

1  
3 SUPER FLAT: HIERARCHY,  
5 CULTURE AND DIMENSIONS  
7 OF ORGANIZING  
9

11 Martin Parker  
13

15 **ABSTRACT**

17 *This article considers a series of ways in which hierarchy is ontologically and*  
19 *politically opposed to flatness, particularly in the work of the artist Takashi*  
21 *Murakami and the cultural critic Dick Hebdige. It explores the attractions*  
23 *and problems of flatness as an alternative to hierarchy, but concludes*  
25 *that both are equally two-dimensional representations of organizing.*  
*Instead, alternative organizers with a commitment to anti-hierarchical*  
*practices would be better learning from the three-dimensional practical*  
*examples of anarchism, feminism, socialism and environmentalism.*

27 **Keywords:** Art; Japan; hierarchy; culture; alternatives  
29

31 **BEGINNINGS**

33 The world of the future might be like Japan is today – super flat.

**AU:1**

35 \_\_\_\_\_  
37 **Reinventing Hierarchy and Bureaucracy – from the Bureau to Network Organizations**  
39 **Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 35, 201–219**  
**Copyright © 2012 by Emerald Group Publishing Limited**  
**All rights of reproduction in any form reserved**  
**ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X(2012)0000035011**

1 Society, art, customs, culture: all are extremely two dimensional. It is particularly  
 2 apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of  
 3 Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime,  
 4 which have become powerful parts of world culture. Takashi Murakami (2000) 'The  
 5 Super Flat Manifesto'

6  
 7 The Japanese artist Takashi Murakami produces a range of cultural  
 8 objects – paintings and sculptures, but also 'commercial' products such as  
 9 little plastic figures, mouse mats, T-shirts and key chains. His work is  
 10 broadly inspired by the Japanese animation and comic book traditions of  
 11 *anime* and *manga* – highly coloured cartoons of fantasy figures which often  
 12 exhibit a big eyed cute (*kawaii*) menace – and is often generally referred to as  
 13 an *otaku* aesthetic. His work, like that of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Damien  
 14 Hirst and many other 'pop' artists, operates to blur the distinctions between  
 15 'high art' and popular culture (Bankowsky, Gingeras, & Wood, 2009), as  
 16 well as in his case between the West and the rest. Murakami describes some  
 17 of his work as 'super flat', and I take this to be a description of both the  
 18 quality of the highly coloured, glossy, computer-generated surfaces of the  
 19 objects he makes, but also of an approach to cultural forms. There is only  
 20 surface, and any claims about depth or elevation are dismissed as illusory  
 21 pretensions, held in place by the operations of power and a sensibility that  
 trades on some elderly normative assumptions about the aesthetic.

22 Probably the most famous of Murakami's characters is Mr DOB,<sup>1</sup> a  
 23 hypercoloured mutant Mickey Mouse with a crazed grin. Mr DOB's big  
 24 eyes shine as he cavorts with smiling flowers, pandas, mushrooms and  
 25 jellyfish. Sometimes he has sharp teeth and slides through bad acid trip  
 26 backgrounds. DOB can be anything – a sculpture, balloon, painting, sticker,  
 27 bath towel, video, plastic toy. He is happy, sad, scary and shocked. He is  
 28 reproduced on expensive paintings, cheaper prints and cuddly toys – serially  
 29 produced and customized for different market niches. Mr DOB is only part  
 30 of Murakami's output. His resin sculpture 'My Lonesome Cowboy', a  
 31 naked and fully erect *kawaii* figure with a lasso of spunk around his head  
 32 sold at Sotheby's for 15.2 million dollars. Murakami also does work for  
 33 Louis Vuitton, the luxury goods manufacturer, as well as organizes **AU:2**  
 34 GEISAI, a biannual arts fair that features other Japanese artists and teen  
 35 J-Pop stars – the candy coloured sex and violence of toon world, the global  
 36 art market and the gyrating 120 beats per minute video on a flat plasma  
 37 screen. It's all the same. As disposable and as important as a Mr DOB  
 38 *shokugan* – a 'snack toy'.

39 The super flat ontology and politics that Murakami trades in seems to me  
 to be related to other ideas about lateral relations – the generalized

1 symmetry between people and things that philosophers of the material such  
as Deleuze, DeLanda and Latour have promoted, as well as the many  
3 attempts to dethrone ‘high’ culture, and celebrate the everyday that we find  
in cultural studies (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1984; Hebdige, **AU 3**  
5 1979, 1988; Latour, 2005). In this chapter I want to suggest that it is also  
related to ideas about hierarchy in organization. This might seem an odd  
7 claim, but it reflects my conviction that questions of organization are, in  
some quite important ways, cultural ones. In general terms, we seem to find  
9 it difficult to express flat relations, perhaps feeling that the flows of cause  
and power expressed in vertical relations – top/bottom, surface/depth,  
11 superstructure/base – somehow explain the world more fully. Like  
Bhaskar’s (1978) realist device of a ‘stratified ontology’ which explains  
13 social phenomena in terms of underlying mechanisms, it is as if we see the  
lateral as merely descriptive, a mapping of a terrain, whilst the vertical  
15 captures necessary causal truths that explain why the visible is laid out in the  
way that it is. Indeed, for some realists, to call an ontology ‘flat’ is to suggest  
17 that it has no explanatory power (Reed, 1997). And so it is, relentlessly, with  
questions of organization. From bureaucratic organograms to expressions  
19 of the transcendent power of leaders, our dominant conceptions of  
organization appear to be constituted as if elevation necessarily provided  
21 vision, and that only rare and precious creatures can breathe the air of the  
executive suite. Power, it seems, only works properly when it is piled on top  
23 of itself, and the higher the pile gets, the more effective the power is.

