

BACKDRAFTS*

Tom O'Dell

In November of 1989 I received a letter from Prague that was sent to me by a friend, Renata. As I opened the envelope I was surprised to find that in addition to a letter, Renata had included a bell, about the size of a thimble, hung from a thin red ribbon. It was made out of a simple ceramic material and lacked any sort of ornamentation. As bells go, this was a modest object.

However, what I held in my hands was more than a cheap bell, it was the materialization of a *cultural backdraft* that had swept through Prague, Czechoslovakia, and much of Eastern Europe over the course of that fall. Amongst firefighters, *backdraft* is known as an explosive phenomenon that derives its energy from a longer process of accumulation in which the power of partially un-burnt gases and other combustibles are suddenly released when presented with a new source of fuel. The fuel that ignites backdrafts and causes the pursuant deflagration is oxygen – something that might otherwise seem benign.¹

As Renata explained in her letter, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of Czechs were taking to the streets in the evenings ringing these little unassuming ceramic bells. It was, she explained, part of a growing protest, a call for change. For the communist government in power, the call for change had been an ever present and ongoing annoyance that seemed to bloom periodically. It had always been controlled, but it nonetheless always lurked in the background.

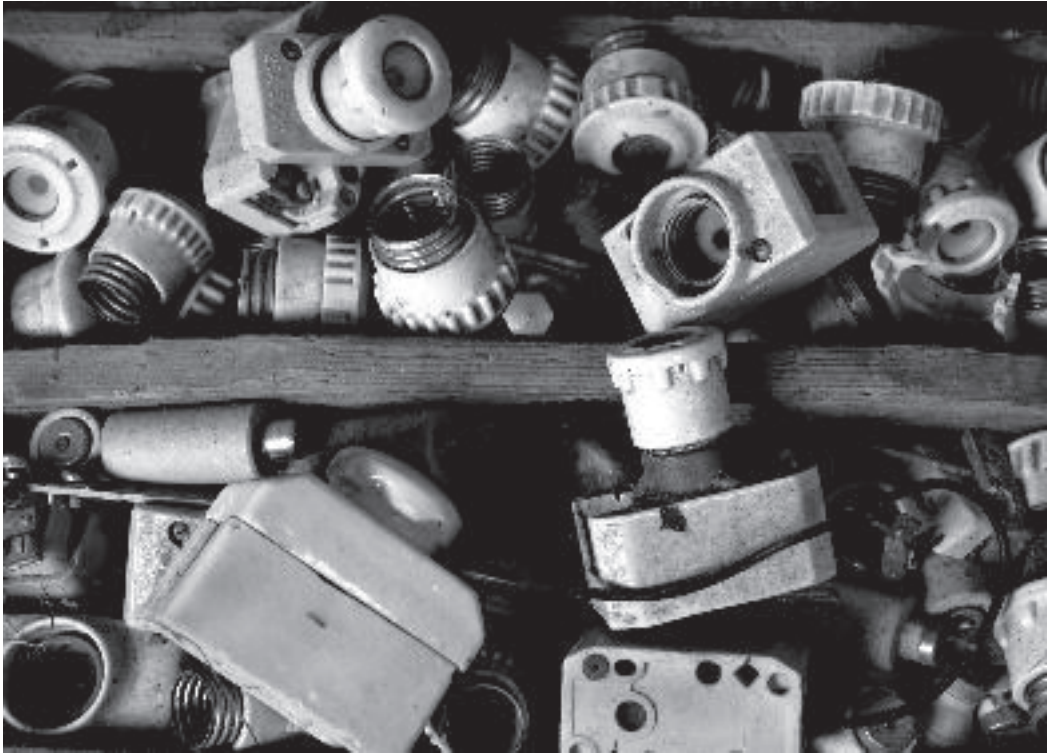
The bell was interesting as a physical manifestation of a cultural backdraft because it metonymical-

ly bore witness to several parallel processes leading up to the 1989 demonstrations. In part, it resonated with an awareness of similar ongoing events in other Eastern European countries that helped to strengthen the protest movement in Prague. However, beyond this, it also spoke of the existence of an invisible power that compelled hundreds of thousands of people to come together and agree upon the use of the bell as a symbol. And it clearly exemplified how years of accumulated (and routinized) dissatisfaction with the existing regime and the conditions of daily life could be channeled through a simple object and given a new collective focus and energy. In this context, it is a revealing reminder of how even the most trivial of actions (including the small movements of the wrist leading to the ringing of a bell) can cause backdrafts to ignite existing fuel in an irreversible manner.

