized the USSR and its satellite system during the height of the Cold War while *perestroika* weakened system integration. The Communist Party organization had been built on nationalist lines in the subordinated republics, especially those in Caucasus and in the central Asian republics. Local elites exhibited a form of ‘pragmatic submission’ rather than ideological loyalty that could be quickly withdrawn if the threat of compulsion seemed distant and unlikely. By the 1980s this was the case.

What can we learn from the fragmentation and eclipse of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party? Institutions are continuously changing because they are generating, at micro and macro levels, actions that act upon actions. Sensemaking can only occur through representations in use in use, irrespective of the nature of the events being made sense of. Think of the organization of the Soviet Communist Party as one whose past obligatory passage points for securing meaning were being increasingly destabilized by events.

**Circuits of system integration: Back in the USA**

In the previous analysis I primarily focused on crisis in the circuit of social integration; now it is time to shift the analytic gaze from the east to the west, from communism to capitalism, from the centrality of the circuit of social integration to that of system integration.

A market-based society demands no ideological conformity; indeed, the more pluralistic it is the better. Plurality and diversity spell out more opportunities for niche markets, products and services. There are some zones in which plurality is not encouraged, however. One of these is professionalization, which depends on increasingly standardized knowledge that, normatively, constitutes being professional. Management is one such field.

At the end of the 1950s the recommendations of the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation ensured the place of a new professionalization of business education. The ideal was one of science, the style that of abstraction, the methods those of empiricism, and the epistemology that of positivism.The discipline of a specific neo-classical and quantitative paradigm went on to dominate the top universities, institutions as well as the lists of the ‘Nobel’[[3]](#footnote-3) prize winners, confirming the normative template for management knowledge as it was legitimated in the top business schools.

Classically, economics had been, as Adam Smith termed it, a theory of moral sentiments but by the late nineteenth century and the marginalist revolution, the value of efficiency became predominant. Economies were conceived of in terms of movement around an equilibrium that knew of no golden mean other than efficiency and no better way of representing such a mean than mathematically. Ethics got stuck in the humanities faculty where it turned postmodern and infiltrated Business Schools only so far as Critical Management Studies. Critical Management Studies suffered from its infusion with Marxism, its stress on ideological mechanisms, and search for a vanished historical subject. It might have been better researching celebrity rather than subordination, false idols rather than false consciousness.

In terms of the management of capital agency theory, with its litany of mistrust of those charged with capital’s management, led to a narrowing of perspectives on the stewardship of the firm to those simply of shareholder value. Allied to devices such as agency theory were innovations in managerialism, such as the stress on key performance indicators. These devices and innovations became primary means for creating the highest order system integration of a capitalist economy through the flows of capital.

The business schools and business professors, especially in mathematical finance, played a key role in the development of the new devices premised on computer modelling and statistically probable market plays. The new mathematical devices of financial economics were engines not cameras: they did not operate on a correspondence theory of the world so much as create a world that cohered with their theory, as investment banks and insurers took mortgages, packaging and repackaging them into complex securities, topping them off with derivatives. The use of complex algorithms in sophisticated computer programs that only the big financial institutions could afford shifted the zero-sum odds of market transactions to trades in volatility that worked in favour of those who held the technology. Extensive network coupling ensued because the practice of using the cash flows from stocks and bonds to create other securities generated massive returns and fees for key players in the system. The institutions creating and selling structured bonds, from banks to ratings agencies to insurance companies, gained a big fee every time a bond was issued. Complexity produced yield in an era of low interest rates, further encouraging density. Structured finance provided banks and other institutions with more chances to develop insurance-like trading strategies where one institution writes swaps or options that provide it with regular payments in exchange for taking another’s risk of default. The ‘tail-risk’ was minimal as long as no event occurred that transformed sensemaking and destabilized extant ethics in practice. Events, of course, prove to be the bane not only of politicians but also of markets.

