

When managers rebel

This page intentionally left blank

When managers rebel

David Courpasson

*Professor in Organizational Sociology
EMLYON Business School*

&

Jean-Claude Thoenig

*Research Director, University Paris-Dauphine
and CNRS, and former professor, INSEAD*

Translated from the French
by Matthew Cush

palgrave
macmillan



The publishers wish to thank The OCE Research Centre at EMLYON Business School and Eurl Thoenig for their gracious assistance in making this English translation possible.

This work has been published with the aid of the French Ministry of Culture – Centre National du Livre.

Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministère français chargé de la culture – Centre National du Livre.

© David Courpasson & Jean-Claude Thoenig 2010

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-27786-1

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6–10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Originally published in French under the title *Quand les cadres se rebellent*. Copyright Vuibert Paris 2008.

First published in English 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-32583-2 ISBN 978-0-230-28993-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230289932

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

Introduction: what on earth am I doing here?	vii
The road to rebellion	vii
An overlooked phenomenon	viii
A phenomenon unlike any other	xi
An outline of this book and its players	xiii
Chapter 1 An offer I couldn't refuse	1
1.1 Patrick and Scotland	1
1.2 Michael and the redundancy plan	5
1.3 Three observations for further discussion	8
Chapter 2 Early signs of rebellion	9
2.1 The disarray of the rebel who dares	10
2.2 Bruno, shaken by his own boldness	11
2.3 A state of confusion	14
2.4 Private lives intervene	15
2.5 How Philip signed on to an existing rebellion	18
2.6 Whose fault is it?	21
Chapter 3 Management spaces	24
3.1 Prison principles	24
3.2 Like a playground	27
3.3 Fuel for rebellion	29
3.4 The spark that sets off the blaze	34
3.5 The force of the locker room	36
Chapter 4 The dynamics of rebellion	40
4.1 Getting others involved	40
4.2 The gestation of rebellion	53
4.3 Rebellion and change	58
Chapter 5 What happens tomorrow to today's rebels?	70
5.1 Those who leave	70
5.2 Those who stay	77

5.3	Those who move up	83
5.4	Those who change	88
	Chapter 6 Creative rebellion	91
6.1	The different levels of creative rebellion	92
6.2	The drivers of creative rebellion	96
6.3	Different types of creative rebellion	101
6.4	Creative rebels' resources	102
	Chapter 7 When private lives fight back	109
7.1	Go-betweens with the other world	109
7.2	The forbidden zone	116
7.3	Qualitative and local stakes	122
	Chapter 8 Exiting rebellion's vicious circle	125
8.1	Never forget the people down below	125
8.2	This is no paper tiger	127
8.3	The ruses of power	130
8.4	Other generations, same lack of trust	133
8.5	Bureaucracy forever	137
	Chapter 9 Polyarchy as an alternative	144
9.1	Dealing with divergent views in political terms	144
9.2	Adversaries, not enemies	149
9.3	Polyarchy, not anarchy	157
	Conclusion: the future beckons	163
	A mixed picture	163
	Various possible outcomes	166
	<i>Notes</i>	170
	<i>Bibliography</i>	174
	<i>Index of names</i>	177
	<i>Index of rebels</i>	179
	<i>Index of subjects</i>	180

INTRODUCTION: WHAT ON EARTH AM I DOING HERE?

The road to rebellion

It's 5:40 a.m. Dozens of people mill around on the platform waiting for the express train to pull into the station. Grey, black, coats, ties – central casting's idea of businessmen. Their faces are weary even before the sun has risen. They've already turned on their mobile phones and picked up their financial, sports and satirical newspapers. Laptops are ready for action. Everything is ready.

They had to get up without waking the children, drive to the station, find a space in the underground parking garage, ride up the escalators, find the right platform, stamp their tickets, and wait. All the time thinking that something's got to give.

“Sometimes I wonder what the hell I'm doing here, in this first-class compartment, why I'm turning on my computer, while outside my window the frost-covered rural landscape beckons. Why am I doing exactly the opposite of what I would be doing if I was something other than what I am? Why does the guy sitting behind me feel like me, but won't admit it? In fact, he doesn't even realize that he feels just like me. Why are we – the fifty or so men and a few women – why are we here, without wanting to be? None of us will ever own up that we're all thinking more or less the same thing – about how silly it is to be on this express train at 5:40 a.m., and when we get off, it's only to drag ourselves through the Tube. All of this just to go do something that, when all is said and done, doesn't amount to much?”

Something's got to give... but probably not today. Any gnawing regrets they may have will melt away, suppressed as usual. And yet, one day, one of them may ask, in the train or at the office,

“What am I doing here? Why am I doing these things for my company?” And on that day, the road to rebellion will open up before him.