In this chapter, written in a deliberately non-linear style, I will explore  
25 these embedded ideas about hierarchy by responding in a meandering way  
to Murakami’s project. If organizations are constituted culturally, and  
27 culture can be understood in some super flat ways, then what does this do to  
our conceptions of organizing? Murakami’s work encourages us to question  
29 our hierarchies – to treat cartoons, toys and pornographic sculptures as art,  
and to treat his mass production as an extension of the white cube gallery.  
31 Such flattening might well be helpful for political projects which push  
radically democratic forms of decision making (Lovink & Scholz, 2007)  
33 but, just as importantly, it might also encourage us to see organizations in  
different ways, with power as an effect of particular organizational arrange-  
35 ments, rather than the reason why all organizing inevitably has to be  
hierarchical. It might be that this sort of anti-art provides a way to think  
37 beyond a culture which reifies power as the inevitability of hierarchy. So  
what happens when all judgements have been suspended, and everything is  
39 as good as everything else? Is it possible, or even desirable, to have super flat  
forms of organizing?

## 1 FLAT CULTURE

3 One way of locating Murakami is through the frame of ‘Business Art’. His  
 5 Tokyo-based Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd. studio and production facility, like Andy  
 7 Warhol’s Factory, is both art and business. He employs 50 people in Tokyo  
 9 and a further 20 in an office in New York. The organization curates art  
 11 exhibitions and sells stuffed *kawaii* toys, works on brand goods, makes  
 13 music videos and always refuses the separations between high art and low  
 15 commerce. In 2010, KaiKai and KiKi (also both cartoon characters  
 17 themselves) became gigantic balloons for the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day  
 19 parade in New York. Murakami is certainly not the only artist to have  
 21 proposed that art, money and work are intimately layered together  
 23 (Molesworth, 2003; Parker, 2012; Siegal & Mattick, 2004) but he is perhaps  
 25 one of the most challenging contemporary examples, simply because of the  
 number of fields that he has now become involved in. Murakami continually  
 shifts. When the Japanese TV star Kase Taishuu lost the legal right to use  
 his image and name after a dispute with the producers of his show,  
 Murakami hired four actors to be him until the Yakuza – heavily involved  
 in Japanese media – objected because it was damaging their profits (Siegal &  
 Mattick, 2004, pp. 62–65). He routinely employs other people to make his  
 work, and PR consultants to help him with his media image. Google his  
 name and there are lots of images of Murakami smiling. A round  
 impenetrable smile, repeated at exhibitions across the world. Like his  
 cartoon flowers, tessellated together and grinning so hard that the image is  
 emptied, and becomes blankly manic.

27 Thus, according to this alternative value system, Murakami is no ‘sell-out’ as would be  
 said of an artist in the West; the white cube art production, luxury fashion brand  
 consulting and Kaikai Kiki merchandising are all equally weighted in his radical cultural  
 29 maelstrom. (Gingeras, 2009, p. 80)

31 The Kaikai KiKi Co. Ltd. doubtless has a structure of some sort, with a  
 33 division of labour and someone who makes sure that the hundred employees  
 on three sites get paid and the art supplies cupboard is refilled every week. It  
 might be a flexible structure of the sort that creative industries are said to  
 35 have, but it will be a structure nonetheless. It would be difficult to imagine  
 how a Mr DOB *shokugan* could be imagined, made and placed in a snack  
 37 packet without some fairly intricate arrangements of people and things to  
 ensure that the stuff arrived in the right places at just the right time.

39 In New York and Tokyo, highly trained Kaikai KiKi employees work under the  
 supervision of Takashi Murakami to produce cutting-edge, innovative artworks. (...)

1     Kaikai Kiki paintings are painstakingly rendered by hand, using computer rendering  
2     technology and advanced printing techniques as guides. After a training of at least 1  
3     month, each staff must, as an initiation test, complete a small painting of a mushroom to  
4     be critiqued by Murakami. (Kaikai Kiki, 2011)

5     This is a description of an organized world, one in which there are  
6     employees who are ‘supervised’ by an authority which establishes the rules  
7     governing labour and technology in a particular time and place. The  
8     employee must pass the tests set by the authority, and the implicit  
9     assumption here is that if your mushroom painting fails to meet a standard  
10    determined by a particular individual you will no longer be an employee. As  
11    we all know, employees are like mushrooms. Kept in the dark and fed shit.

12    In the ‘Super Flat Manifesto’ Murakami compares his thesis about two  
13    dimensionality to the process of producing graphic art.

14    One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop  
15    graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one. Though it is  
16    not a terribly clear example, the feeling I get is a sense of reality that is very nearly a  
17    physical sensation. (Murakami, 2000, p. 5)

18    ‘A sense of *reality*?’ As if the real were flat, and there is a kind of vertigo in  
19    no longer seeing it as layered? As Murakami explains in his essay ‘A Theory  
20    of Super Flat Japanese Art’ (2000, pp. 9–25), for a long time Japan has  
21    produced art forms which emphasize surface. Other art might be concerned  
22    with depth and perspective, such as that which develops in Italy in the 15th  
23    century (Azuma, 2000; Berger, 1972), but he claims that Japanese art is  
24    planar. There is no optical illusion of a viewer, with the world unfolding  
25    away to a vanishing point in front of them, but an image to be scanned.  
26    Further, the technical means to produce this image are clear on the surface  
27    of the work. In a drawing of a plum tree, or Mount Fuji, there is no attempt  
28    to fool us into thinking that we are looking at a plum tree, or Mount Fuji.  
29    This flatness then extends, Murakami argues, into a cultural flatness too. It  
30    is difficult to express the singular idea of ‘art’ in Japanese, and to distinguish  
31    it from technique, craft or learning. The Western idea of high ‘art’ was  
32    imported in the late 19th century, and an understanding of what counts as  
33    ‘art’ is hence inextricably associated with particular non-Japanese forms and  
34    the markets they since created. Since that time, the popularity of pottery,  
35    sculpture, or Japanese painting, or Western painting, or Japanese versions  
36    of Western painting styles have fluctuated depending on fashion and  
37    economics.

38    So if Japanese art tends to flatness, and the distinctions between ‘art’ and  
39    its other are unstable, it follows that Godzilla is equivalent to Kurosawa.

