6 Into the ‘crack’
Scottish agricultural revolutions and the art of moaning

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Introduction

In this chapter, I wish to consider high-spirited ‘moaning’ sessions among tenant farmers in Duthchas Hills – what is locally known as the ‘crack’ – as a poetic and potentially transformative medium for carving out alternative and often counterfactual trajectories across a legal landscape whose topological features are shaped by a singular revolutionary event. When Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Richard Lochhead, in 2013 announced that forthcoming changes to the Scottish land legislation might include tenant farmers’ ‘absolute right to buy’ (ARTB) their farms, he effectively charted a viable path towards a long-awaited agricultural revolution. The ownership of rural land in Scotland is concentrated in the hands of relatively few estate owners who continue to enjoy the benefits of a feudal-like legal system: security of occupancy for tenant farmers is predicated on the nature of their personal ties with the laird or the estate factor. Widely considered as the primary tool for catalysing the agricultural sector out of the dark ages of feudalism, ARTB will force estate owners to sell tenanted land to the tenant farmers and thus radically change the pattern of land ownership in Scotland. The only problem being that the responses from those tenant farmers, who will clearly benefit from these radical changes of current Scottish agricultural legislation, do not always reflect unequivocal support for ARTB.

Based on recent ethnographic fieldwork among tenant farmers in Scotland’s Duthchas Hills, this chapter charts the contours of an agricultural revolution that is being articulated not through the making of change but through its obliteration. Whereas the conceptual space of the factual agricultural revolution is captured by ARTB, alternative and inherently counterfactual ideological trajectories appear at the interstices of the legal-cum-rural landscape in the form of tenant farmers’ nightly moaning sessions, where the splendour of days past are jokingly celebrated. Considered as located beyond the terrain of agricultural realities, these alternative revolutionary trajectories are paradoxically also acknowledged as being intensively true.

Through an extended analysis of the farmers’ bickering during the ‘crack’, I thus wish to consider how a displacement in relation to a seemingly
unacceptable condition might occur. My argument will be that the ‘crack’ twists out of proportion – distorts – the properties of an existing tension-ridden and unequal relationship between landowners and tenant farmers and thereby allows for the revolutionary potentials that are otherwise relegated to a deferred future to assert themselves in the present. What emerges from the farmers’ nightly moaning sessions, then, is a hyper-real, albeit counterfactual, version of social life in Duthchas Hills, which connects with the revolutionary future of ARTB through the obliteration of change: the satirical accounts of a glorious past (and present) is the revolution that destabilizes the revolutionary force of ARTB, as it were. In this highly politicized rural environment, an agricultural revolution is therefore not defined by a radical break with a pre-existing social order but, rather, by aligning the future scenario of ARTB with the counterfactual realities that are mapped out during the ‘crack’. It can be argued that ARTB surgically extracts from the existing social order a distorted shadow reality, which then comes to serve as its own necessary pre-condition. During the nightly crack, a counterfactual reality is thus played out that momentarily instantiates a past that is even more revolutionary than the promises afforded by ARTB. Considered as such, the farmers’ subjugation to the local land-owning elite is nothing but debris from a revolution that has already conquered its true past.

Inspired by the work of the French writer Alfred Jarry (1996; see also Baudrillard 1992; Bök 1997; Hugill 2012), I consider the ‘crack’ as an ideological form of ‘pataphysical’ distortion. From Jarry’s obscure body of work, we learn that pataphysics is the science of exceptions that can ‘explain the universe supplementary to this one’ (Jarry 1996: 21) by tracing the abnormalities and distortions within the governing social order that it contradicts. At the outset, then, my discussion of the pataphysics of the tenant farmers’ moaning sessions is based on an overall understanding of distortion as ‘an arena of unavoidable and often desirable sui generis creation, whose potential utility and significance can only be established retrospectively’ (Nielsen and Pedersen 2012). While sticking to this overall understanding of distortion as ‘a wedge between ... cause and effects’ (op. cit.: 7), I will emphasize even further how pataphysical distortions might operate so as to completely annihilate both cause and effects. What remains is a singular monadic aberration [i.e. a revolutionary future and its ‘true’ albeit counterfactual past] whose unique moral sensibility regarding the values of proper agricultural life is elicited precisely by eradicating – rather than simply transforming or adding something qualitatively new – both input and output, cause and effects.