In what follows, I shall more closely examine the cultural anatomy of backdrafts and the processes fueling them. I argue that we need to more closely examine the repetitive activities and routines of daily life. Backdrafts are interesting because they do not just suddenly occur; their potential develops over time as tensions build under a facade of stability and continuity.

Unnoticed Signs

For the anthropologist, the challenge is to identify the processes leading to backdrafts before they explode. But this requires an appreciation of things that are inconspicuous. Unfortunately, the current trends in



cultural research tend to be moving in the opposite direction, towards a predominant focus upon that which is turbulent, vividly problematic, and palpably present (see the discussion in Shove 2003: 1). We find a predilection for the study of such phenomena as disciplining powers, acts of resistance, arenas of cultural contestation, and forces of fragmentation, atomization, and hybridity (see for example Pile & Keith 1997; Rojek 1995; Young 1995). This is a world of scholarly interest that emphasizes visible signs of change over continuity, regularly invoking metaphors of liquidity, fluidity, flexibility, and speed (see Bauman 2000; Sennett 1998; Urry 2000, 2003; Virilio 2000). And while much of this work has significantly contributed to our understanding of the problems facing contemporary society, it does little to explain the processes that keep daily life from becoming unglued, spinning completely out of control for many people.

In some ways the invocation of the backdraft metaphor could be understood as yet another sign of the scholarly preoccupation with highly visible and dramatic phenomena. To be sure, cultural backdrafts often have defining moments that mark the point when they coalesce into a recognizable force: the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11th, or the revelation of the poisoning of Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko in the late fall of 2004. These are the big events, the “conspicuous moments”, that tend to be remembered in history books and heritage celebrations, but they are only a very small portion of the “cultural biography” of any backdraft (Appadurai 1986). Behind these highly visible events there is a long period when daily life seemed to follow a normal course. This point might be easier to illustrate with examples that are less dramatic than the orange revolution or the fall of communism.

Backdrafts do not always make the news. Within academia there is a rich flora of stories about departments that, at least from the perspective of outsiders, suddenly seem to implode or disintegrate. The defining moment may be a heated exchange of words that suddenly polarizes a department or even a larger

community of scholars. However, signs of a coming tempest can be found nestled unobtrusively in such things as a footnote in a leading journal, a snide comment at a conference, or an intentionally (?) omitted reference. They can also be more obvious; a professor's choice to leave one department for another, or increasingly vigorous debates in journals. In part, the pressures driving these processes may stem from competing theoretical perspectives and political positions, but emotions should not be overlooked as an important source of power for backdrafts. Indignation, hurt pride, the need to be right and respected, these are just a few of the emotional energies driving backdrafts through university corridors (Ehn & Löfgren 2004).

However, university settings are not unique. Emotions are an important source of cultural energy in many other backdraft contexts, but emotions have to be understood as more than isolated phenomena internally bound to the psyche of individuals. As Arlie Russell Hochschild has argued, “emotions always involve the body, but they are not sealed biological events” (2003: 125). The question is, how do they accumulate cultural resonance over longer periods of time, creating a mood (or atmosphere) that transcends the individual?

Accumulating Energy

Perhaps a small part of the answer can be found in homes around the world. In popular discourse, western homes are often likened to castles and cocoons isolated from the trials, tribulations, and pressures of public life. However, within the confines of their homes, people conduct some of the most emotionally charged discussions and negotiations they will face during their lives. Homes are places in which love and affection can find a focus and source of confirmation, but they are also places in which people work to synchronize slightly different values, and perceptions of “normality” over longer and shorter periods of time (Morley 2000: 57).