1 It might sound like a radical cultural relativism to those schooled in Western  
aesthetics, but for Murakami's Japan this is no more than expressing a truth  
3 about perspectives and markets. 'Art is the supreme incarnation of luxury  
entertainment' (Murakami, 2011). Things are worth what you might pay for  
5 them, and of taste there is no disputing. In his book he goes on to show how  
he treats *anime*, teen J-pop, classical Japanese drawings and paintings as  
7 equivalents. The 'Western' moral economy that celebrates age and craft  
skill, and is suspicious of market penetration and mechanical reproduction,  
9 is irrelevant here, and the book presents a variety of cultural goods with  
equal care. Video game screen shots, photographs of varying quality, pop  
11 song lyrics, enamelled screens and detailed embroideries, cartoon panels and  
dance instruction drawings are laminated next to erotic resin sculptures of  
13 teenagers with big eyes and delicate prints of the fading pink petals of a lotus  
flower. For Murakami, the market makes these things flat, exchangeable  
15 with one another, and he wants to ensure that the work of Japanese artists  
(such as those working within Kaikai Kiki) has a market. Flatness, in that  
17 sense, has another connotation – being just as good as the West. In  
Murakami's floating world, everything moves relative to everything else.  
19 There are no foundations, no places we can stand in order to ground a  
hierarchy in which this is better than that.

21 Thomas Friedman's pro-globalization book *The World is Flat* (2005)  
seems to echo Murakami rather neatly. The relentless predicate of the book  
23 is that everything can be exchanged and value is a matter of markets.  
Friedman's thesis is that the application of information and transportation  
25 technologies to multiple markets has made the global economy into a level  
playing field. Anyone can sell anything anywhere, and geography and  
27 history no longer matter that much. Though Friedman wants to warn his  
fellow Americans that they need to develop skills to prevent themselves from  
29 being washed away, his message is not protectionist. Just as Murakami  
sweeps into Manhattan, so will 'Globalization 3.0' do away with elderly  
31 ideas about the competitive advantage of nations. The market corrodes  
established hierarchies, and makes everyone the same. We can all exchange  
33 value, and move people and things without friction across the surface of the  
world in jets and shipping containers. In a world of exchange, all hierarchies  
35 are temporary, all rules, laws and institutions are provisional, all that was  
solid melts into air. Murakami, in response to being told that one of his  
37 works was printed upside down in a newspaper article responded that 'it  
didn't matter much' (Azuma, 2000, p. 147). Perhaps this super flatness is the  
39 'post-modern' condition, a relentless creative destruction that bulldozes  
everything in its path.

1 **THE FEAR OF FLATNESS**

3 MORE: What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?

ROPER: I'd cut down every law in England to do that!

5 MORE: Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you – where would you hide, Roper, the laws being all flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast – man's laws, not God's – and if you cut them down (...)

7 d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?

Robert Bolt *A Man for All Seasons* (1960, p. 39)

9 But what happens when all the world is flat, and all value is reduced to exchange? In Bolt's play, Thomas More has faith in institutions, including  
11 the King who eventually martyred him. It seems fitting that this Tudor cleric  
13 with such faith in the sheltering capacities of organization should be the  
15 author of *Utopia* (1516), a thought experiment which has given its name to  
17 an entire genre. Murakami and Friedman's celebrations of flatness seem to  
19 be the cultural and economic equivalent of the great wind that so troubles  
21 More, because what will be left after such a bonfire of the certainties?

17 In his essay 'The Bottom Line on Planet One', the cultural critic Dick  
19 Hebdige invited us into a different sort of thought experiment. He asks us to  
21 imagine two worlds based on different principles. Planet One has 'a priestly  
23 class of scribes' who 'determine the rules of rhetoric and grammar, draw the  
25 lines between disciplines, proscribe the form and content of all (legitimate)  
27 discourse and control the flow of knowledge to the people' (1988, p. 158).  
29 Thanks to the activities of these mandarins, this is a world with depth, as  
signs are made to signify for other signs, and with history, as signs are made  
to tell stories. Planet One is our world, a world in which cultural distinction  
is made through authority relations, and maps of social distinctions can  
be constructed that locate people and things in more or less predictable  
relations (Bourdieu, 1984). Planet Two, on the other hand, is a world  
where –

31 the vertical axis has collapsed and the organization of sense is horizontal (i.e., this world  
33 is a flat world). There are no scribes or priests or engravers here. Instead knowledge is  
assembled and dispensed to the public by a motley gang of bricoleurs, ironists, designers,  
publicists, image consultants, *hommes et femmes fatales*, market researchers, pirates,  
35 adventurers, *flâneurs* and dandies. (op. cit., p. 159)

37 First published in 1985 in an art photography magazine, the essay  
explores a sense of flatness, a world of kaleidoscopic configurations which  
need no authorization to be what they are and in which the shiftings of the  
39 patterns cannot be called history – in a teleological sense – but merely tell of  
endlessly shifting difference.

1 Hebdige's essay was written as a response to the British style magazine  
 3 *The Face*, which was at that time an example of the image driven glossy  
 5 collision of ideas which was then called 'post-modernism' but is now just  
 7 culture. Interviews with pop stars, fragments from fashionable intellectuals  
 9 (Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze ...), pictures of clothes and buildings, ethno-  
 11 graphies of sub-cultures, political gestures, ironic nods to old styles and  
 13 coverage of opera, starvation somewhere and adverts for anything that  
 15 might sell to the inhabitants of Planet Two. Because everything in *The Face*  
 17 is for sale, it's just a question of how you consume as you drift across the  
 19 shiny surfaces of words and things. What makes this essay really interesting  
 21 is that oddly, for a commentator who has done so much to celebrate treating  
 23 popular culture as every bit as important as high culture (1979), and who  
 25 studied at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,  
 Hebdige appears to be nostalgic for Planet One.