The complex transactions in these dense networks exceeded the capacity of key managers to judge, interpret and make sense of the complexity that occurred. The complexity was abstracted not substantive; the numbers were free floating signifiers. No necessary reality attached to the numbers other than the coherencies assumed by a mathematical calculus embedded in programs and more at home in theoretical physics than social reality. However, as we know, eventful and unimagined contingency was waiting to happen and indeed it did, as the sub-prime crisis unfolded into the GFC.

When, in the early stages of the GFC, the scions of Wall Street appeared before the US Congress and claimed not to know what was going on they were not necessarily dissimulating. In situations of weakly coupled and dense inter-organizational networks, internal organization order was deliberately designed as a loosely coupled system in which social ties were weak, with traders having many degrees of freedom and little oversight – in part because of the abstract complexity of the devices and the lack of detail knowledge of those nominally responsible for them.

System integration, premised on increasingly abstracted disciplines of calculation and the devices thus created, had become increasingly complex. Its complexity, under a regime of light regulation, made its circuits of power/knowledge virtually ungovernable.

**Discussion**

The crisis of capitalism was not one of social integration so much as system integration. It has not produced a legitimation crisis. Unlike the USSR, that sought to create social order on the basis of a singular overwhelming hegemony and legitimacy, that of the Party, capitalism’s primary circuit of power was a nexus of seemingly boundless and increasing flows of capital. Freedoms, with a polyvalent plurality of possibilities wrapped in financial obligations, were its currency of power. The Marxist critique of ideology in the west was misplaced and overstated: capitalism’s genius lies not in its controls over thought but the freedoms of opportunity it afforded.

While the USSR had one dominant institution of the Party western capitalism had one dominant institution of the market. The Party closed off possibilities for plurality and prosperity; the market creatively spun them out and celebrated them. Social integration, built around ideology, as the USSR discovered, is a fragile construct, with the need for recurrent episodic power to normalize and restore order being evidence of this proposition. Circuits of system integration built around ever-expanding imaginaries and institutions of markets offer a more secure basis for social ordering. While they are no more immune to crisis than circuits that are largely socially integrated they are more resilient.

In both cases crisis arose from events that were unanticipated: in the east, the impossibility of matching Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ program or of reforming a Leninist economy; in the west, the inability of management to control the complexity unleashed by the algorithmic innovations embedded in programs. The USSR was blighted by the constraints of apparatchikism and the demand for loyal social integration, while in the USA devastation was wrought through managerialism’s demands for increasingly expanding spheres of market penetration.

In the west, system integration is founded on abstractions that become ever more abstracted while social integration is increasingly schizoid: on the one hand founded on virtual celebrations of identity expressed through social media presence; on the other hand, through whatever major forms of collective sentiment, combining spectacle and ethics, command attention. In both cases social media have effectively ‘colonized the lifeworld’. One consequence, ironically, is that the democratic power of the multitude to grasp the critical moments in which we live is increasingly limited by the politics of immediacy, of presence and individualism.

The lessons from these differentiated circuits for power/knowledge relations are evident. Circuits built on ideology that seeks to dominate, to attain hegemony, are the most fragile and vulnerable. It is much more efficient to govern through freedoms, however illusory, than repressions and this applies across all levels of analysis from the organizational to the societal. Circuits that stress system integration and allow for diversities and pluralities in social integration are more resilient and robust. They are so to the extent that they allow far more scope for freedoms of identity. To the extent that extensively networked system integration becomes too tightly coupled and programed to repeat what has been learnt in the past it is less capable of learning from events not previously encountered. System shock absorbers do not function well in such circumstances.