Agricultural landholdings in Duthchas Hills

Although no actual object of discontent was required in order for the tenant farmers to moan, the current and seemingly untenable situation regarding land occupancies in Duthchas Hills did seem to warrant a permanent state of bickering. There is no official data on agricultural holdings and land occupancies exclusively for Duthchas Hills but the survey that I carried out shows that there are currently 38 tenant farms and 37 so-called ‘owner-occupiers’ in the parish. Of the latter category, five owner-occupiers possess larger estates with a number of tenant farms on their lands.

With approximately 55,000 acres, the Duthchas Estate is by far the biggest landowner in Inverness-shire and is currently among the 50 largest landholdings in Scotland (Land Reform Review Group 2013). The Duthchas Estate was purchased in 1873 from the Garrisons of Kirkill by the Harrison family and it has been in their possession ever since. Currently, it is run by Lord Albert Harrison in close collaboration with a professional land agent functioning as estate factor. There are 42 let farms on the Duthchas Estate, out of which 34 tenancies (81%) are based on the 1991 Agricultural Holdings Act. Significantly, every members of the Scottish Land Court have confirmed that legislation on tenant farming in Scotland is extremely complex and covers an excessive number of Acts and regulations. With the most recent 2003 Land Reform Act, there are four forms of leases:

- Short Limited Duration Tenancy (SLDT). Maximum 5 years but no minimum.
- Limited Duration Tenancy (LDT). Minimum 15 years but no maximum.
- Grazing or moving lease. No more than 364 days.

Besides the 34 tenancies based on the 1991 Act, there is one SLDT, one LDT and a few grazing leases on the Duthchas Estate. These primary categories, however, say little about the actual terms of individual leases. Ideally, all contracts are renewed during rent reviews every third year, where rents for the coming period are settled based on evaluations of the farm’s overall conditions: its size, livestock and yearly produce. To the large majority of farmers on the Duthchas Estate, rent reviews constituted arduous and often stressful periods of protracted negotiations with an opponent whose unpredictable manoeuvres made any attempt at establishing viable strategies impossible. Rent reviews are supposed to be settled as ‘amicable’ agreements without the involvement of outside arbiters and so landowners initially propose to the tenant what they take to be reasonable rents for the coming period (Scottish Government 2014). Significantly, however, there do not seem to be any fixed standards for evaluating rents. Having examined the Duthchas Estate’s internal documents from the 2009 rent review, it is striking that the categories by which all farms were evaluated fluctuated quite substantially. Whereas the value of, say, one acre of arable land should remain constant across all tenant farms, this was not the case and Farm A might end up with a much higher rent than Farm B despite the fact that their overall conditions were roughly the same. The fluctuating terms of rent reviews was even acknowledged to me by the land agent responsible
for negotiating with tenant farmers for the Dutchas Estate. As he told me, he would start out deciding what he thought was a proper rent increase and then work his way backwards, as it were, to make the different categories fit the desired result.

Needless to say, the tenant farmers were less than pleased with the way the land agent carried out the rent reviews. 'Clearly, he is dumb as a door-knob', Fergus MacGregor grumbled. 'But it's not right, you know. Why won't he reveal how he comes up with those figures? Ah! Someone should throw his Eton arse out of the parish!' To Fergus MacGregor and many other tenant farmers on the Dutchas Estate, the factor's questionable calculations during rent reviews signalled a widely felt problem regarding the relationship between laird and tenant, which, if allowed to develop, would have serious and disconcerting ramifications for the agricultural community in Dutchas Hills. Basically, estate owners, such as Lord Harrison, seemed no longer to be interested in maintaining a thriving community of tenant farmers on their lands. As I was frequently being told, with the increasing political focus on subsidizing wildlife preservation and natural conservation, the large estates were seeking to convert their landholdings into nature reserves and thereby also remove tenant farms from their lands. And judging from the decreasing number of let farms in Dutchas Hills and other parishes in Inverness-shire, the tenant farmers might not be entirely off the mark. Within the last five years, four tenancies on the Dutchas Estate have been eliminated and on the Kirkland Estate, only one tenant farm remains, whereas previously there were more than ten.

