

Workplace Culture, Text, and Activity in the Tranz Rail Inquiry

Mike Lloyd*

The concept of workplace culture is an important one in the study of industrial relations, however, the broader concept of culture is notorious for its haziness. This paper uses an empirical case study, discussed in light of selected sociological approaches to culture, to present a view of industrial relations as saturated with the culturing effects of texts and documents. The case study is taken from the recent ministerial inquiry into workplace health and safety at Tranz Rail, specifically the inquiry's question of whether "any culture or cultures within Tranz Rail may be relevant to the operation of a safe and healthy place of work". Treating texts and documents as cultural objects is presented as a useful supplement to existing understandings of workplace culture. In many ways the story told is an old one, as it involves conflict between capital and labour, nevertheless, the industrial relations literature could benefit by including texts and documents in the study of such conflict.

Introduction

That the investigator "does" a report is thereby made a matter for public record for the use of only partially identifiable other persons Not only for investigators, but on all sides there is the relevance of "What was really found out for-all-practical-purposes?" which consists unavoidably of how much can you find out, how much can you disclose, how much can you gloss, how much can you conceal, how much can you hold as none of the business of some important persons, *investigators* included Investigators, as a matter of occupational duty, were coming up with written reports of how, for-all-practical-purposes persons-really-died-and-are-really-dead-in-the-society (Garfinkel, 1984: 16, original emphasis).

Recently, much local attention has been given to an organisation where workers-really-died-and-are-really-dead-in-the-workplace, to adapt Garfinkel's striking phrase. That organisation is Tranz Rail Limited. Tranz Rail is the consortium of local and international companies that in 1993 took over the previously government-owned New Zealand Rail. Whilst its rail operations are much reduced from the glory days of New Zealand railways, it is still nationwide in scope, including the inter-island ferry linkage between the North and South Islands. It was mainly in the course of work with trains, particularly shunting operations, that the deaths occurred, but deaths also occurred in the inter-island

* Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Victoria University of Wellington. Thanks to an NZJIR anonymous referee who provided comments useful in clarifying this paper

ferry service and in track-maintenance work (see Ministerial Inquiry, 2000 for fuller details). As a consequence of these deaths, or more correctly what appeared to be a higher than normal rate of deaths, a Ministerial Inquiry (hereafter, the Inquiry) was established to investigate the workplace safety practices and standards at Tranz Rail.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the Inquiry, what Smith (1990) has called “textually mediated social organisation”. Specifically, I am interested in how textual material figures in asking whether the “workplace culture” at Tranz Rail was a significant factor in the deaths and injuries. Within this focus my emphasis is on presenting and analysing empirical material. I make some specific comments on the conceptualisation of workplace culture, drawing on Ethnomethodology and Actor-Network-Theory to do so, however, it is far beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the broader social science debates about workplace culture in specific, or the concept of culture in general.

The inquiry and the problem of workplace culture

New Zealand readers should be familiar with the events surrounding the Inquiry, as it has captured a large amount of media attention (reportage of subsequent accidents is ongoing and often refers back to the Inquiry). To remind readers, the key details are as follows. On June 28 2000, the Minister of Labour announced the establishment of the Inquiry and its terms of reference. Media statements made it clear that the Inquiry was prompted by the death of a railway shunter in May 2000, the fifth death of a Tranz Rail employee within a year. These five deaths provided an obvious hook for the media, however, concern about workplace safety in the rail and port industry had existed for many years – the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) had expressed its concern as early as 1995 (Armstrong, 2000). The rationale for the Inquiry was to establish whether there were any “systemic factors” that contributed to the high rate of accidents and, if so, whether they arose out of the safety regulatory regime governing Tranz Rail’s activities. The Inquiry was based on nine specific terms of reference and heard oral submissions (mostly derived from written submissions) over a five-day period. The final report was released relatively quickly by August, 2000.