Two cautionary notes can be sounded. First, don’t expect too much of coherent and consensual knowledge in society at large or in corporate culture writ small. Circuits of social integration, the more centred they become on obligatory passage points that stress conformism and convergence, stifle innovation and have a low capacity to absorb shocks that do not conform to their constructions of reality. Second, don’t create circuits of system integration the complexity of which defies management and understanding and whose extensive interlocking rapidly relays circuit-breaking events through tightly coupled and heavily programed sub-systems. In an increasingly connected world in which representations seem more real than existence itself continuous online presence through smart phones and social media such as Facebook and Twitter leads to an increasing mediation of circuits of power/knowledge. They produce a dangerous and dysfunctional effect, an increasing sense of being in the moment rather than in history. Presence and being in the present does not make history redundant; the latest i-gadgets, tweets, or viral feeds do not supersede dominant political and organizational circuits of power/knowledge: while sometimes interesting and important, social media are ultimately epiphenomenal, of the moment. It is history that matters most, however.

Take for instance the recent history of Russia: in the run up to the Winter Olympics almost all of the non-sports reporting was oriented to Putin and Russia’s anti-gay attitudes (about 208,000,000 Google hits). By comparison, little reportage sought to draw connections between the events in Ukraine’s Independence Square and the probability of Russian nationalism defaulting to the Soviet mode of ’56 and ’68 (47,000).[[4]](#footnote-4) I think this is significant: social media devices have, by and large, led to a trivialization of news values, a focus on what is trending and ephemeral, vacuous and vain. The effects are two-fold: first, as the new devices transform the nature of journalism and the advertising revenues it depends on, news media have less resources to apply to in-depth reporting and analysis. Second, as news values that appeal to the lowest common denominators of taste, in terms of gossip, celebrity, cuteness, scandal and outrage find an audience and trend, these become the most heavily featured news stories of the day. The loop tightens recursively around the trivial which is inherently more interesting to more people more of the time than the events of world history. We are at serious risk of being dumbed down as a populace as a whole as technologically pervasive circuits of knowledge in everyday life become increasingly ahistorical, anti-intellectual, apolitical and ephemeral.

Note that what I have presented I resolutely not an ideology critique: it is not ideology and social integration that is central in the west so much as system integration. The reliance of financial institutions on algorithmic devices caused a near global crisis but virtually no legitimation crisis, apart from some elements of carnival associated with Occupy and related social movements. In the west, not a thousand but millions of flowerings of identity bloom, aided by Facebook and the like. The dense plurality of the circuits of social integration cushion, compartmentalize and rationalize those crises that ensue. Where system integration is the leitmotif then reliance on increasingly abstracted devices poses the main threat to social ordering as their effects escape sensemaking and comprehension on the part of those charged with their management.

In the east, in Russia, identity politics are critical for social ordering because the central conduit of politics is reliance on social integration. That is one of the main reasons why Putin’s Russia is marked by its anti-gay stance and extreme nationalism. To be gay in a city such as Oslo or Sydney is an authentic expression of identity whereas in Russia it invites censure, recrimination, violence and state sanction. Religion plays its role also: the Orthodox Church supports and reproduces the discourse of nationalism. In Russia the shift of social integration from the rhetoric of the Party to that of national, patriarchal and religious identity still seeks to channel social identity through a restricted obligatory passage point. The conduits may have changed but the dynamics remain very similar. The contrast in the role that Christianity plays as a circuit of power/knowledge in the US and Russia is striking: in the US it is plural, fragmented and individualistic with strong popular undercurrents of a fundamental evangelism while in Russia it is centralized, homogenous and traditionalist for elites and masses alike.

The essence of modern power/knowledge relations resides in their condensation and differentiation through many organs and capillaries. Abstract *power over*assemblages of human beings and things is achieved through mundane regulation by devices of panoptical surveillance, by governing the conduct of conduct of specific forms of life’s practices.[[5]](#endnote-1) An *abstract*, ‘power over’ is essential where the target of power is no one in particular and anyone in general. *Power over* people and things operates not only through episodic intervention into the conditions of everyday life but also in a more unobtrusive fashion through the application of means/ends rationality. While much of this power is episodic an apparatus of disciplinary power often underlies episodic power. Moreover, the exercise of power over relies on *devices*because modern power is abstract not personalized – it flows through things and devices. In contemporary Russia it flows through pipelines as oil, a major resource that forms the basis for a network of system integration that is state controlled but over which control is being lost as the gas basins of Central Asia increasingly flow east into China rather than north to Russia. The USA rules through more abstract market networks every bit as global but far less material and much more pervasive, as the sanctions regime that has the potential to shut Russia’s oligarchy out of global capital markets might demonstrate.

