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## Review of Fineman, S. (2017) *Revenge*. London: Reaktion.

To everything there is a season<sup>i</sup>. There is a time to fill out details in existing research frameworks, and a time to decide that there are no adequate frameworks and new ones need constructing. There is a time for boxed-in research and a time for box-breaking research<sup>ii</sup>. Boxed-in research may be appropriate if there is a suitable box, and if we have confidence in the boxes available to us. The additive view that research should be about filling in gaps may have its place in some areas of medicine, but we may feel that we are not ready for it in organization studies, which is a field in which boxes still need to be broken. The metaphor of 'gaps in knowledge' implies relatively stable and agreed blocks of knowledge separated by areas where such stable blocks have yet to be supplied. It would be a very uncritical and unexciting approach compared with one that seeks a new vision of the literature, a realignment of the kaleidoscope of ideas. In the case of this book, there is no option of boxed-in research because no-one has made the box. *Revenge* is a fresh topic; it has received little or no direct attention in our field. This book offers a new direction of thought because the author has given himself space for a book length exploration of a new theme. This book leads you into thinking about revenge, about its nature, its characteristics and its consequences, and it shows how such thinking can illuminate many other areas of organizational thinking.

I should declare an interest. I have written with Fineman<sup>iii</sup>. I therefore come to this book knowing that I can trust the intellectual process behind it, so that I do not need the exhaustive justification and referencing that one would expect if this were an academic monograph. I also know, from having had many of my more flowery expressions deleted by Fineman in our collaboration, that he values clear and uncluttered prose. All of this means that I am willing to suspend academic prickliness, and the tendency to say 'prove it!', and instead to enjoy the many new things that I can see when I let myself try out the view of the world he is offering. The very fact that I feel the need to mention this bears out the argument of Lindebaum, Perezts and Andersson (2017)<sup>iv</sup> that we limit our appreciation and learning if we become fixated on particular kinds of academic writing. Our expectations of the currently conventional style of journal article lead us into a kind of academic fundamentalism (blocks of knowledge with gaps again), and away from an appreciative, playful approach to developing our understanding, where play may betoken a good way of doing our work<sup>v</sup>.

*Revenge* does not aim to fill a gap in the literature, and it makes no attempt to bore us into submission with long lists of academic references. Instead, it is an appreciation of a topic, a meditation on the meanings and implications of a fundamental, fascinating and little-analysed social phenomenon, which might give an alternative illumination to many areas of organization studies. Its nine chapters are not like stages in an argument, but more like an exhibition of nine paintings, each viewing revenge from a different angle, interpreting it and developing its meaning from that angle. Each painting is an interesting and engaging work in its own right, and the exhibition of the nine paintings together produces a satisfying whole rather than a linear progression, although like a good exhibition, the order in which the paintings have been arranged has been thought about too. The ways in which readers of *Organization Studies* might relate these pictures to organizational life are

so diverse that I will leave you to make your own links. Fineman starts with the psychological roots of revenge, its place in the make-up of the person. He goes on to look at the way revenge is regarded by different religions, in practice as well as in their ideals. The dominant place that revenge has in giving interest and life to literature and film comes next, with some discussion of the dramatic role of the avenger. He then moves on to the relationship between revenge and the justice system, with a number of stories that illustrate the way this has developed over time, as well as mention of approaches to restorative justice. Tribes and gangs are clearly often driven by revenge, and may indeed need the motivation and bonding that revenge gives them to function well. Personal grudges come next, with some discussion of the special sharpness of grudges against former friends or those formerly loved. At the other end of the scale we have revenge in warfare, with its stories of massive acts of vengeance that we hear about in the news and that are so incomprehensible to those of us who cannot imagine writing our lives on so big a canvas. Finally, we have chapters on taking revenge at work, and on the very public and perhaps staged form of revenge which can be witnessed in politics.

Such a book will always be personal. It is written by a person to explore the field and to answer their own questions about that field, with their own definitions of what is relevant, what is helpful and what is of interest. This fits comfortably with the belief in creating a gallery of views, rather than trying to fill the gaps. You can never fill the gaps because other people see different gaps. If someone else had written this book they would have come up with different chapter headings, and painted different pictures within those chapters, showing different aspects of the scenes they are painting. At this point the quality of writing becomes very important. This book works because Fineman writes very well, and as reader, you do not feel that you are being presented with a complete exhibition which you should passively admire or critique, but rather that you are being drawn into a conversation. There will be times when you feel 'no, I would not have put it like that', or 'I would really like you to spend more time on this topic' or 'haven't you missed something here?'. In an exploratory book such as this, these responses are all signs that the book is succeeding.