15 To stare into the blank, flat *Face* is to look into a world where your actual presence is  
 17 unnecessary, where nothing adds up to much *anything* anymore, where you live to be  
 19 alive. Because flatness is the friend of death and death is the great leveller. That's the  
 21 bottom line on Planet Two. (Hebdige, 1988, p. 161)

19 Though he is sceptical of the epistemology of Planet One, one in which it  
 21 is assumed that the elect can see through appearances to a reality which lies  
 23 behind and beyond, Hebdige baulks at the ethical-political implications of  
 25 such flatness. Since there is no topology to Planet Two, he fears skidding off  
 the surface, being reduced to two dimensions, and floating in space not  
 knowing which way is up.

## 27 2D VS. 3D

29 There seems to be a problem here then. Murakami wants to flatten things,  
 31 because he sees the hierarchies that exist as arbitrary. Murakami's logic is  
 33 based on a hostility to cultural and historical hierarchies which he sees  
 35 as complicit in the dismissal of Japan, Japanese art and Japanese popular  
 37 culture. This is a programme of cutting things down to size, a radical  
 democratization of questions of judgement which uses Friedman's market  
 equivalence as its means to place Mr DOB alongside Mickey Mouse, and  
*otaku* in the elite white cube galleries of The West.

39 Hebdige is troubled by this flattening, because he wants to be able to  
 celebrate and condemn, to engage with warm people rather than the one-  
 dimensional ciphers of the market. He seems sympathetic to a politics of



1 symbolic redistribution, but worries about what flatness does to judgement.  
His sentimental humanism demands purchase on the surface of Planet Two,  
3 as he continues to insist that everything is not the same, and some things  
are better than others. If everything is flattened by the market, then how do  
5 we organize ourselves around things that matter? This seems to be a  
normative demand for judgement to be recognized as what humans  
7 *should* do.

9       Whatever Baudrillard or *The Tatler* or Saatchi and Saatchi, and Swatch have to say  
about it, I shall go on reminding myself that this earth is round not flat, that there will  
11 never be an end to judgement, that the ghosts will go on gathering at the bitter line which  
separates truth from lies, justice from injustice, Chile, Biafra and all the other avoidable  
13 disasters from all of us, whose order is built on their chaos. And that, I suppose, is the  
bottom line on Planet One. (Hebdige, 1988, p. 176)

15       It seems we have a reassertion of some sort of hierarchy against flatness  
here, but it has been flatness that appears to have been fashionable for some  
17 time. Nietzsche announced the ‘transvaluation of all values’ a century ago  
(2007), and many of the posts which have been staked since are an attack on  
19 the idea that some grounds for judgement are more elevated than others.  
Those who sit at the top of the church, state, university, art gallery or  
21 corporation have no more right to determine right than those who don’t, so  
drag the statues down and storm the universities. But, Hebdige reminds us,  
23 if everyone is the same, then are there no grounds for decision, for preferring  
Beethoven to Lady Gaga, or democracy to fascism. Everything is permitted,  
25 everything is for sale. If we are looking for some grounds to prefer flatness  
to hierarchy, then this is a criticism that needs to be addressed, because  
27 (unless we are happy to give up on institutions altogether) we need to decide  
how decisions are made in order that we can make worlds to live in together.  
29 These are organizational matters, questions of distribution and legitimacy  
which cannot be solved by simply insisting that everything is treated as  
31 equivalent, however attractive such rhetorical declarations might sound.

33

## **FLATNESS AND HIERARCHY**

35

Is organizing necessarily hierarchical? Let’s begin by noting that we don’t  
37 *need* to imagine the intricacies of institutions as vertical matters, like a Super  
Mario platform game where an employee jumps up to a new level and  
39 collects some gold coins. This is a habit, one that is difficult to break  
perhaps, but it is not a necessary condition of organization. It is quite

1 possible to think about organization as a distribution of capacities, each  
2 node or element performing some function which is different from others.  
3 We do not need to assume the neo-Platonist argument from the fictional  
4 Hierotheus of the 5th century CE, that the universe is ordered from God  
5 downwards, via nine orders of angels and eight more of different sorts of  
6 humans (Parker, 2009). The great chain of being might have been an  
7 influential template for thought, but it is quite possible now to think about  
8 organizations as systems, with functions distributed across a network, in the  
9 way that they are in the human body or a computer for example. Indeed, the  
10 Christmas tree organization has a rather fairy story verticality to it,  
11 assuming as it does that there is only one sort of power and you will find it in  
12 the pointy top. In the place under the roof of the organization, enclosed in  
13 an office somewhere so that it doesn't leak out. Indeed, if we want to trouble  
14 stories of hierarchy, then it's a good idea to start off by noting just what a  
15 bizarre story the organization chart tells. If someone suggests that it is  
16 'idealistic' to want to explore alternatives to hierarchy, does that mean that  
17 the organogram is a realistic depiction? In fact, it's not even as realistic as a  
18 flat map, since all it really charts are the imagined distributions of tasks and  
19 rewards. It ignores 'informal' elements of organizing (all those that are not  
20 'formalized') and is a truly fantastic representation of the empirical.

21 If instead we were to take the organization chart, lay it flat and then  
22 redistribute or explode it like a circuit board, engineering diagram, maze or  
23 mandala, the imagined geography of hierarchy becomes clearer. A flat  
24 depiction of a division of labour doesn't necessarily assume that some bits  
25 are more important than others, or that some parts can see the whole.  
26 Flatness has a democracy to it too. It dispenses with the idea that some are  
27 more equal than others, and consequently that some are special and deserve  
28 parking spaces and shiny suits. Flatness doesn't dispense with the idea of  
29 organization, of the patterning which is an effect of the dispersal and  
30 arrangement of people and things. Neither would flatland organizers be  
31 troubled by the idea that some bits might co-ordinate, or relay, or occupy a  
32 centre, node or steering position of some kind. Such questions are technical  
33 matters about how particular things get done, and how certain sorts of  
34 powers are allocated to different parts. What the reduction to surface does is  
35 to suggest that *hierarchy* is not necessarily embedded into organizing in the  
36 way that we might assume is inevitable. The change of perspective re-orders  
37 what we see, and might allow us to think in different ways.