From the perspective of Lord Harrison, the owner of the Dutchas Estate, the situation appeared slightly different. As he told me during an hour-long interview, the Dutchas Estate has traditionally been an agricultural landholding with a substantial number of tenant farms and he has no desire not to maintain this focus. Still, with the recent political announcements of upcoming radical changes to Scottish land laws, his enthusiasm for maintaining a vibrant agricultural community has diminished considerably. We were sitting across from each other in his land agent's office and after an extended historical lecture on the genealogy of his predecessors, I asked him what he thought about the prospects of the tenant farmers getting the absolute right to buy their land. 'Well, Morten', I suppose it's what comes with democracy...', Lord Harrison paused and smiled, '...but logically I don't approve of it. I believe that this land is best taken care of by people like myself. I really do want tenant farms on Dutchas Estate, you know, but I am afraid I might lose my family's land if Absolute Right to Buy is implemented'.

'Absolute right to buy'

In 1976 crofters in the highlands and islands were given an absolute right to buy their crofts from their landlords for a sum equivalent to fifteen times their annual rents (Hunter et al. 2013). When drafting the 2003 Agricultural Holdings Act, the idea was proposed for tenant farmers to acquire similar rights, but the Scottish Executive Branch finally accepted only a more restricted 'pre-emptive right to buy', which implies that if a landlord puts an estate on the market, tenant farmers on the estate must be offered a first refusal of their farms provided that they have previously registered an interest in buying the land (Tenant Farming Forum 2007). In 2008, a year after the SNP (Scottish National Party) had assumed power, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment took ARTB off the table arguing that landowners, such as Lord Harrison, would show greater willingness to let land if they did not see their ownership rights as being potentially threatened. For the next five years, the prospects of implementing ARTB lay dormant until Richard Lochhead, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, announced in June 2013 that it was back on the agenda. During a press conference at the Royal Highland Show, Lochhead declared that:

Many tenant farmers have made the case that current tenure arrangements stifle on-farm investment ... It is also important that we give all tenant farmers and stakeholders the opportunity to enter into full and frank dialogue about absolute right to buy.

(Farmers Guardian 2013)

During my conversation with Lord Harrison, he stated quite emphatically that the reason for landowners being reluctant to let out land was primarily out of a fear of losing huge portions of their landholdings if ARTB were implemented. According to the recent 'Review of Agricultural Holdings Legislation', Lord Harrison's worries are shared by the interviewed landowners, who are increasingly concerned about the 'political imperative that gives priority to tenants' rights over landlords' (The Scottish Government 2014). Whereas a secure tenancy was previously considered as a 'low return/low risk investment', it is now regarded as a 'low return/high risk investment' and many landowners are therefore reluctant to let land other than as a grazing let (op. cit.: 57).

And, apparently, their fears are not unsubstantiated. During my first two months in Dutchas Hills, I consistently heard about the Scottish Government's alleged ambitions of implementing ARTB within the foreseeable future. Having examined the watered down results of previous attempts at reforming Scottish Land Laws, however, I remained quite sceptical about the seriousness of Lochhead's recent announcements. It was only a few weeks before my return to Denmark in November 2013 that I realized the SNP was apparently ready to implement radical and revolutionary changes in Scottish legislation on land. While driving in my car, a woman rang me up, introducing herself simply as 'the Scottish Government'. She told me that she was part of a small task force that was currently working on reforming
existing land laws, and asked if we could meet up in order to discuss my research on agricultural holdings and land tenancies. A few days later, I met with the embodiment of the Scottish Government who confirmed that the SNP did, in fact, want to radically reform the Scottish Land Law through the implementation of different new legal instruments, such as ARTB.

It is probably no exaggeration to argue that the support for ARTB is both widespread and substantial. Prominent stakeholders within state and civic institutions are enthusiastically promoting ARTB as the one singular tool necessary for catapulting the Scottish agricultural sector out of the feudal 'dark ages'. While I was in Duthchas Hills, the chairman of the Scottish Tenants Farmers Association (STFA) visited the parish to discuss the ongoing reform process with local STFA members and, in particular, to gain support for ARTB. I accompanied the chairman during his meetings with different stakeholder groups and everywhere we went responses were unanimous in their backing for ARTB. Adam Clarkson, the municipal councillor of Inverness-shire, concluded the first public meeting by stating that: 'time has come for the tenant farmers to own their land. With Scotland's Independence, our farmers need their independence as well'. After the public meeting, a group of tenant farmers invited me for a dram and a 'crack' at the Duthchas Hotel. And, quite surprisingly, the enthusiastic support for ARTB expressed earlier in the evening seemed to vanish as soon as we sat down to order our drinks.