It should be noted that the Inquiry was not, as such, a prosecution. Prosecutions against Tranz Rail over the workplace fatalities covered in the Inquiry were pursued, but these were a matter separate from the Inquiry. Nevertheless, the Inquiry did have a legalistic tenor¹: law firms were employed by Tranz Rail to present at the Inquiry and to help produce their written submission; the RMTU used its own barrister and legal expertise in a similar manner; and there was a general concern with the more normative aspect of the law, namely, notions of blame, responsibility and apology.

Without exaggeration, the Inquiry generated a vast amount of documentary material, there being, literally, a room set aside to house the submissions. This raises important questions

¹ For more detail on this, and for discussion of events after the inquiry, see Simpson (forthcoming).

about how such a vast amount of documentary material is *reduced* into a final report of 65 pages, and there is existing work that could be drawn upon in such an analysis (for example, Bowker and Star, 1999; Latour, 1999; Lynch and Bogen, 1996). However, that task is too large for the space here, instead I want to concentrate on the term of reference to do with "workplace culture" (hereafter, the culture problem). While not denying the usefulness of existing approaches to workplace culture, particularly organisation studies (for example, Clegg et al., 1996; Dwyer, 1991; Kono and Clegg, 1998; Nichols, 1997), I want to avoid a literature-review approach and instead foreground some empirical material. The intention is to emphasise, firstly, the central role of texts and documents in *constituting* workplace culture, and secondly, to introduce an ethnomethodological insight about the nature of culture. Below I focus on Tranz Rail's submission on the culture problem, but conclude with some more general points extending the case study².

The culture problem

The wording of the culture term of reference is as follows: "Identify and consider any culture or cultures (i.e., influences or attitudes which affect practices and behaviour) within Tranz Rail and its employees and contractors that may be relevant to the operation of a safe and healthy place of work" (Ministerial Inquiry, 2000: 2). In Tranz Rail's lengthy submission devoted to the culture problem it is not surprising to see ambivalence and difficulty, for as Williams has famously put it, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1988: 87). Tranz Rail's submission devotes a whole page to defining culture. It is noted that culture is an intangible, that it is difficult to determine with any specificity, and then "culture is defined as: The formal or informal values, philosophies and norms that interact and overlap to create the fabric we call culture" (Tranz Rail, 2000: 1). After this definition, the submission reiterates the difficulty in pinpointing culture, and also mentions that "the "sub-culture" of each group will be examined" (ibid: 1).

In pointing out an apparent difficulty with "culture", and suggesting that the introduction of the separate term "sub-culture" is another complication, I am not making a direct criticism of Tranz Rail's approach (or competence). Their definition is actually very close to what can be found in respected academic discussion. Kono and Clegg, for example, define "corporate culture" as "the values shared by members, their method of decision-making or way of thinking (including basic assumptions), and their overt behaviour patterns" (1998: 2). This definition in turn is reflective of the four main approaches to the study of corporate culture: 1), an anthropological approach emphasising rites, rituals and symbols, 2), cognitive theory emphasising culture as a cognitive map, schema, or basic assumption, 3), leadership theory emphasising relations between leadership style and morale, and 4), a decision-making approach emphasising attitudes, information collection,

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The empirical base for this paper is mainly Tranz Rail's written submission to the Inquiry, however, I also attended the three days that the Inquiry sat in Wellington. This observational fieldwork is used at times to fill-out the details of the Inquiry.

idea generation and strategy development (Kono and Clegg, 1998: 5-6). Aspects of all four approaches can be found in the Tranz Rail submission.

Covering all these elements may well have a lot to do with why Tranz Rail's submission is so lengthy. But it may also reflect another important factor. Tranz Rail's birth as a corporate entity is part of local and global changes now widely discussed under the label "neo-liberalism" (for example, see Barry et al., 1996; Peters, 2000). More specifically, this has resulted in what Lerner (1998) has usefully called the "discourse of restructuring", a key point about which is that it has *not* gone unchallenged, that it has to continually defend its position:

. . . existing commentaries tend to focus on the economic logic driving these changes; namely, the drive to re-create conditions for sustained capitalist accumulation. Less Attention has been paid to the discourses and practices through which changes are rationalised, and the means by which hegemonic political-economic groups achieve their aspirations in the face of opposition from social movements and individual workers themselves . . . [We] need to consider discourse as a means of constructing social entities, relations and identities (1998: 266).