An overlooked phenomenon

This book is about rebellion, revolt, protest.¹ The dictionary reveals some striking similarities between these three words. Rebellion means an act of disobedience, insubordination or opposition. Revolt means the rejection of an established social order, indignant opposition to rules or an authority. Protest suggests controversy, debate, denial or disavowal. This book will avail itself of the rich vocabulary surrounding the rejection of an established social order or rules imposed by an established authority.

One day, out of the blue, when not even they are expecting it, employees, managers and supervisors rebel, revolt and protest. “That does it! I can’t go on like this. They’ve gone too far. They can’t make me toe the line any more! For what? I’ve had enough!” They refuse to maintain the pretense. And they are not afraid to say so out loud. What’s more, they refuse to back down. They who in many cases had been held up as models of success at their companies, they on whom the senior executives were counting, they for whom the path to the top seemed to beckon.

Are such reactions, which on the surface seem irrational or irresponsible, worth writing about? After all, perhaps it’s just a rough spot to be endured, a blown fuse, a lost temper, a misplaced word. Too much accumulated fatigue, family stress, nerves frayed by the challenges to be met. A little rest and everything will be fine. Maybe a session with a counselor and everything will go back to normal.

Rebellion and protest are to be taken seriously – precisely because they are not usually taken seriously, or at least not seriously enough. We see it coming without really seeing it. Or we ignore it altogether. And even when we do take notice, we don’t place much importance on it.

It was entirely by chance that, as sociologists, we took an interest in executive rebellion. Cases of this were occurring in companies where we were carrying out surveys and running training programmes. Even so, we initially overlooked them entirely, or ignored them, as if they just didn't make sense.

For several years now we have observed, especially in interviews, how power and managerial roles have been transformed in multinational chemicals, energy and building materials companies, as well as in regional companies (David Courpasson;² Claude Michaud and Jean-Claude Thoenig³). We have also run training programmes for managers of these companies. In the thousands of pages of notes we took during several hundred interviews, we conscientiously noted down references to accounts of revolt and protest, accounts whose sources were either heroes or mere observers. We never thought of using these stories. We even forgot all about them. They did not fit in with what we were doing. They seemed isolated, tangents that didn't lead anywhere. That is, until three events occurred within the span of a few weeks.

The first event was one day when we were quite surprised as, out of the blue, a manager we had interviewed a year previously called us, saying "I have something to tell you that should really interest you as sociologists. Let's have lunch." So we got together over lunch. The manager wanted to tell us why and how he had headed a noisy protest at his company against a senior management decision regarding a certain research and development (R&D) project. He had evidently been shaken by the whole experience.

The second event occurred when speaking at a colloquium on our research report based on staff interviews at a bank he directed, the CEO openly wondered why we had made no mention of the work stoppages and street demonstrations in which employees from several of the bank's branches had taken part. These employees had balked at a modification of the company's performance review practices that had been imposed unilaterally by the head office. He asked, "How could you not have included this in your report?" It's true that we couldn't remember it, even though we'd spent several weeks at the bank.

The third event took place one Saturday morning at the supermarket, when one of us ran into someone whom he had interviewed a few years previously. The young man explained that he had voluntarily resigned his position as a supervisor and had become an associate professor at a vocational training school. In spite of a relative decline in social status and income, or because of it, he felt that he had escaped a world that he could not stand any more – the world of the large corporation.

We soon decided that executive protest and rebellion are worthy topics in their own right. We looked again at the notes we had made since 1990. We undertook more systematic observations. We unravelled about forty unusual cases of protest, from start to finish. In short, we decided to take executive rebellion very seriously.

Revolt and protest occur far more often than one might at first imagine. It is impossible to give an order of magnitude. There are no broad statistics or even approximations. Moreover, these are often quiet incidents that are not shared with the protagonists' networks or communities. Even so, all we have to do is to look closely: there is a great deal of executive rebellion out there. To take one example, at a very large multinational company that otherwise is considered quite socially responsible and employee-friendly, we interviewed and trained more than 400 mid-level and upper-level executives – factory managers, sales managers and so on. Out of those 400-odd people, fourteen eventually said at some point, "No, I won't play the game any longer." Fourteen out of 400 is not insignificant.

This book is a first. A bibliographical search shows that there are almost no books or articles that look at this issue head-on and in depth. What little attention had been paid to the phenomenon diluted it. Ready-made explanations are of common use. A typical justification might be "Isn't this what companies are inevitably coming to at the start of the twenty-first century?". Or "Life is tough for company employees, isn't it?". Reference is also made to individual pathologies such as stress, split personality syndromes, and so on. Medical treatment by psychologists is perceived as the appropriate solution. In any case and by definition rebellion is bad. It expresses a symptom of societal or mental disorganization. It is an outcome of modern capitalism, the counterpart of an iron law of globalization and greed governing

companies. This book will show just how hasty and facile are such conclusions. Executive rebellion is a unique phenomenon, unlike any other. It is not inevitable, and it is often for the worst, though it can also be for the best.