The art of moaning

'I have a great idea!' David Campbell was on his way to buy a round of beers but his ingenious thinking apparently made him return to our table before reaching the bar. 'Instead of all this "absolute right to buy" nonsense, what if Lord Harrison were to plough his own fields?' The silence that followed seemed to indicate that Campbell was alone in appreciating the greatness of his idea, so further elaboration was required. 'I mean ..., if people like him were forced to live here, they would have to learn about our way of doing things ... about farming ...' Angus Ferguson shook his head. 'Yeah, Dave, that's a great idea. But those people are not at all interested in living in Duthchas Hills. They only come here to kill a few animals and parade around in their tweed jackets and stupid hats'. John Drummond agreed. 'I don't think that 'Absolute Right to Buy' will ever be implemented'. John took a sip of his beer before continuing:

But there's no point in twisting the laird's arm. Once, while I was working down south, I saw this fantastic ploughshare that made really deep but much fewer furrows than the conventional ones. Expensive as hell but it ended up reducing costs for seed corn. The great thing was that the farmers persuaded the laird to buy the ploughshare for collective use provided that he (the laird) got a share of the profit. A kind of partnership, you know. We should do that! Only ... the guy who sold them the ploughshare ended up hogging the laird's wife and after six months he ran off with the ploughshare and the woman.

During my time in Duthchas Hills, I had numerous occasions to participate in such lively sessions, which were highly cherished by the majority of tenant farmers. Fergus MacGregor would often tell me that what he enjoyed the most in Duthchas Hills was the good 'crack'. In Scotland, the Gaelic term 'crack' has been assimilated into English where it denotes loud talk, gossiping or just good fun and it was in this broad sense that Fergus MacGregor used the term. What I wish to suggest, then, is that the bickering and complaining that were so integral to many everyday conversations among tenant farmers might fruitfully be considered as one particular crystallization of the 'crack', where the poetic and imaginative staging of social life in Duthchas Hills is valued far more than any seemingly neutral account outlining the predicaments of being a tenant farmer today.

Generally, the large majority of tenant farmers was unequivocal in the support for ARTB, and wholeheartedly pushed for immediate and extensive changes to current land legislation. Quite a few were loyal members of STFA (Scottish Tenant Farmers Association) and did not hesitate to write passionate letters in support of ARTB to local or national politicians; also, on several occasions, voicing their opinions in Scottish Farmer, a weekly journal that is widely read by farmers, interest groups and politicians at both local and national level. Opinions seemed to change, however, during the nightly 'crack', and for a few hours the enthusiastic support for ARTB succumbed to the continuous cascades of imagined scenarios where farming life was staged in alternative and often counterfactual ways.

Not long after having arrived in Duthchas Hills, I met Fergus MacGregor outside the local grocery shop. The back of his beaten-up Land Rover was packed with long wooden poles and I asked Fergus what they were intended for. 'Well ...', Fergus leaned back on the side of his car, '... I love Lord Harrison so much that I have decided to do his job for him. If we are really going to buy our own land from the lairds then we better prepare ourselves!' Fergus continued to explain that the estate owner had promised to do up his house and maintain the march fences surrounding his fields but for the last five years he had done nothing:

... So I said to myself: Why don't you take the stubs that he [the estate owner] has already bought and put them up yourself? I mean, if we are the new lairds, then we bloody well start now, don't you think? I am sure he will agree that it's better for all of us if he just hands over the torch instead of getting into the whole 'absolute right to buy' thing ...

Notwithstanding the apparent challenges of actually implementing the idea suggested by Fergus as well as those of many other tenant farmers in ...
area, their most remarkable feature is probably that the ideas are not at all that bad. Although acknowledged by the farmers themselves as being beyond the terrain of actual probabilities, there was a certain pragmatic do-ability, as it were, to the scenarios that were staged during the lively moaning sessions. Often, the imagined alternatives to the farmers’ current predicaments were elicited as precise manuals for actualizing counterfactual social universes that challenged the conceptual-cum-spatial topology of ARTB. Guided by the always-enteraining proclivity for complaining and moaning about the questionable state of things, the possibilities for experimenting with paradoxical and often counterfactual configurations of social life were seemingly endless.