Power does not normally work through coercion in order to secure its objectives; it only does this when the order that is ordinarily secured breaks down. An implication of this is that social systems that have to intervene forcibly to reform ‘deviance’ are not, in fact, powerful: if they were, no need would exist for the crude exercise of ‘episodic’ power. Of course social integration can always construct an Other on whom the unleashing of episodic power can be justified: for Russia, at the present, the Ukrainian state is the Other. It is the irruption of episodic power spilling into this state that strengthens social integration at home, through opposition, antagonism and violence to the western European oriented political projects of one, majority, fraction of the Ukrainian political elites. The latter are intent on maintaining system integration of the pre-existing (since the time of Khrushchev) state formation. The minority fraction maps its support closely onto social identity claims premised on language and ethnicity sprung from Mother Russia. The goals of Russian social integration are incompatible with those of Ukrainian system integration in this case. Hence the importance of power/knowledge relations fused on language and its sense of national identity: creation of power within a system normally presupposes consensus on goals, providing a framework within which facilitative power operates. When these relations become tangled up in what get to be constituted as different systems social and system integration clash.

**Conclusion**

To summarize: in the east, where there was centrality of circuits of social integration, social ordering was marked by too much state and too little market, while in the west, or at least in in its most neo-liberally economic expressions, there was centrality of circuits of system integration and social ordering was marked by too little state and too much market. Of course, states are dense collections of fields, characterized by complex relations. As circuits of social and system integration traverse these relations each is liable to circuit breaking from events. Where social integration is central, power over deviant subjects defined in terms of dominant conceptions of normal power/knowledge will be forcibly exercised. Where system integration is central and abstracted coding the norm, it will be confounded when confronted with events not previously encountered.

These tendencies are exacerbated the more that coding devices are abstracted, embedded in programs and the more remote they are from managerial oversight. While financial innovation tends to pull centrifugally in the direction of enhanced abstraction it requires the state to exert centripetal pressure for enhanced surveillance and oversight. To the extent that key elements of the state administration, notably the finance and economic divisions, are captured by the rhetoric of markets, the less likely it will be that sufficient surveillance occurs.

Crisis in either market led system integration or in state led social integration can destabilize existing knowledge, resource dependencies and pattern of interaction.  In such conjunctures, while system disintegration can be fixed by states learning new routines, such as quantitative easing, social disintegration is far more problematic where no higher order organization (other than potentially religious institutions such as the Orthodox Church in Mother Russia) exists to fix internal problems of integration. However, these can be displaced externally through a projection of episodic power, in the name of social integration, into other systems, disintegrating them in the process.

Neo-economically liberal states weather crisis much more resiliently than do states in which system integration is subordinate to social integration. The former are far less ideological while the latter are for more ideological, contrary to the lessons of Western Marxism. Contradictions in system integration have not destroyed capitalism because of its relative autonomy as a circuit of power/knowledge, especially in the most central global states; in addition, the plurality and diversity of social integration within such nations make them far more resilient, even when all the preconditions of fiscal and legitimation crisis are present.

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2. Also a Visiting Professor at Newcastle University Business School, UK; Nova School of Business and economics, Lisboa, Portugal; EM-Lyon, France. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 1969 the Royal Bank of Sweden, created the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, the so-called Nobel Prize in Economics. It is not a prize bequeathed by Nobel. It is an example of a very successful professional legitimation device. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Google hits were generated by searching for ‘Putin Russia anti-gay’ and ‘Ukraine Independence Square Russia Crimea’ and were searched for on March 7 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)