Without doubt, Tranz Rail is part and parcel of New Zealand's "discourse of restructuring", however, the very fact that it has been brought before a Ministerial Inquiry serves to highlight that "opposition from social movements and individual workers" can occur and have significant effect.

Moreover, the aspect of contention to the "discourse of restructuring" gives us a better feel for the concept of "textually mediated social organisation" (Smith, 1990). Contention and opposition may take many forms, but the defining feature of any ministerial inquiry is that it is dominated by texts, hence we are dealing with a form of "textual warfare". Submissions and counters to them are textual, even oral submissions will be translated to some written form, final reports are textual, and there are inter-textual relations amongst all of these, not to mention the further multiplication of stories in the mass media. This produces a situation where what Tranz Rail puts on paper before the Inquiry is very consequential: it has to be delicately framed, finely shaped and always expressed with a view to possible competing interpretations. Unsurprisingly, this means there is no single best textual strategy, rather there are multiple strategies. For one, Tranz Rail produces a mass of material: every term of reference is covered and there is a mass of appendices and reproduced documents. At the same time, their document must have a readily identifiable "gist" to it; despite its length, an overall argument must emerge. In this regard we would expect that the "normal" response to a charge of unsafe practices would be followed, that is, a convincing defence will be attempted.

The above points all have to do with the broader form of discourse. Whether the concern is with the "discourse of restructuring", or with how an Inquiry is centrally about textual material, we do not as yet have a detailed feel for the particulars of Tranz Rail's submission. To remedy this I now want to reproduce one particular extract from Tranz Rail's submission and see what can be made of it, in view of our concern with the culture problem.

The “historical perspective” story

Three pages into the Tranz Rail submission on the culture problem the following story is told:

2.2 1880s - 1981: For almost a century, New Zealand’s railway system was owned by the Government and, in fact, was a Government Department with its own Minister for Railways. Features of this period included an entrenched bureaucratic culture. The Department conducted its business with a focus on engineering and, as an adjunct to the business, pursued social and political objectives.

2.3 The Department operated in a protected environment in that goods or freight were not able to be transported by road for any distances greater than 30 miles, then 40 miles and later 150 kilometres. The culture during this period was based on the ideal of “a job for life”. Given the security of tenure for most employees, the Department was able to foster its own sense of family and community. For example, many employees lived in Railway houses, owned by the Department, at minimal rents. As these houses were usually grouped together, working for the Department was not only a job but a lifestyle.

2.4 The Department was a hierarchical, military-type structure. Promotional opportunities were based primarily on length of service as opposed to performance.

2.5 1982 – 1990: During this period, the Department became a Government Corporation known as NZ Railways Corporation. The Government at the time embarked on the commercialisation of the old railways Department. Protection from road transport competition was lifted. There was a shift in focus and fundamental *raison d’être* of the organisation from engineering and social goals to cost efficiency and with emphasis on downsizing the organisation.

2.6 During this time, the hierarchical structure of the organisation was dismantled to a large degree in that a number of layers of management were eliminated and the focus for front line employees was the improvement of productivity.

2.7 Over this period staff numbers reduced from more than 20,000 to approximately 6,800 by 1990.

2.8 1990 – 1993: In 1990, the Corporation became a Government-owned company, NZ Rail Limited. The focus of the organisation moved to achieving operating profit, not merely cost reduction. The deregulation of the road transport industry resulted in intense competition for freight movement. To be successful in the new environment, NZ Rail Limited concentrated on meeting customer needs and cost containment.