The outside of rebellion

In his seminal paper ‘Rituals of rebellion in South-East Africa’ (1963), Max Gluckman analysed the ritualised forms of social and political protest that occur during the Swazi Incwala ceremony. According to Gluckman, the ceremony functions primarily as ideological support for a cosmic kingship. Staged as a series of overt contestations against the incumbent king, the ceremony reproduces the inclusive powers of cosmic kingship and confirms its capacity for forcing together the socially differentiating and decisive potencies that may otherwise fragment the king’s order (Kapferer 2002: 15). As Gluckman wrote:

This ceremony is not a simple mass assertion of unity, but a stressing of conflict, a statement of rebellion and rivalry against the king, with periodical affirmations of unity with the king, and the drawing of power from the king. The political structure, as the source of prosperity and strength, which safeguards the nation internally and externally, is made sacred in the person of the king.

(1963: 125)

In Gluckman’s reading, the Swazi Incwala ceremony serves a cathartic purpose by allowing otherwise contained social tensions and political differentiations to be played out in public. During the ceremonial event, the king’s subjects express their hatred and opposition towards the king and, by so doing, end up buttressing the legitimacy of the system. Indeed, ‘in these circumstances of a rebellion against a bad king ..., the rebellion is in fact waged to defend the kingship against the king ... It is the kingship and not the king who is divine’ (op. cit.:129). As recently emphasized by Vigh (2009), Gluckman’s analysis is structured around a distinction between a revolution and a rebellion. Whereas the former designates a fundamental change of the overarching political system, the latter refers to a change within the system. Considered as a rebellious staging of public discontent, the Incwala ceremony exposes the inner workings of a dual social dynamics where everyday social life is turned on its head during a carnivalesque moment of disruption that ends up lending support to existing hierarchical structures.

Several anthropological studies indicate, however, that Gluckman oversimplifies the workings of the Incwala ritual (Beidelman 1966; Kapferer 2005; see also Sanders 2000: 471–73). Through a detailed analysis of Swazi cosmology, Beidelman thus argues that:

the main theme of the Incwala is not rebellion or the expression of aggression and conflict ... but the separation of the king from the various groups within his nation so that he is free and fit to assume the heavy supernatural powers of his office as king-priest of the nation.

(1966: 401)

It might be contended, then, that what Gluckman fails to see is the ‘sacrificial transformation of the king’ that takes place through the ceremony (Kapferer 2005: 104). Considered as such, the ceremony does not merely function as an ultimately non-threatening valve for ‘letting off steam’ (Kapferer 1988: 162) but, rather, as a medium for conjuring the cosmological relationship between the divine king and his subjects.

While taking into account the critiques raised against Gluckman, it is nevertheless tempting to consider the tenant farmers’ moaning sessions as a ‘rebellious’ staging of public discontent. When farmers in Duthchas Hills met up at local pubs or during sheep auctions to have a ‘crack’, did they not precisely ‘express opposition to ... the king [or, here, the laird]’ but support for the kingship? (Gluckman 1963: 128). Surely, by creatively tinkering with novel ways of structuring the relationships between tenants and laird, farmers in Duthchas Hills did seem to implicitly approve of the existing feudal-like political system that continues to govern the distribution of use-rights to agricultural land in Scotland. Although voiced with a heavy dose of sarcasm, the speculative scenarios of silly landowners and stout-hearted farmers did little to challenge the laird’s superior position. One might ask, however, to what extent the ‘unchallenged social order’ (op. cit.:127) that was evoked during the nightly ‘crack’ corresponded to the everyday realities experienced by the tenant farmers. Notwithstanding my overall admiration for the farmers’ poetic skills, I would often have a hard time connecting the goofy laird figure that would often appear during the moaning sessions with the aloof English landowner whom I had met on several occasions. As I slowly realized, however, the key issue to be dealt with during the ‘crack’ was not necessarily the precise (and accurately depicted) particularities of an unjust socio-political system that allowed the laird to enjoy excessive privileges but, rather, the latter’s complete lack of agricultural skills and, equally important, the depth of his stupidity.

After a particularly spirited night at the Duthchas Hotel, Angus Ferguson drove me home in the Toyota Hilux that he had recently purchased.
So, Morten..." Angus threw himself into the driver’s seat and looked at me with a half-concealed grin on his face: ‘have you learned anything tonight that you can use for your science project?’ I told Angus that I had enjoyed the evening but that I was not really sure if I recognized the laird that they had depicted in the pub. Angus giggled and nodded several times. ‘Yeah, Morten. It’s insane.... Imagine if Harrison really had to gather a flock of sheep... He would end up damning himself! And who would have to clean up his mess? Us! Jesus...’!

