

On Misunderstanding Heraclitus: The Justice of Organisation Structure

Writers on organisational change often refer to the cosmology of Heraclitus in their work. Organisational change scholars have paid particular attention to the assertion that Plato attributes to Heraclitus that 'all things are in process and nothing stays still' (Kirk et al., 1983, p.195). Some draw upon this statement to justify arguments that organisational change is constant and universal and that organisational continuity and stability are a mirage. These writers wholly misunderstand Heraclitus. Other writers draw upon the idea that originated with the thought of Heraclitus, that the universe is composed of processes and not of things, in arguing for proper attention to be paid to processual studies of organisational change. Yet there is some uncertainty as to whether Heraclitus actually said that the universe was composed exclusively of processes rather than things, and even if that was what he thought, he intended his ideas on flux to be understood not in isolation but in the context of other aspects of his cosmology. Heraclitus was a rational but also a religious thinker. A central element in his thought was the notion of divine Justice (*dike*), which to a Greek of his era meant the order of the universe. Remote as his Olympian theology may seem today, it sets a crucial and entirely rational context for understanding his ideas about flux. It means that ideas about continuity and stability were quite as important in Heraclitus's cosmology as his more commonly quoted ideas about change. Writers on organisational change seldom make reference to this wider context.

Analysis of the thought of Heraclitus is complex at more than one level. Heraclitus was a citizen of Ephesus writing at the end of the 6th century BC. Kahn (1979) points out that the original text of the work of every philosopher before Plato, including Heraclitus, has been lost. Only fragments of Heraclitus's work that have been quoted by later writers have survived. There are substantial problems in isolating what Heraclitus actually said from what later writers have attributed to him under the influence of their own particular purposes and convictions (Cherniss, 1951). Moreover, Heraclitus was recognised, even in antiquity, as an obscure writer (Kirk et al., 1983), his style of expression was poetic and prophetic (Cherniss, 1951; Emlyn-Jones, 1976; Kahn, 1979), and even when the words that he actually wrote have been clarified, problems remain in understanding what he meant by them. Despite the challenges, the effort to discover such insights about organisational change as we can from Heraclitus is worthwhile. As Platts and Harris (2011) argue, Heraclitus's contribution at the dawn of western philosophy is the origin of a key theme in how we think about the nature of reality, which has substantial implications for the ways in which we think and speak about organisations and organising. The frequent recourse of writers on organisational change to the authority and inspiration of Heraclitus argues for critical examination of their use of Heraclitus's thinking.

Organisational change scholars appear to have misunderstood Heraclitus in three main ways. First, most display excessive confidence in their interpretation of what Heraclitus said about flux, despite the presence of radically different interpretations among scholars of pre-Socratic philosophy (Popper, 1958-59; Kirk, 1960). Second, some draw upon what Heraclitus said about flux to justify claims that organisational change is constant and universal, when the most that can reasonably be inferred from Heraclitus's ideas about flux is that organisations are constituted of constantly changing micro-processes, which are quite consistent with the possibility of organisational continuity and stability (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Third, organisational change scholars typically focus on what Heraclitus said about flux, but ignore other elements of his cosmology, in the absence of which his thinking about flux cannot properly be understood. These other elements of Heraclitus's cosmology are, first, his belief that the universe is governed by Justice, that is, that the universe is ordered in accordance with rational, divine laws that are capable of being understood by insightful people and, second, that Justice is embodied in perpetual strife

(*eris*) between opposites, which is reflected in Heraclitus's doctrine of the unity of opposites (Kirk et al., 1983; Lloyd-Jones, 1983). Examination of all three of these elements of Heraclitus's cosmology - flux, Justice, and the unity of opposites - is necessary in order to assess what insights into organisational change can reasonably be drawn from his philosophy, and how far they are consistent with contemporary writing on the subject.

References

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