2.9 The restructuring and rationalisation of the company continued but not at the same rate as the previous era. In terms of staff numbers, reduction during this period was from 6,800 employees to approximately 5,000 by 1993.

2.10 By the end of this period, NZ Rail Limited was a profitable organisation.

2.11 1993 – present: NZ Rail was sold to a consortium of private owners including Wisconsin Central Transportation Limited, Berkshire Partners and Fay Richwhite.

This extract contains facts, figures, and words that refer to previous events. The dates and figures it contains could be checked, and from this a judgement could be made about whether the parameters of this story are accurate and valid. But in making a sociological

analysis we need to go beyond a reference, or correspondence, model of language. In short, we need to consider the pragmatics of this extract: what it does, where it takes us, the effect of the story it tells. Such a concern has been extant for some time in the study of organisations, for example, in 1957 Selznick commented:

To create an institution we rely on many techniques for infusing day-to-day behaviour with long-run meaning and purpose. One of the most important of these techniques is the elaboration of socially integrating myths. These are efforts to state, in the language of uplift and idealism, what is distinctive about the aims and methods of the enterprise (. . .). The assignment of a high value to certain activities will itself help to create a myth, especially if buttressed by occasional explicit statements (quoted in Parker, 2000: 134).

The Historical Perspective extract occurs amidst an attempt to answer the culture problem, but it also functions as a “socially integrating myth”. It is a foundation story, that is, it is one legitimated tale of the foundation of Tranz Rail and like any tale, it is deeply moral, has a particular form, and attempts to convince readers of a particular view.

The tale has a simple narrative form: A long time ago there was a group of people who had a bad way of living, but then after a period of trials some new people triumphed and things were made good. It is a classic story of change and contest between good guys/good ways of doing things and bad guys/bad ways of doing things. It is easily interpretable, but as a brief elaboration we can pick out a few key pieces from the extract, and put story equivalents in brackets. The Historical Perspective story begins, “For almost a century” (A long time ago), “New Zealand’s railway system was owned by the Government Features of this period included an entrenched bureaucratic culture” where “working for the Department was not only a job but a lifestyle” and “Promotional opportunities were based primarily on length of service as opposed to performance” (the people lived in a state of darkness/there was a scourge upon the land). (But then something new happened) “1982-1990: . . . the commercialisation of the old Railways Department” emphasising “cost efficiency”. (The people found this new way a little frightening) “layers of management were eliminated and the focus of front line employees was the improvement of productivity”; “Over this period staff numbers reduced from more than 20, 000 to approximately 6,800 by 1990” (But after all their efforts things got better and better). “By the end of this period, NZ Rail Limited was a profitable organisation” (until in the end the people lived happily ever after) “NZ Rail was sold to a consortium of private owners”.

The story as culture

The key elements that any organisation uses to become stable and powerful - the natural, social and discursive (see Cooper and Law, 1995; Latour, 1987, 1999) - are all operating in the Inquiry, whose task is to work out (and put on paper) what is significant from amongst an array of possibilities. Just what will be admitted as relevant in attempting to explain the high rates of accidents and injuries at Tranz Rail? At times, the “natural” must be allowed to speak (partly) for itself: it is obvious that when someone is crushed by a train, the immediate cause of death or injury is a soft body coming into contact with a hard machine that has no sympathy for humans. But what was the broader context within which this fatal contact occurred? Here, the social organisation of the workplace becomes the

focus, and this in turn can reconfigure the consideration of material objects. There is no clear answer, always debate. For example, some time was given over in the oral submissions to questioning whether the floor of one rail carriage was actually rusted right through, as the RMTU claimed, or whether this was spurious, as Tranz Rail claimed. Or, when a power pole rots below the ground, that is a natural occurrence, but when it falls and crushes a worker, we ask why precautions were not taken. Thus, the culture problem makes the social its focus, but not to the isolation of the natural, to which it is inextricably linked. That is, accidents and injuries may be found to have a "natural" component but once established this opens up the question of what other "social" factors were involved, and oftentimes it may be unclear just what mix of the natural and social is involved. The constant debate and contingency are good reason to follow Callon (1998) and call the Inquiry a "hybrid forum", that is, a constantly debated mix of the natural, social and discursive (also see Law, 2000).