Clearly, Angus and his friends were not all that concerned about the ‘truth value’, if you will, of their stories. The artistry of ‘the crack’ was rather the farmers’ individual and collective capacities for establishing a speculative scenario where the laird and other related figures (the factor, local politicians, wealthy farmers, etc.) were set up so as to render bickering and moaning possible. Hence, as I gradually came to realize, it was a somewhat twisted version of the local social universe that emerged during the nightly sessions in which the absurdity of deep-seated hierarchies was made glaringly apparent. With cynical acuity the farmers stripped the laird of his snobbish manners and exposed him as the awkward fool that he really was. As the farmers in Duthchas Hills made clear with deadpan seriousness, although the benefits that could be reaped from their agricultural ingenuity were carefully explained to the laird, it was something that he was simply not capable of fully comprehending.

Returning again to Gluckman’s analysis of ‘rebelligious’ events, it seems to me that what distinguishes the ‘crack’ in relation to the Swazi Incula ceremony is the way that it reverberates with the encircling ‘social order’, if you like. Whereas the Incula ceremony intensifies latent social and political tensions in order to control them, moaning twists out of proportion those inequalities that the tenant farmers wish for ARTB to eliminate. The liminal ‘crack’ therefore cannot be considered as an embalmed version of a false consciousness that somehow keeps the farmers in place by ventilating their discontent through hour-long moaning sessions. That would require a retroactive longing for the speculative scenarios that are conjured up (i.e. the unequal relationship between laird and tenant farmers) and this does not seem to be the case. Might it not be, instead, that the entertaining cascades of bickering and moaning open up a speculative and, indeed, alternative version of the ‘social order’ in which existing hierarchical inequalities and social tensions always loose out to the agricultural skills of the farmers? If so, the ‘rebelligious’ event operates in a completely contrary fashion to the Swazi Incula ceremony analysed by Gluckman. Rather than the ritualized moaning sessions functioning to activate (and control) latent social tensions, the expected agricultural revolution is an intensified version of the counterfactual agricultural world that was conjured up again and again during the nightly moaning sessions. In a beautiful albeit puzzling pataphysical phrasing, it could be argued that the ARTB is a misunderstanding that misunderstands itself.

In order for ARTB to actualize its revolutionary potentials, it invests a distorted version of the present with its own inherent qualities and thereby annuls the distance between past and future.

If, as I argue, an agricultural revolution is taking place through the obliterating of change, the analytical challenge is obviously to consider how the present might become invested with the properties of an ideological future (cf. Nielsen 2013; 2014a; 2014b). In the next section, I therefore proceed to discuss the counterfactual realities conjured up during the ‘crack’ as a revolution in the present which annihilates the distance between present and future. Inspired by the work of Jarry, I consider this temporal-ideological configuration as a ‘pataphysical distortion’.

The ‘crack’ as pataphysical distortion

The speculative scenarios that were conjured up during the nightly cracks resonate with the work by the experimental French writer Alfred Jarry (1873–1907). Best known for his play Ubu Roué, which is often cited as a forerunner to the surrealist movement of the 1920s, Jarry was also the inventor of ‘pataphysics’, a pseudo-science devised to destabilize the foundations of conventional metaphysics (Hugill 2012). In his obscure work Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician (1996), Jarry offers the following definition of pataphysics:

Pataphysics will examine the laws which govern exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, will describe a universe which can be – and perhaps should be – envisaged in the place of the traditional one... Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.

(op. cit.: 21–22; italics added)

As a science of the particular and the laws governing exceptions, pataphysics charts the contours of alternative universes ‘supplementary to this one’ by tracing the anomalies and aberrations within the existing metaphysical system that the system apparently contradicts. As such, Jarry aims not to negate or oppose metaphysics, which, he claims, would end up serving as its important preservation but, rather, to displace metaphysics ‘through a radical mutation within it’ (Bök 1997: 56–57). In Jarry’s work, this is done by using the jargon and insights of conventional science but in such a way as to distort its inner logics. Georges Perec (1936–1982), a French novelist and self-proclaimed pataphysician summed up the strategy of pataphysics in a short quasi-syllogism:

If physics proposes: ‘you have a brother and he likes cheese’, then metaphysics replies: ‘if you have a brother, he likes cheese’. But ‘Pataphysics says: ‘You don’t have a brother and he likes cheese.’