38 On the other hand, describing things as ontologically flat doesn't make  
39 them politically flat, because it can all too often simply ignore existing  
40 sedimentations of power. This is the problem with Friedman's view from the

1 New York Times skyscraper, across a world in which most people don't  
have access to telephones, let alone the internet and shipping containers. His  
3 assertions about the way that things are reflect 50 years of post-industrial  
futurology in which bureaucracy is replaced by the project, the matrix and  
5 the virtual. Take the example of the word 'network'.<sup>2</sup> This word has  
been applied to transportation, media, biology, technology, mathematics  
7 and human societies. In its essence, it suggests a non-hierarchical web of  
connections (or ties) between organizations and/or people and/or objects.  
9 Such a web would have communication nodes but no controlling centre. In  
principal, unlike a hierarchy, the network does not need centralized direction,  
11 and could hence still operate even if parts of it were not functioning. It thus  
has something in common with 'cellular' or 'bottom-up' methods of  
13 organizing. However, the metaphor is an elastic one, since some 'nodes'  
can be conceptualized as more important than others (in terms of establish-  
15 ing rules for the rest of the network), and some connections can be seen to  
be more important than others (if their information is particularly valued).  
17 In other words, things called networks can easily begin to look like hier-  
archies if there is a great deal of distinction between the elements of the  
19 network. Further, since networks have been theorized as being 'weak' or  
'strong', then it is possible to imagine a hierarchy of networks, or even (in  
21 the most conventional case) the word 'network' functioning a little like the  
term 'informal structure' in relation to the formal structures of organiza-  
23 tions. The utilitarian use of the term 'networking' appears to have this  
meaning, by people who really want to make sure that they climb up a  
25 hierarchy.

So the radically non-hierarchical potential of the word has hence been  
27 degraded considerably. At its most general, it has even been used (by Castells,  
2000 or Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006 for example) as a general description of  
29 an information society – just the sort of social order that Friedman is  
describing. However, since this 'network society' contains forms of  
31 organization and economy that are clearly hierarchical and exclusionary, it  
is difficult to see what distinctiveness the word has in this context. Like so  
33 many 'new' organizational forms over the last 50 years, the managers are still  
the ones insisting that others be flexible (Heydebrand, 1989). My point is that  
35 many of the claims about the world being flat – informalization, empower-  
ment, the wisdom of crowds, post-modernism, post-bureaucratic organiza-  
37 tion – should not be treated as empirical statements or ontological claims  
but as advertising slogans. Indeed, sometimes they should be treated with  
39 extreme caution because the person who claims that we are all in the same  
boat usually isn't.

1 Treating hierarchy as if it does not exist offers wonderful support to those at the top of  
the hierarchy. (Bratton 1989, p. 1499)

3 Hierarchy denial can be a form of ideology, a sort of obfuscation which is  
5 usually practiced by those whose elevation allows them to see no detail of  
the problems experienced down there on the ground.

7 So we cannot wish political hierarchies away with fashionable words, but  
neither should we assume that hierarchy is a *necessary* organizational form.  
9 Other worlds are possible. That is to say, there are plenty of places where we  
can often empirically document hierarchies, but this doesn't mean that all  
11 organizing *must* (and therefore should) be hierarchical. To assume the latter  
would be to fall into the Functionalist Fallacy 101, that the social phenomena  
13 that do exist must exist, and hence that radical social change is merely  
idealism. The question that remains is whether there are ways of thinking  
15 which can preserve the possibility of different and non-hierarchical forms, but  
without losing a sense of organizing as the engineering of relative powers.

## 19 DIMENSIONS OF ORGANIZING

21 Let's begin by thinking about hierarchy and super flat as being equally two-  
dimensional accounts of organizing. Whether flattening distinctions, or  
23 constructing them, the oscillation takes place between the horizontal and the  
vertical when neither can possibly be stable states. First, the vertical  
25 organogram tends not to express horizontal relations, even though it has  
been empirically established since at least the 1950s 'dysfunctions of  
27 bureaucracy' literature that the informal is what allows the formal to exist at  
all. James Scott notes that the organization chart is the public or official  
29 transcript of some sort of institution in which all members are joined only by  
vertical relations, and ultimately only given unity 'by the lord, patron or  
31 master, *who represents the only link joining them*' (1990, p. 62, italics in  
original). This is a form of picturing the social which ignores so much else  
33 that connects and divides people. The informal organization is then  
relegated to being what Scott calls a 'hidden transcript', a kind of residue  
35 which is only of interest insofar as it assists or blocks the schemes of those  
'higher up' the organization. So we might say that an emphasis on hierarchy  
37 is a form of blindness which ignores the planar nature of much of what  
actually happens in organizations – the self management, informality, sub-  
39 cultures and so on – in favour of an account which justifies the elevation of  
those who provide it. No wonder that the schools which teach management  
also tend to teach the inevitability of hierarchical power relations.

1 Second, though the impulse to push over the Christmas tree is  
understandable enough from those with commitments to equality, a flat  
3 picture of organizing does fail to capture its political topology in a very  
convincing way. It tends to be a normative description, one motivated by  
5 certain commitments which I happen to agree with, but which (as Hebdige  
noted) end up describing a world which is just as glossily unrealistic.  
7 Complex forms of organizing do have centres of power. For example, as  
Pamela Lee suggests, it is vector graphics programmes like Adobe  
9 Illustrator which have allowed Murakami to produce scalable images that  
can be reproduced on and as a wide range of products from Macy's parade  
11 balloons to a key chain (2007). Adobe allows for stretchable surfaces, and  
hence for both customized high end products and serial production at the  
13 bottom end. So Mr DOB represents a form of branded commodity which  
has partly been made possible by the technology provided by a global  
15 software company with headquarters in San Jose California, a turnover in  
2009 of 2.946 billion dollars and 8,715 employees.<sup>3</sup> This particular version of  
17 mechanical reproduction is using post-Fordist production methods to sell  
into luxury markets willing to pay for a Louis Vuitton accessory, others  
19 willing to pay a few yen for a snack toy, as well as millionaires and museums  
who will bid on artworks worth 15.2 million dollars. Louis Vuitton is part of  
21 the LVMH group, the world's largest producer of luxury goods with a  
turnover of €20.3 billion in 2010. I'm with Hebdige here. This doesn't seem like  
23 a very flat world to me, and saying that organizing is flat doesn't make it so.