In the context of the restructuring of New Zealand that occurred from the 1980s there are a myriad of similar hybrid forums and specific workplace stories, hence the basic tale is very familiar: the old ways were bad, there was a little pain from the change to the new ways, but there was no alternative. Given the latest developments that see Tranz Rail significantly reducing its railway commitments, it is easy to be a little cynical about this story, but we need to take the analysis a little further than simple cynicism. Following McHoul (1987), we need to avoid two types of naive position in analysing such stories. The first he calls "naive relativism" which is the model that people are roles X, Y, or Z because they talk in a certain way. With our example, this would be to say that the author performs being a corporate manager because she is able to talk in the appropriate corporate fashion - to reiterate the corporation's foundation story. The second is "naive realism", which is the model that people talk in certain ways because they really are roles X, Y, or Z. This equates to the view that there is no artifice involved: the corporate manager talks in this way because she is the corporate manager, what she says comes directly from who she is, and by extension Tranz Rail really holds to the Historical Perspective story. McHoul's argument is that these views are unhelpful as they both take the mistaken approach of assuming that either how the talk is done, or whichever of the social roles and identities there are, precede, or cause the other (also see Munro, 1999). The alternative model is to focus on how talk/language and personal/collective identities are mutually constitutive.

If we can link mutual constitution with culture then we may have a better understanding of the Inquiry and some interesting insights into the culture problem. To do this I want to use Harvey Sacks' conception of culture, as elaborated by Miller and McHoul (1998). In brief, Sacks wanted to know how a culture formed - the techniques people know, use and share that establish a common culture. If a culture exists then one can presume that its members have both, methods for *producing* cultural objects (like the Historical Perspective story), and methods for *recognising* them as those cultural objects (i.e., corporate members of Tranz Rail somehow recognise it as their story). To put it another way, "culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past" (Sahlins, 1985: 155). As McHoul and Miller note, the question of how production relates to recognition

has received much theoretical effort, but it could be the assumption that these are two different moments of a culture where the difficulty lies. Sacks offers a powerful insight on this issue:

A culture is an apparatus for generating *recognizable* actions; if the same procedures are used for generating as for detecting, that is perhaps as simple a solution to the problem of recognizability as is formulatable. (Sacks cited in Miller and McHoul, 1998: 179)

To make this less abstract, consider the paradigm that Sacks worked on – types of conversation. In a courtroom, for example, language is generated via pre-allocation of turns at talk; concomitantly, it is pre-allocation of turns that makes the situation recognisable as formal courtroom talk, as say distinguishable from ordinary conversation where turns at talk are not pre-allocated. Hence, the same procedures (allocation of turns) are used for generating and recognising specific types of talk-in-interaction. It is in this way that cultural forms become normalised.

What the story does

To apply this to our current material, we first need to note that absolutely nothing was said in the Historical Perspective story about accidents and injuries in the railway workplace. This raises the important question of why it is there – why include a passage not immediately relevant to explaining the high rates of injuries and fatalities? My answer is that this passage is a key part of the argument that Tranz Rail is putting forth in the Inquiry. Importantly, the story constructs Tranz Rail as a mix of cultures: corporate-management and workplace arms of culture. These are undoubtedly connected, but the thrust of the extract is essentially one of division, which ultimately functions to shift blame and responsibility. What the Historical Perspective story builds up is a logic where the old, traditional way of running railways is a negative thing. To be employed for a lifetime within railways is worked up to be inflexibility, intractability, in short, a “bad”. This logic is generated in the story by Tranz Rail corporate culture, which then has this available as an implicit ground for their answer to the culture problem. There is no problem admitting that accidents and injuries are another “bad”, but what could cause such a bad? The logical answer offered seems to be, “like generates like”. Only another bad causes further bads, hence, it is through examining the survival of old, traditional ways of doing things within the new Tranz Rail that this culture finds an answer to the culture problem.