For example, in the first chapter, Fineman looks at the psychological roots of revenge. I shall re-read this chapter a few more times; it is that sort of book – easy to read but you want to go back and make sure you have not missed something. The chapter is full of good stories, well told, which make the argument. A lot of weight is put on 'malignant narcissism', a new concept to me, as an explanation of the psychological roots of revenge. There is no obfuscation here, nothing is too difficult to follow, but still at the end of the chapter I was asking myself whether I really agreed that this process was the root of revenge as I have seen it. That is why this book succeeds well; nothing else I have read has ever made me question that before, and I do not need to agree with Fineman's analysis in order to be enlightened by it.

Revenge can be at its most interesting in its absence, and ten years ago many of us would have been quick to hold up the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa as an example of how revenge can be circumvented. By getting victims and perpetrators to tell their truth to each other, the Commission seemed to offer an exciting vision of how past hurts might be healed by acknowledging how painful they were, by perpetrators owning their part in causing that pain, and

then agreeing to live with that knowledge without revenge and the potential for a feud<sup>vi</sup>. Over the last few years the success of Truth and Reconciliation has become more questionable as justice issues about the ownership of land and the lack of opportunities for many of those who fought for freedom have cast doubt on whether it has defused revenge or only deferred it. Fineman touches on these issues briefly, and I would like to have seen longer being spent on these questions but once again, the book succeeds. It has caused me to work further on the half-formed thoughts that I had about the topic, and what more could I ask?

I have always been particular interested by the rapid mini-revenges that take place in work place meetings. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, someone says something quite rude and aggressive to someone else in a meeting. It seems to make no sense in the immediate context of the rest of the conversation going on. However, in many cases, cast your mind back through the last 10 minutes or so of the discussion, and you will find a put-down, a slight or a political manoeuvring by the other person, and you realise that you are observing a slightly delayed act of revenge, where just enough time has been allowed to elapse for the revenge not to be too crudely obvious, and also for the aggrieved person to have planned and chosen the moment for their revenge. In the chapter on Work and Revenge, Fineman does not talk about this – but following my earlier argument, he does not need to. Instead, he has set me thinking more analytically about a phenomenon that I had already observed, and in which I was already interested.

I could equally have given examples of other phenomena that I had not connected with revenge, but Fineman does, and the connection is illuminating. For example, he suggests that the careers of some entrepreneurs are motivated partly by revenge against those who would not take their ideas seriously earlier. Those who are old enough may be reminded of the years of revenge exacted by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was rejected early in her career for a research job, and spent years in government exacting what revenge she could on the research community.

I have been working on the role of story in leadership<sup>vii</sup>. I have said very little in that work about the place of revenge in leadership, but if I had read this book first, I might have recast some of the ideas in a way that acknowledges revenge more. For example, there is plenty of revenge in the stories that churches have told about each other, and there are many examples of church leadership where it would be interesting to think about the possible role of malignant narcissism. Lindebaum, Perezts and Andersson (2017) say that books can, and should, help us shed formulaic straightjackets, or in Alvesson and Sandberg's (2014) words, break boxes. That is exactly what this book has done for me, and why I commend it to others. Read it on the way to a conference, and let it take you on a journey.

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<sup>i</sup> Ecclesiastes 3, 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Alvesson M and Sandberg (2014) Habitat and habitus: boxed-in versus box-breaking research. *Organization Studies*, 35 (7), 967-987.

<sup>iii</sup> Fineman S, Sims D and Gabriel Y (2010) *Organizing and organization*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Sage

<sup>iv</sup> Lindebaum D, Perezts M and Andersson L (2017) Why books? Book Review Editorial for *Organization Studies*

<sup>v</sup> Sorensen BM and Spoelstra S (2012) Play at work: continuation, intervention and usurpation. *Organization*, 19 (1), 81-97.

<sup>vi</sup> Abramson NR and Senyshyn Y (2010) Effective punishment through forgiveness: rediscovering Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith in the Abraham story. *Organization Studies*, 31 (5), 555 – 581.

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vii Roberts VS and Sims D (2017) *Leading by story: rethinking church leadership*. London: SCM Press.