The problem might be the Manichean nature of the set up – either  
25 hierarchy or super flat – when the ontology and politics of organizing is  
always more complex than that. Indeed, there is no particular reason to  
27 assume that a particular ontology of organizing commits you to a politics  
which necessarily supports or questions political hierarchies. Those who  
29 claim that the world is flat might be doing so in order to ensure that you buy  
whatever it is that they are selling, and those who insist on hierarchy might  
31 be imagining organizations that more effectively distribute resources for  
reasons of social justice.

33

35

## POST-HIERARCHY

37 'after death the heart assumes the shape of a pyramid'. (Julian Barnes, quoted in  
Burrell, 1993, p. 66)

39 Nevertheless, there is an odd convergence here between the pro-market  
claims of Murakami and Friedman, and the long-standing suspicion of  
hierarchy that we find in a wide series of anti-authoritarian positions.

1 Both viewpoints appear to be trading on some notion of human freedoms  
 3 and an opposition to constraint, but the similarities shouldn't blind us to  
 5 some very substantial differences. For Friedman, the ceaseless waves of  
 7 innovation are inevitable, and his objections are not to hierarchy as such,  
 9 but rather to the idea that any particular hierarchy could last. Like a  
 11 bourgeois merchant, he objects to the feudal and the bureaucratic, but only  
 13 in order that he can get his own pile. Murakami, it seems to me, is a similar  
 15 case, with his seductive attempts at equalizing cultural value being largely  
 17 plays *within* a market system, and being both predicated and justified on the  
 19 same grounds which that system provides. If you sell more product, you  
 21 deserve more profit, and to claim anything else is rather old fashioned. So  
 23 these are not objections to hierarchy in general, or in principal.

13 However, from another point of view there are plenty of good reasons why  
 15 hierarchy itself should be regarded with suspicion. As Gibson Burrell appears  
 17 to be implying with the use of his epigraph, the bureaucratic organization  
 19 appears petrified, rather than alive, and its linearity kills (1997). Decades of  
 21 writing on organizations have suggested that its immutable hierarchies  
 23 produce bureaucratic personalities, banal conformists who follow orders,  
 25 solidify rituals and spend lifetimes striving for the gold watch or executive  
 27 washroom (Bauman, 1989; Whyte, 1961). Symbolically it very often seems  
 29 that hierarchy is conservative and arboreal whilst radicalism is flat and  
 rhizomatic. The tower must be pulled down and the new world built.

25 The diverse factions which gather in the Post identify the centralized source of this  
 27 oppressive power variously as the Word/the Enlightenment Project/European Ration-  
 29 alism/the Party/the Law of the Father/the Phallus as (absent) guarantor of imaginary  
 coherence. In other words, the project is a multi-faceted attack on the authority/  
 authorship diad which is seen to hover like the ghost of the Father behind all First World  
 discourse guaranteeing truth, hierarchy and the order of things. (Hebdige, 1988, p. 163)

31 There are lots of capitals in these sentences, lots of ironic implications, but  
 33 nonetheless, many forms of intentional community, alternative organiza-  
 35 tion, anti-capitalist movement and utopia are informed by some sense of  
 37 organization as distributed and democratic. Hierarchical assumptions,  
 39 whether institutionalized in political parties, states, capitalist organizations or  
 particular human relations have been subjected to consistent suspicion.  
 Many radicals would assume that the work of organizing can and should  
 proceed through the autonomous yet co-ordinated activities of the organizers.  
 This could be an imagined state of social order in an utopian sense; or the  
 operationalization of a normative political philosophy like anarchism,  
 socialism, environmentalism or feminism; a technological practice in the case

1 of open source, creative commons and copyleft ideas; or a specific and  
2 located form of intentional community or co-operative. In all these cases,  
3 there are deep and practical commitments to direct democracy and engage-  
4 ment, as forms of life that need to be worked at in order to sustain them. If  
5 hierarchy is a form of the petrification of power, as many of these alternative  
6 organizers would agree, then it needs to be continually addressed, reflected  
7 upon and challenged in order that it can be resisted (Blaug, 1999; Bookchin,  
8 1982, p. 62, *passim*; Parker, Fournier, & Reedy, 2007).

9 But, this does *not* mean that the result of these reflections are necessarily  
10 normatively flat forms of organizing. Indeed, Murakami's version of flatness  
11 is a wilful myth, precisely because his practice actually requires that the  
12 cultural hierarchies are there in the background. There would be nothing  
13 interesting about Mr DOB in an art gallery if art galleries and cartoon  
14 characters were normally part of the same world. If *otaku* was equivalent to  
15 Leonardo, Murakami would have less to sell. It is the fact that they are not  
16 that makes Murakami interesting, and provides his work with a market  
17 value. Murakami isn't flattening, but social climbing. In order to make sense  
18 of his practice, it needs to be understood as incongruous against some sort  
19 of backdrop. Murakami's seeming commitment to cultural equity is  
20 laudable only if we view it as the sort of flatness which Friedman describes.  
21 As an artist of floating values, he will sell into whatever markets are  
22 available, and that includes the hyper-rich consumers who can afford a  
23 superluxury Louis Vuitton handbag for more money than most people on  
24 the planet earn in a year. Murakami is a contemporary version of what  
25 Hebdige fears, a fluid movement of capital across the surface of the world  
26 assembled and dispensed to the public by a motley gang of bricoleurs,  
27 ironists, designers and so on. There are no rules, only choices, and hence the  
28 only commitments that make any sense are those of Friedman's free market,  
29 of which Murakami's art market is a small example.