A phenomenon unlike any other

Managers and supervisors do sometimes protest within companies in ways that are completely unlike labour movements, which fit within well-worn trade-union or political frameworks. Managers do not in general lead work stoppages or occupy factories. They march under no flag. No committee speaks up for them. Their demands don't deal with salaries (we want more) or working hours (we want less). Nor are they driven by any sort of anti-whatever ideology. They don't aim to transform society or sweep away neo-capitalism. They don't make the front page. They lie low. Those who do protest keep it to themselves. At the same time, they are marked indelibly. Far from protesting over salaries or working hours, their rebellions deal with something of an entirely different order: how the company is managed.

Talking about rebellion or protest is no easy task. It's a real minefield. Everyone seems to have preconceived notions of it, however misguided. And the media are always ready to poison the debate with their clichés and buzz-words.

Revolt, rebellion and protest have sometimes evoked a compassionate interpretation by specialists in this area, along with an apocalyptic vision of the working world. For example, executive burnout was one explanation broached in 1970s, and this gave way to the notion of executive apathy. Loss of social identity, loss of company status, general lack of interest; many explanations have been put forward to explain the process of unravelling. According to these explanations, rebellion ultimately leads to a destructive pathology. Executives are suffering. Burnout, which is a state of professional weariness that rest does nothing to cure, is lying in wait, claims the pioneering work of Robert Golembiewski and his associates.⁴ Closet alcoholism is said to be relatively widespread, and not just among lower-level employees. Executives commit

suicide at their workplace, and so on. Such employees must therefore feel that the least bad thing that can still happen to them, before their fate is finally sealed, is for some of them to denounce the prison that their company has become, to decry the insatiable pressure of management. According to this line of thinking, rebellion is simply a warning sign or a distress signal from people who are sinking and can no longer pull themselves out.

Others see revolt, rebellion and protest on another level, that of disobedience and, on top of that, disorder, disorganization and lack of discipline. These undermine the company's prospects. The very people who are being relied on to make the company a success – its managers and supervisors – dare to set a bad example. Like a bunch of spoiled children, they are biting the hand that feeds them. It's true that, nowadays, authority for authority's sake is no longer credible. Having just one head honcho is so twentieth century. However – according to this line of thinking – it is considered heresy and sacrilege for managers to balk when their bosses put them through ordeals to test their loyalty and their potential – witness the 5:40 a.m. express train. The world has changed, after all. Managers are no longer willing to go all-out, to give everything to their jobs and their companies. The new generation has been brought up on flexitime and cocooning, to say nothing of channel-surfing. Nothing matters any more, least of all loyalty to one's employer.

This book deals with executive rebellion, revolt and protest as straightforwardly as possible, avoiding sentimentality and pre-conceived notions as much as possible, and, above all, by observing the facts, and nothing but the facts.

Who are these rebels? What is driving them? What, and who, exactly are they protesting against? What is their ultimate aim, and what do they hope to change? How does a process of rebellion and protest unfold in concrete terms through time and space? How do companies interpret rebellion, and how do they react? What are the ultimate consequences for company stakeholders?

We intend to add some shading to a picture so often painted in stark black and white, and to draw some conclusions that might seem paradoxical or counterintuitive. There might even be a

message in all this, a message that is in fact quite optimistic and positive. Rebellious managers are not necessarily those whom everyone has given up on, outcasts or non-conformists. Quite the contrary, in fact: sometimes it is those who had been recruited from the groups of tomorrow's potential elites, who were placed on the lowest rung of the golden ladder to the top, and who then, for the next five or ten years, gave their all to their careers. And then, one day, they rebelled.

Moreover, while rebels may question the way the top executives run things, they don't turn their backs on their companies; rather the opposite, in fact. They pour their energy into finding solutions, into seeking other ways of doing things, ways that are often just as effective, or even more so. They continue to support their company. They don't act against its interests; they propose alternatives. They are creative and responsible.

Rebelling is no walk in the park. It's a traumatic experience that leaves scars that often do not heal. For the rebel, the psychological burden of questioning one's identity, career and job is traumatic. For the company, the risk of losing executives who, up to that point, had been deemed the most promising, is traumatic. At the same time, protest is a unique opportunity to bring about change – for the rebels themselves, whether they stay or leave, and for the company, which is the better for it, whether it admits it or not. Rebellion is ultimately less disruptive than constructive, as it serves two purposes. One of these is to reconcile corporate life with its executives' private lives. The other is to allow the protesters to bring society at large and life outside work into the company and the business sphere.