Homes are a cultural arena in which small things can make big differences. A sock that did not quite make it into the hamper (again), a dinner that was not ready on time, a load of laundry that included

the wrong mix of garments or an inappropriate water temperature; any of these small events may be individually insignificant. Nonetheless, in the gendered context of serial domestic lapses, past oversights and warnings can prepare the ground for reactions on an unexpected scale as ideals about how the home should be organized come into conflict with the reality of actual events. The problem here is not simply that people forget to perform their domestic chores in an “appropriate” or “agreed upon” manner, but that old habits, and dominant social structures have a way of repeatedly making themselves felt. As a result, as Jean-Claude Kaufmann has demonstrated in a study of domestic role sharing amongst French couples,

the most trivial gestures take on awesome dimensions... Taken separately, each action – the neatly ironed underpants, the sock left lying around – appear (sic!) unimportant. Yet society is present in each of them transformed into social objects, determining the individual who thinks he or she controls them (1998: 211).

In this context, small repetitive acts like those linked to the mundane routines of daily life can work as key sources of cultural energy capable of continuously re-stoking an emotionally charged atmosphere – causing temperatures to rise and tensions to build until a breaking point is reached.

Signs of an impending conflagration often exist long before anything dramatic actually happens, but they tend to be either overlooked, or regarded as insignificant. The cultural energy generated by backdrafts seems to be compressed and accelerated by processes of denial in which the warning signals of an imminent pyrolysis are observed, but dismissed. Unfortunately we know very little about how denial is culturally organized and sustained. In contrast, cultural theorists have devoted a great deal of time and space to emphasizing the role played by reflexivity in late modernity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). We need to turn the tables to reconsider some of the limits of this reflexivity. We also need to contemplate the ways breaches in reflexivity, as well as other

forms of non-recognition and denial, can facilitate the development of backdrafts.

Bodily Practice and Pre-reflexivity

Many of the seemingly trivial activities people carry out on a daily basis are pre-reflexive. Rather than being strategically planned out, or organized by conscious design, they are simply done out of habit, for reasons that can be hard to explain (Kaufmann 1998: 138). They might include a daily compulsion to wipe-off the kitchen countertop just before leaving for work, or a desire to listen to music while dusting. But in the long run, even small shifts in these types of practices can have a bearing upon the way in which we view ourselves, and understand the world around us. This is a point that has been emphasized by Henrietta Moore:

Shifts in meaning can result from a reordering of practical activities. If meaning is given to the organization of space through practice, it follows that small changes in procedure can provide new interpretations of spatial layout... Shifting the grounds of meaning, reading against the grain, is often something done through practice that is, through the day-to-day activities that take place within symbolically structured space (1994: 83).

Understood in this way, small shifts in practice can generate new experiences that challenge existing norms, values and structures. The stimulus for change in this case comes, at least in part, from corporally bound impressions that produce a sense of “business as usual”. As small changes in the performance of daily practices become routinized they have the potential to produce new interpretations of the surrounding world.

The subtleties of this process have been partially illuminated by Sarah Pink in a recent study she conducted of the relationship people have with their homes and housework in England and Spain (Pink 2004). Among other things, she discovered that men tended to attribute a degree of agency to their homes and the dirty surfaces and textures within them. Activities traditionally associated with housewives,

such as cleaning, were often recast in the minds of men as adventurous endeavors of conquest. Men pitted themselves against “menaces” such as dust, mould, and smelly carpets, and in the process unconsciously reframed the “feminine activity” of housecleaning as a masculine project which they had to fight day after day (Pink 2004: 135f.).

The shifts in meaning that Pink describes are not dramatic, but they open the way for a reevaluation of the understanding of specific gendered activities associated with the home. As an aspect of backdraft, the processes involved in these types of minute changes in meaning and understanding are an important field of study that require further empirical and analytical study. The question is, in what ways do repetition and routine have the capability to produce a strong sense of continuity and stability, while simultaneously incorporating moments of change that go unnoticed, or at least unregistered as people live their daily lives? And in what ways can these changes be seen as a precondition for other changes?²

Burning Out

Having asked this question, I do not mean to imply that small changes always lead to larger cultural transformations. Some backdrafts lose energy or disappear before they ever have the chance to explode. In Eastern European politics, overwhelming force was repeatedly used to smother backdrafts in the process of deflagration. But brutal force is not always the most effective means of extinguishing backdrafts; while having short-term effects, it also reveals a loss of power and control. It is a sure sign that something else will be smoldering in the background.