30 It does seem important to question hierarchy in the way that Murakami  
31 does, but not to thereby suggest that two-dimensional flatness can or should  
32 replace two-dimensional verticality. To borrow some terms from Deleuze  
33 and Guattari, but refuse their implied politics, arboreal and rhizomatic  
34 accounts are not in opposition to one another (2004, p. 3, *passim*). This is a  
35 practical fact of organizing, and simple dualisms are in danger of obscuring  
36 it. Many 'alternative' forms of organizing do have hierarchies, but they are  
37 rarely naturalized or assumed to be inevitable. In 200 years of anarchist,  
38 feminist, environmentalist and socialist thought we have a vibrant variety of  
39 accounts concerning how and whether legitimate individuals or groups  
40 should co-ordinate the life and labour of others. Added to that are questions

1 concerning the length of tenure, the span and limitation of responsibilities,  
3 differential rewards, the processes of consultation and democratic participa-  
5 tion, and grounds for legitimacy (Ferree & Martin, 1995; Lovink & Scholtz,  
7 2007; Marshall, 1993; Parker et al., 2007; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & **AU 4**  
9 Land, 2013). The literature on alternative ways of thinking about organizing  
11 is huge, but rarely recognized within the Business School. These are three-  
13 dimensional issues, practical issues and they demand that organizing is  
15 conceptualized as taking place in space and not in a single plane, whether  
17 vertical or horizontal. Simply opposing hierarchy with flatness does not  
19 recognize the ways in which arboreal forms of organizing work well for  
21 trees, and rhizomes produce sprouts which push upwards. Simple  
23 oppositions rarely capture empirical complexities, or the ethical-political  
25 questions that are raised by any form of organizing that wants to get things  
27 done *and* also reflect on the means by which things are done.

15 If institutions are power made durable, then the question is not whether  
17 hierarchy can be opposed with flatness, but whether and how institutions  
19 can keep de-institutionalizing themselves. Judgements will happen, Hebdige  
21 is right, but the hierarchy of Planet One can represent judgement turned to  
23 stone. Decisions will be made, hierarchies will grow as power congeals for a  
25 while and produces certain sort of arrangements and effects. But that  
27 doesn't mean that hierarchy is the equilibrium state of organizing. Order can  
29 exist without hierarchies being permanent. Positioning a theory of  
organizing, or a political practice, against the *inevitability* of hierarchy does  
not imply that everything becomes equivalent and we end up in Mr DOB's  
world. This sort of flattening which is predicated merely on the market runs  
the danger of reducing incommensurable values to one common coin, and  
hence effacing other sorts of value altogether. In other words, there is no  
reason why hierarchy itself cannot serve a value, without it thereby  
becoming a universal principle.

Edwin Abbot's mathematical romance *Flatland*, first published in 1884,  
tells the story of a square and his two-dimensional universe. The flatlanders  
are a narrow and conservative bunch, with severe traditions and judgements  
about the rectitude of the angles of their fellows. For men, the more sides the  
better, with circles being the most perfect. The working class are triangles,  
with equilateral triangles being the most respectable, whilst women are  
very dangerous and pointed needles who can easily kill by accident and  
hence require firm control. Despite their flat world, the Flatlanders have  
clear hierarchies and classes, enforced by violent authority, and no doubts  
that theirs is the only sensible world that should and could exist. When  
our protagonist sees 'Lineland' (one dimension) and 'Spaceland' (three



1 dimensions) he begins to reflect on the relativity of customs and assumptions  
 2 that he had always assumed inviolable. Of course he is assumed to be mad  
 3 or seditious by the rulers of Flatland, and writes to us from prison. Widely  
 4 assumed to be a satire on Victorian morality, as well as a neat primer in the  
 5 mathematics of dimensions, *Flatland* does not present flatness as a virtue,  
 and shows that hierarchy can exist there too.

7 Spinning *Flatland* on its side allows us to see that the problem that this  
 non-linear essay set itself is two dimensionality, not flatness as such.  
 9 Claiming that the earth is flat, or that we are part of a great chain of being,  
 or that the social world has a stratified ontology, simply refuses to  
 11 acknowledge the complexity of the *politics* of organizing. The tree is not  
 bad, and the rhizome is not good, and both actually spread in three  
 13 dimensions. Opposing hierarchy with flatness is like opposing the *x*-axis  
 with the *y*-axis, and such a definitively Cartesian gesture is unlikely to  
 15 produce any convincing accounts of the world, or ways of acting on that  
 world. Better to be clear about what sort of organizations are wished for,  
 17 what sort of utopias can be imagined and work towards those, than claim a  
 warrant in preferring one dimension to another. Mr DOB has helped me  
 19 think through what flatness means, but his politics are as thin as a coin.  
 Anarchists, feminists, communists and environmentalists have been  
 21 concerned with these issues for hundreds of years, and their accounts of  
 organizing are driven by ethical-political commitments, not a marketing  
 23 strategy or naturalized ontological myths.

## 25 27 UNCITED REFERENCES

AU :5

29 Abbot (1884/1992); Bolt (1960); Hebdige (1998); Schimmel & Mark (2007).

## 31 33 NOTES

35 1. In Azuma's essay in the Super Flat book (2000), the words 'DOB' and 'Super  
 Flat' are rendered in Western characters in the Japanese text. I assume this is  
 significant.

37 2. In a rhizomatic manner, some of the words here are borrowed from the  
 'network' entry in Parker et al. (2007).

39 3. Retrieved from [www.adobe.com/aboutadobe/pressroom/pdfs/fastfacts.pdf](http://www.adobe.com/aboutadobe/pressroom/pdfs/fastfacts.pdf).  
 Accessed on 18 March 2011.

## REFERENCES

- 1
- 3 Abbot, E. (1992). *Flatland: A romance of many dimensions*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.
- 4 Azuma, H. (2000). Super flat speculation. In T. Murakami (Ed.), *Super flat* (pp. 138–151).  
5 Tokyo: Madra Publishing Company.
- 6 Bankowsky, J., Gingeras, A., & Wood, C. (2009). *Pop life: Art in a material world*. London:  
7 Tate Publishing.
- 8 Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford: Polity.
- 9 Berger, P. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: BBC/Penguin.
- 10 Bhaskar, R. (1978). *A realist theory of science*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- 11 Blaug, R. (1999). The tyranny of the visible. *Organisation*, 6(1), 33–56.
- 12 Bolt, R. (1960). *A man for all seasons*. London: Heinemann.
- 13 Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2006). *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.
- 14 Bookchin, M. (1982). *The ecology of freedom*. Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books.
- 15 Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: RKP.
- 16 Bratton, W. (1989). The new economic theory of the firm. *Stanford Law Review*, 41, 1471–1527.
- 17 Burrell, G. (1993). The organization of pleasure. In M. Alvesson & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Critical  
18 management studies* (pp. 66–89). London: Sage.
- 19 Burrell, G. (1997). *Pandemonium: Towards a retro-organization theory*. London: Sage.
- 20 Castels, M. (2000). *The information age: The rise of the network society*. London: Blackwell.
- 21 DeLanda, M. (2006). *A new philosophy of society*. London: Athlone.
- 22 Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *A thousand plateaux*. London: Continuum.
- 23 Ferree, M., & Martin, P. (1995). *Feminist organizations*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University  
24 Press.
- 25 Friedman, T. (2005). *The world is flat*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 26 Gingeras, A. (2009). Lost in translation: The politics of identity in the work of Takashi  
27 Murakami. In J. Bankowsky, A. Gingeras & C. Wood (Eds.), *Pop life: Art in a material  
28 world* (pp. 77–87). London: Tate Publishing.
- 29 Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Methuen.
- 30 Hebdige, D. (1998). The bottom line on planet one: Squaring up to the face. In D. Hebdige  
31 (Ed.), *Hiding in the light*. London: Comedia.
- 32 Heydebrand, W. (1989). New organizational forms. *Work and Occupations*, 16(3), 323–357.
- 33 Kaikai Kiki. (2011). *Production and promotion of artwork*. Retrieved from [http://english.  
34 kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/activity/list/artworks\\_sales](http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/activity/list/artworks_sales). Accessed on 14 February  
35 2011.
- 36 Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 37 Lee, P. (2007). ‘Economies of scale’ in ‘The art of production’. *Artforum*, October (Special  
38 Issue), pp. 337–343.
- 39 Lovink, G., & Scholz, T. (2007). *The art of free cooperation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- 40 Marshall, P. (1993). *Demanding the impossible: A history of anarchism*. London: Fontana  
41 Books.
- 42 Molesworth, H. (2003). *Work ethic*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- 43 Murakami, T. (2000). *Super flat*. Tokyo: Madra Publishing Company.
- 44 Murakami, T. (2011). *A message*. Retrieved from [http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/  
45 whatskaikaikiki/message](http://english.kaikaikiki.co.jp/whatskaikaikiki/message). Accessed on 14 February 2011.
- 46 Nietzsche, F. (2007). The antichrist. In *Twilight of the idols*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth.

- 1 Parker, M. (2009). Angelic organization: Hierarchy and the tyranny of heaven. *Organization Studies*, 30(11), 1281–1299.
- 3 Parker, M. (2012). Art as work: Rules and creative labour. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 5(3).
- Parker, M., Cheney, G., Fournier, V., & Land, C. (Eds.). (2013). *The Routledge companion to alternative organization*. London: Routledge. **AU :6**
- 5 Parker, M., Fournier, V., & Reedy, P. (2007). *The dictionary of alternatives: Utopianism and organization*. London: Zed.
- 7 Reed, M. (1997). In praise of duality and dualism. *Organization Studies*, 18(1), 21–42.
- Schimmel, P., & Mark, L. (Eds.). (2007). ©Murakami. New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications.
- 9 Scott, J. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Siegal, K., & Mattick, P. (2004). *Money*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 11 Whyte, W. H. (1961). *The organisation man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

13

15

17

19

21

23

25

27

29

31


33

35

37

39

## AUTHOR QUERY FORM

	<b>Book: RSO-V035-3610447</b>  <b>Chapter: 9</b>	<b>Please e-mail or fax your responses and any corrections to:</b>  <b>E-mail:</b> <b>Fax:</b>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting, some questions may have arisen. These are listed below. Please check your typeset proof carefully and mark any corrections in the margin of the proof or compile them as a separate list.

### Disk use

Sometimes we are unable to process the electronic file of your article and/or artwork. If this is the case, we have proceeded by:

- Scanning (parts of) your article   
  Rekeying (parts of) your article  
 Scanning the artwork

### Bibliography

If discrepancies were noted between the literature list and the text references, the following may apply:

- The references listed below were noted in the text but appear to be missing from your literature list. Please complete the list or remove the references from the text.**  
 ***UNCITED REFERENCES:* This section comprises references that occur in the reference list but not in the body of the text. Please position each reference in the text or delete it. Any reference not dealt with will be retained in this section.**

### Queries and/or remarks

Location in Article	Query / remark	Response
AU:1	Please check various quotes given in the text have been set as "Quotations".	
AU:2	Please check the edits made in the following sentence: "Murakami also does work for Louis Vuitton.."	
AU:3	Please provide the following references in the reference list: Deleuze & Guattari, 1984; Hebdige, 1988; Lovink & Scholtz, 2007.	

AU:4	As per the reference list, the ref. Marshall (1991) has been changed to Marshall (1993). Please check.	
AU:5	Please cite the following references “Abbot (1884/1992); Bolt (1960); Hebdige (1998); Schimmel & Mark (2007)” or should be they be deleted from the reference list.	
AU:6	Please check whether “2013” should be changed to “forthcoming” as per style in the ref. Parker et al. (2013).	