There's something to be said for rebellion. At the same time, it is a cause for concern, particularly when current discussions of management practices, frankly, sound hollow, and when the gap between companies and society becomes a chasm.

An outline of this book and its players

Rebellions don't announce themselves to the world beforehand; they erupt suddenly and unexpectedly. Chapter 1 recounts two

true stories; stories that could happen to any of us. They are of people who had toed the line perfectly until, one day, they were offered the kind of chance that one doesn't usually turn down.

Chapter 2 describes the circumstances that exist prior to protest. Amid psychological turmoil, the executive brings his/her private life into the corporation, the private life that the company persists in overlooking, or even trampling on. While managers usually shrug off the many demands and pressures from the company that encroach on their private lives, a day comes when something pushes them over the brink, when they say "Enough is enough".

Rebellion plays out in a certain setting. Chapter 3 pinpoints and describes that setting. Rebellion cannot be put down to the whims of a spoilt child, problems with one's love life or mere bad moods that will get better eventually. Companies are neither prisons nor playgrounds. Rebellion is fuelled by failure at the top.

How does a process of rebellion unfold? Chapter 4 shows that executive rebels don't simply want to trash the place. They aren't trying to destroy the company. Protesting or rebelling does not mean doing just anything, any way, and at any time – quite the reverse. Unwritten rules exist along a well-marked path. One of those rules is to provide alternative proposals for management. Successful rebellion requires a lot of know-how.

What becomes of executive rebels? Chapter 5 looks at their lives once their rebellion has paused, or come to an end. Our stories suggest a wide variety of personal destinies. Some executive rebels lose and leave; others win and stay. All are marked by their experience for a long time afterward.

What becomes of their rebellion? Chapter 6 provides an assessment from the point of view of company management. It turns out that there is a surprising and constructive side to rebellion for the company, because rebellion sparks creativity. Not only do the rebels themselves change the paths of their own lives; their rebellion brings new forms of culture, organization and empowerment to the company. Rebellion uncovers and builds on new ways of acting together, new ways of producing, and of interacting with society and serving its needs.

Is executive rebellion a harbinger of some sort of executive class struggle? Might executives begin to dabble in traditional trade-union practices? Chapter 7 stresses the unique character and originality of executives' ways of protesting. Their demands are not quantitative, but rather a blunt, outright rejection of companies' encroachment on a forbidden zone – that of their private lives. Protests are an opportunity to bring society back into the company.

Chapter 8 shows how rebellion is associated with, if not fed by, a single-minded conception and practice of management style. Subordinates are given just enough to keep them quiet. Managers are expected, first and foremost, to take orders from their superiors. At the same time, managerial control is subtle. Its reins are gentle and faceless, not brutal and personal. And it is able to deal with protest, if not absorb it, relatively successfully.

Chapter 9 shows how protest and rebellion can be seen as normal antagonistic processes, and can even be made beneficial, constructive and effective in their collective impact – that is, as long as there is a change of mindset, a way of seeing and interpreting the world; in short, of adopting another way of governing the social and human fabric that constitutes a company.

In our conclusion we sum up the main lessons we have drawn from our observations and discuss the growing interdependence within companies. In this new environment, it is more important than ever to provide meaning and to create identities.

Seven accounts of rebellion will serve as our reference points. These are actual cases that we have observed. The identities of protagonists and companies have been disguised, for obvious reasons.⁵ Here are the rebels, in order of appearance:

- Patrick is a 33-year-old engineer. He also has an MBA and heads a regional subsidiary of Construct, a leading multinational construction and civil engineering company.
- Michael, also an engineer by training. At 32, he is the production manager of a plant that is part of Strand, a European company manufacturing fishing line.
- Bruno is 38 years old. He is in charge of setting up green-field building materials stores across China. Brick, the company

which employees him, is a world leader in its field. He was born and educated in a European Union country. His parents were immigrants from China.

- Philip trained as a biochemist. At 40, he acts as an R&D project manager for Agro, a leader in the field of agrochemical products.
- Mark, 42 years old, has a PhD in microbiology, is a colleague of Philip's, and a project manager at the same company, Agro.
- Charles serves as a branch manager at a mid-size bank called Bank. He is 38. He has an advanced degree in management studies.
- Martin is 32 years old. He graduated from a business school. He is a marketing manager at the headquarters of Bank.
- Julie is a 41-year-old production manager at a steel mill owned by Mill, a global industrial conglomerate. Trained as an engineer, she took part in a training programme in applied social sciences.