(Hugill 2012: 13)
Searching for supplementary universes within the existing one, Jarry takes Nietzschean nihilism to its conclusion, as it were. The death of God logically implies the abolition of the cosmological distinction between two worlds: the metaphysical distinction between essence and appearance, the logical distinction between true and false (Deleuze 2004); and, ultimately, the distance between the present and imagined futures. As Jarry sees it, these epistemological breakdowns allow poetry to play a prominent role within the scientific system. In order to create ‘imaginary solutions’, poetry must become a genre of therapeutic knowledge creating ‘pseudo-statements’ that will retain the beauty of the untrue in order to perturb the entropy of science. As Christian Bök argues in his excellent thesis on Jarry’s pseudo-science (1997):

Pataphysics misreads metaphysics in order to disrupt it, confuse it, or deflect it, transposing the relationship between a royal paradigm and a nomad paralogy, until such a philosophy of exceptions goes even as far as to misread itself.

(op. cit.: 86; italics added)

‘Imaginary solutions’ thus arise from believing in the untruth that is created when a metaphysical system is distorted from within. With Vico, it could be argued that to understand in terms of ‘truth’ is to be reactive, accepting the world of the ‘as is’; but to misunderstand on behalf of error is to be creative, inventing the world of the ‘as if’ (Vico 1984; see also Vahinger 1925). In this regard, pataphysics is a speculative theory of contradictory undecidability operating within a conventional scientific paradigm in order to dissolve the distinction between poetry and science.

What might the analytical purchase be of considering the recurring moaning sessions in Duthchas Hills as particular forms of pataphysical distortions? Not unlike Jarry’s pseudo-science, the speculative scenarios staged by the tenant farmers seem to ironically test the flexibility of a delimited conceptual universe. Whereas Jarry was concerned with the restrictions of a rule-based scientific paradigm that he wanted to demolish from within, the tenant farmers experimentally charted alternative ways of connecting an unjust socio-political environment with the revolutionary legal reform that was unequivocally being praised as of paramount importance for the establishment of a vibrant agricultural community in Duthchas Hills and elsewhere in Scotland. Almost as if responding to Jarry’s wish for mutations to be generated ‘from within’, the tenant farmers did not dissociate themselves from the system that they so clearly wanted to eradicate. Rather, by tinkering with ways of confronting the foolishness of the laird with their own shrewdness and agricultural skills, the farmers poetically twisted out of shape their hierarchical submission to the land-owning elite; the effect being that the inequalities of the existing ‘social order’ gradually came to appear irrelevant; it was, in a sense, a battle that was won long before it had even commenced. Returning to my initial outline of what I take pataphysical distortion to be, it might even be argued that by twisting out of shape certain key properties of the existing social order, a singular monadic aberration emerged that essentially annihilated its own cause (hierarchical inequalities) and, indeed, its effects (ARTB). Let me finally expand on this crucial aspect of the ‘crack’ as pataphysical distortion.

Resolving the ideological paradox

By framing the always entertaining tirades of moaning about the questionable state of things with deadpan declarations, such as ‘My love for my laird is endless’, the tenant farmers opened up the conceptual space of ARTB so that the unequal power relationship could be momentarily bracketed off and alternative visions of social life in Duthchas Hills tried out for size. As such, moaning and bickering constitute a particular and almost foreign language from the future that produced within the present ‘a kind of foot stomping, a stammering, an obsessionally tom-tom, like a repetition that never ceases to create something new’ (Deleuze 1998: 96). This is what happened when Fergus MacGregor, during a break at a Council Meeting in July 2013, brought up the mystical ploughshare once seen by John Drummond when he was working down south. Half-whispering so that only the people sitting next to him could hear it, Fergus began by recounting the numerous advantages to be gained if only the laird could be persuaded into buying the ploughshare. By collectively working the fields, the tiresome fights over land rights that would undoubtedly follow ARTB could be avoided and the laird would get his chance to show his worth as an industrious farmer. Fergus then made a short theatrical pause, allowed the chairman sitting to his right and proceeded to emphatically argue that the ‘idiotic project’ would surely end up with all tenant farmers having to plough the fields with their bare hands because the factor would ‘ruin the chisel by simply looking at it’. The laird, however, would reap the obvious benefits of visiting all the households without the men at home. When the muffled laughter had died out completely, Fergus concluded his contribution to the meeting with an extended and loud tirade on the need for immediate, prudent and pragmatic action in order to prevent the agricultural community from collapsing within. ‘If we don’t act now, my friends, there will be no community to hold these meetings!’