A few examples exemplify this discursive technique. Here are some comments (all from Tranz Rail, 2000) focused on locomotive engineers:

A particular feature of the locomotive engineers’ occupation is that no locomotive engineer has been recruited and trained for the last 15 years. . . .

Many of Tranz Rails’ locomotive engineers have never worked for another employee . . . This means that locomotive engineers have a limited range of occupational skills to directly apply to an environment outside Tranz Rail and limited exposure to competition or external references. Their major reference point is their own experience and history (p.12, 2.55, 2.56).

The task of shunting and train examination has been in existence since the inception of the railway. There remains a very traditional workforce in the shunting and yard environment (p.12, 2.61).

Contrast this with the following comments focused on “Mechanical Engineering Employees”:

The mechanical engineers are production focused. They have a broader experience of the work force outside Tranz Rail than shunters or locomotive engineers . . . It is probably fair to say that Mechanical Engineering employees are less affected by the specific railway environment and have a broader outlook as a result of a higher degree of exposure to the conduct of their profession outside of the railway environment (p.14, 2.76, 2.78).

This theme of tradition = bad, exposure to competition = good, continues on through the types of employees:

Freight employees are generally outside the traditional railway profession and considerably less affected by traditional railway culture than core operating staff such as shunters and locomotive engineers. . . . Many freight handling employees have worked for other employers

Tranz Rail employees involved in the maintenance and construction of infrastructure . . . have a traditional culture in the same way as locomotive engineers and long-serving shunters. . . . most infrastructure employees have not worked for another employer and their skills are not readily transferable outside the railway industry (p.15, 2.80, 2.82, 2.84, 2.90).

It can be strongly suggested that someone not familiar with the types of workers who suffered the most injuries and fatalities at Tranz Rail could accurately predict from the above extracts who they were. Ultimately, there is nothing hidden about Tranz Rail’s line of argument here. While the value of long-serving staff is recognised,

Equally, however, the culture of long service and tradition can be obstacles to improving safety in the workplace. Traditional and entrenched mind-sets amongst operating staff about the way in which their jobs are carried out can be difficult to alter and accordingly can make new practices designed to increase safety, more difficult to implement and enforce (p.20, 3.6).

The final statement on the culture problem appears at first glance to offer a break on the tradition = bad equation:

In the future Tranz Rail proposes to continue with leadership, communication and behavioural change programmes (such as the Accident Prevention Programme and Project BEST) that focus on enhancing the traditional positive safety culture within Tranz Rail (p.34, 5.12).

But even here we see the same logic operating: the previously bad word “tradition” can only be mentioned as something positive if it is in the same breath as “change” words. That is, we can venture the existence of a “traditional positive safety culture” because it is being enhanced; it is going through a behavioural change programme. All of this is not difficult to understand and interpret, precisely because we are all so familiar with “the discourse of

restructuring" (Larner, 1998). It has almost become part of our culture: "A culture is, in fact, where we recognise what *you* are doing because, for all of us, culturally, that is *how* we would do it" (Miller and McHoul, 1998: 179).

Note, this does not mean that there is agreement about ends, means, and results. Rather, it is precisely in the discourse of the hybrid forum that ends, means and results are made visible. As Dodier has usefully stated, "Those who work on short sequences of action are often accused of 'forgetting about history'. But . . . a longer timeframe is only necessary if agents are said to have relatively stable competences" (1993: 568). Facts, stabilities, historical trends and epochs are sensible things, but they are the outcome and not the cause of the Inquiry's findings (see Latour, 1987, 1999). In the workplace the cause and effect processes resulting in injuries and fatalities are lost as soon as they occur (see Green, 1997). That is, accidents happen and are then re-described in various ways, for example, through photographs, diagrams, interviews, records and so on. When we get to the stage of the Inquiry, it is these textual traces that are the base for the social processes of deciding what happened and what to do. To see how important texts and documents are here, we can use a thought-experiment: in what ways would such inquiries differ if there were no texts, only oral means of translation?