Other backdrafts seem to lose energy through the introduction of new routines. This is a standard tactic that has long been used to quell growing tensions in domestic settings, and it is the strategy around which the industry of marriage counseling has developed. In this case, the production of new routines may be a very active and conscious endeavor to make compromises, but it may also be an unconscious move – resulting from “gut feelings” that

help people “tip-toe” around sensitive issues and problems (cf. Kaufmann 1998: 26). Whatever the case, the end result may be the establishment of new routines that alleviate past tensions. In this sense, some backdrafts, rather than resulting in dramatic change, may actually work to hinder it. The question is, how do these processes work in other contexts beyond the home as well as within it?

Backdrafts are interesting, as I am arguing, because they are around us all the time, but they have the tendency to develop and affect us in ways that are often nearly imperceptible. Sometimes they lead to dramatic cultural, political, and social changes. However, more often than not, they simply lie there in the background working in contradictory ways and contributing to the production of something people loosely refer to as the “spirit of our times” (cf. Svensson 1997).

Backdrafts challenge ethnology to focus more explicitly upon the small, at times seemingly trivial and banal activities and practices of daily life and to understand how these work to drive larger cultural changes. At the same time, as the example from Prague that this article opened with illustrates, the study of backdrafts also requires a sensitive understanding of how transnational cultural processes affect local settings. To paraphrase a quote from Marianne Gullestad (1989), an appreciation of the role backdrafts play as cultural processes requires a renewed sensitivity to the manner in which “small facts” and “large issues” continuously speak to one another, simultaneously perpetuating conditions of both continuity and change in everyday life.

Notes

* This article is part of a project, *Home-made: The cultural dynamics of the inconspicuous*, funded by The Swedish Research Council.

- 1 See Bengtsson, L.G. & Karlsson, B. (1997) *Fenomenen övertändning, backdraft och brandgas-explosion*, Räddningsverket, rapport P21-185/97.
- 2 Non-recognition, as it turns out, can take many forms. In some cases – like that of the misplaced sock – it contributes to a pressure cooker like atmosphere in which people slowly become aware of the tensions developing around them. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising to

note that many of the backdrafts I have described here seem to include a hard to define point at which actors increasingly become cognizant of their own interests in relation to those of others. Reflexivity may work as a catalyst of change in this context, focusing people's attention, helping to define a goal, problem, or source of emotional discontent, and facilitating a recognition of the manner in which seemingly disparate processes and activities in everyday life may be linked.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun 1986: Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value. In: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. London: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–63.
- Bauman, Zygmunt 2000: *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, Ulrich 1992: *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Bengtsson, L.G. & B. Karlsson 1997: *Fenomenen övertändning, backdraft och brandgasexplosion*. Räddningsverket, rapport P21-185/97.
- Ehn, Billy & Orvar Löfgren 2004: *Hur blir man klok på universitetet?* Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Giddens, Anthony 1991: *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gullestad, Marianne 1989: Small Facts and Large Issues: The Anthropology of Contemporary Scandinavian Society. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 18, 71–93.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell 2003: *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kaufmann, Jean-Claude 1998: *Dirty Linen: Couples and Their Laundry*. London: Middlesex University Press.
- Moore, Henrietta 1994: *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Morley, David 2000: *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Pile, Steve & Michael Keith 1997: *Geographies of Resistance*. London: Routledge.
- Pink, Sarah 2004: *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Rojek, Chris 1995: *Decentering Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sennett, Richard 1998: *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Shove, Elizabeth 2003: *Comfort, Cleanliness & Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Oxford: Berg.
- Svensson, Birgitta 1997: Livstid. In: Gunnar Alsmark (ed.), *Skjorta eller själ? Kulturella identiteter i tid och rum*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, pp. 38–61.
- Urry, John 2000: *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Routledge.
- Urry, John 2003: *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Virilio, Paul 2000: *Polar Inertia*. London: Sage Publications.
- Young, Robert 1995: *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge.