

Countercultural values

Description

default watermark

Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak speaks up in favour of countercultural values as contributing factors in Silicon Valleyâ??s commercial successes, and as providing keys to creativity. Thinking for yourself, wearing the clothes you like, dropping out, innovating, and rebelling against conformity go together.

Of course, thereâ??s a conflict between the â??think differentâ?• slogan (promoted by Steve Jobs) and the powerfully corporate, hyper-organised, controlled and controlling world of Apple. Is there a theory of successfully organised non-conformity?



The cool, modernist, minimalism of contemporary Apple design (via Jonathan Ive) puts one in mind of the Platonic forms, and hence Platonic idealism. Plato also hinted at the way organisations operate. For Plato, there are those people who tend more towards reliability. These people are like the sturdy, organised, parallel threads (the warp) deployed in the weaving process to make fabrics. The more decorative elements, the woof (or weft), are looser and threaded between the straight stuff. Both are required to create a smooth and â??well-wovenâ?• fabric (*Statesman*, 311c). By this reading, any

organisation needs radical as well as organised elements (see Network Notion). Perhaps the non-conformists are ok so long as their activity gets channelled and directed to good ends.

Itâ??s common to think of media organisations, games developers, architects, and R&D setups as organised roughly into two parts. There are the reliable organisers, the accountants, the planners, the legals and the project facilitators. On the other hand, the design teams, the creatives, are the ones who come in late, work into the evening, and dress as they like. Their manners are sometimes brusque and unpredictable, but tolerated. The warp of the organisers supports the tangled web of the slightly dysfunctional but highly creative â??woofs.â?•

But hereâ??s a slightly different view of the relationship between organisation and creativity â?¦ The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari referenced Plato, and developed a philosophy of organised non-conformity â?¦ or perhaps itâ??s disorganised conformity.

They endorse the idea of two kinds of â??structures.â?• Thereâ??s tree-like organisation where things connect in a hierarchical manner. The trunk holds the branches, which in turn support smaller branches, and twigs. All the parts lead back to the authority of the leader (the trunk).

default watermark

A more rhizomic structure is one in which there is *no* sense of a leader, and parts are interconnected in dynamic and indeterminate ways, much as we now think of social networks (on and offline).

I donâ??t think theirs is a theory of Platonic balance, control, and harmony between the organisers and the creatives, but about accepting a set of relationships that are always fraught. Neither is it about two groups of people, but an endemic condition within all of us, and within any system.

Deleuze and Guattari think of a rhizome as **parasitic** on established structures. It grows from within to eat away at the edifice of the tree. The trappings of bureaucracy and the keeping of accounts operate as trees (arboreally), but creative subversion â??can begin to burgeon nonetheless, throwing out rhizome stems, as in a Kafka novelâ?• (p. 15). Institutions are prone to disturbances to their own operations and authority from within.

On another tack â?¦ any system is perverted by ill-formed and deviant flows: â??A mutant flow always implies something tending to elude or escape the codesâ?• (p. 219). Their metaphor of the rhizome draws attention to a disruption in the flow, â??*a system of interruptions* or breaks (*coupures*)â?• (p. 36).

> everything functions at the same time, but amidst hiatuses and ruptures, breakdowns and failures, stalling and short circuits, distances and fragmentations, within a sum that never succeeds in bringing its various parts together so as to form a whole (p. 42).

Perhaps their most profound point is that the human condition, politics, language, art, history, and institutions are best understood through the idea of the rhizome and of the machine running amok, a self-destructive or intensely self-transforming movement without beginning or end.

Back to the Apple tree: The recent BBC documentary homage to Steve Jobs (*Steve Jobs â?? Billion Dollar Hippy*) hints at this unsettled movement, conflict and contradiction, in one organisation at least.

Theirs is a political rather than an organisational manual, but I often think Deleuze and Guattari provide a good starting assumption for any manager, whatever your position in the tree. Donâ??t think of your

organisation as a statically ideal system where everything is in its place, from which it occasionally deviates and to which it must be returned. Organisations donâ??t only occasionally suffer from outside interference. They are already unsettled, and from within. But then we donâ??t need Deleuze and Guattari to tell us that (or Silicon Valley non-conformists and entrepreneurs). Itâ??s really just about facing up to the way things are, and being pragmatic.

Reference

- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi. London: Athlone Press.
- BBC Radio 4 programmes: Steve Wozniak: â??Think for yourselfâ?? (Wed 14 December 2011); Counterculture: Key to business success?
- Also see Brain scans and creativity.

Category

1. Creativity

default watermark

Tags

1. Apple
2. creativity
3. design
4. organisation
5. Plato
6. Steve Jobs
7. Steve Wozniak

Date Created
December 17, 2011
Author
rcoyne99