Conclusion: finding workplace culture through culture

Writing now after the release of the Inquiry's final report, it is very clear that Tranz Rail's answer to the culture problem was rejected (exactly how this rejection was arrived at is a task for further analysis). Throughout, I have been drawing attention to textually-based *procedures*, and we have seen one form of argument that may well be common in corporate culture. I am suggesting that in the close attention to textual material, we have seen culture-in-action. Texts display ordering processes, they attempt to make enduring social entities that can "act at a distance" (Latour, 1987; 1999). You want to know whether workplace culture could be involved in the deaths and injuries at Tranz Rail? Well then, you have to know how Tranz Rail transformed an inflexible, unprofitable government monopoly into a profitable, efficient arm of a multinational corporation. This proposition was then available to help construct a "bad begets bad" story: Tranz Rail's submission invited the interpretation that the original bad (i.e. a key causal factor) was traditional workplace culture. The failure of this interpretation exemplifies how "the discourse of restructuring" remains a field of contestation. All texts are vulnerable.

The realisation of contestability can be extended to a final critical comment. The logic that tradition as a bad, as inflexibility, should be looked to for an answer to the culture problem, although mostly implicit, is not hard to find in Tranz Rail's textual response. This leaves us with an important question: why was Tranz Rail not able to interrogate its own cultural products? On the first day that the Inquiry sat, Tranz Rail made a public apology about the high rates of injuries and fatalities, but this admission seems remarkably out of keeping with the tenor of their documentary submission (as outlined above). If one can apologise in front of an Inquiry, what is to stop a textual submission putting corporate allegiances and corporate-speak off the agenda, and honestly and critically pursuing the culture problem.

Had Tranz Rail become akin to a "total institution" (see Punch, 2000) where dissenting voices could not be heard, where the equation, profits = (with alarming regularity) bad deaths and injuries, is simply someone else's (wrong) cultural product? Certainly, the final report of the Ministerial Inquiry (2000) did not buy the Tranz Rail line, in fact, most of their consideration of the culture problem is taken up not with a possible answer, but with rejecting Tranz Rail's "old culture is the problem" argument. The final sentence admonishes Tranz Rail "to re-examine management attitudes to ensure that, at critical times, front-line managers do not place a greater priority on maintaining productivity than on safety" (Ministerial Inquiry, 2000: 45).

So, Tranz Rail did not successfully win others to their answer to the culture problem. Indeed, the argument presented here is that they were effectively hoist with their own petard: in attempting to answer the culture problem what came through was the relative rigidity of their own culture. As this culture was constructed in their submission it simultaneously constructed a selective (and rejected) answer to the culture problem. By now New Zealanders are well used to hearing "There Is No Alternative" (TINA) as a justification for constant change and restructuring. As illustrated by the material above, it is no longer just a convenient rhetoric but has become embodied within the corporations themselves. Just what this means for the future regulation and improvement of workplace health and safety we simply do not know. There are always alternatives, but if TINA is so embedded in corporate culture, some important actors will simply not look for them, nor include them in the texts and documents that are so crucial to modern organisational life.

Studies of industrial relations, workplace accidents and discourse need to overcome the either/or of the traditional agency/structure debate (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000). People in the workplace talk and they write; these are foundational social and cultural practices both for putting together work itself, and in determining what to do when things go wrong in the workplace (for example, accidents and injuries). Macro pictures of the social distribution of accidents and injuries are useful, but we need more studies of the dynamic processes that enable statistics to exist in the first place. There is much research that could be done focusing on how textual material is produced, circulated, interpreted, and made effective within the workplace, in short, how the workplace is a "textually mediated social organisation" (Smith, 1990).

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