Keeping in mind the discussion of pataphysics above, it is my argument that Fergus MacGregor managed to insert new intervals and combinatory possibilities within the otherwise hermetically sealed revolutionary conceptualization of ARTB. The key insight that his fellow-participants could learn from Fergus’s intervention was thus that, if successfully implemented, ARTB would crystallize a unique moral sensibility that was at the core of the farming community in Duthchas Hills. While drowned by the clamour of centuries of painfully felt inequalities, this moral sensibility could
be re-activated only through a series of parataphysical permutations based on a gleeful ‘over-identification’ with the social order that ARTB would ultimately disrupt (pace Boyer and Yurchak 2010). The parataphysical distortions of the ‘crack’ might be figuratively sketched out as shown in Figure 6.1.

By twisting the existing hierarchical order out of proportions, a hyper-real, albeit counterfactual, version of social life is conjured up that presents the farmers from Duthchas Hills as agricultural specialists whose ingenious ideas nevertheless fail to materialize due to the laird’s dilettante approach. As suggested by Fergus, it is this moral sensibility that will carry the farming community into the future of ARTB. Hence, rather than charting a radical break with the existing social order, ARTB is the finale of an advancing crescendo that is built up through the farmers’ recurring moaning sessions.

If we return again to the discussion of parataphysics, it might be argued that the misreading at the heart of the ‘crack’ ‘goes even as far as to misread itself’ (Bök 1997: 86) precisely when the moral sensibility of ingenious and cunning (but nevertheless constantly failing) agricultural creativity becomes the precondition for ARTB. This has huge implications for the ideological set-up of ARTB in relation to the ‘crack’. According to the French political theorist Claude Lefort, the legitimacy of any political ideology is always verified by reference to an external ‘truth’ that cannot be challenged through the ideological discourse itself and which—logically—serves as premise for the latter (1986: 181–236). This invariably creates a paradox at the heart of the ideological project whose claim for universality is ipso facto undermined. Indeed, while a political ideology might declare itself as containing a universal truth-value, ‘it cannot represent its chartering external truth by definition, but instead must take it for granted’ (Boyer and Yurchak 2010: 209-10).

Considered as an ideological project, it might be argued that the ‘crack’ (at least momentarily) resolves this ‘paradox of universality’ by eliminating the relation to an external truth. By generating parataphysical distortions from within, the ‘crack’ draws ARTB towards itself and thereby effaces any distinction that might have existed in their distinctive ‘lineaments’ (pace Jarry 1996: 22). The ‘crack’ and ARTB become, in effect, two reflections of a singular parataphysical modulation where the outside (external truth) of the ‘crack’ is ARTB. And vice versa. As a deterritorialized monadic aberration, the ‘crack’ and ARTB confirm the counterfactual truth of a misunderstanding that misunderstands itself.

Conclusion

To the tenant farmers in Duthchas Hills, ARTB currently constitutes the only viable path towards establishing a vibrant agricultural community. In order for the farmers to be able to make the necessary and long-term investments in land, they want to be relieved of the feudal-like obligations to estate owners, and a legal right to buy their farms will hopefully do just that. Notwithstanding, as I have outlined above, during the recurring moaning sessions, tenant farmers voice their scepticism regarding ARTB. Staged as speculative and often counterfactual scenarios, alternatives to ARTB were formulated in a setting, which was considered as lying beyond the terrain of everyday agricultural realities. As parataphysical misreadings, these scenarios served to test the flexibility of the agricultural revolution that was praised by the large majority of tenant farmers in Duthchas Hills.

Significantly, while the parataphysical distortions of the ‘crack’ might indeed (and should!) be considered as a ‘phenomenon (that) undergoes continuous transformations and through that process adds to its own mutations’ (Nielsen and Pedersen 2012: 10), its key characteristic is the ways in which mutations ‘from within’ annihilate their own cause and effects. As I have fleshed out above, the emerging moral sensibility that is actualized through the ‘crack’ is one that has essentially already conquered its true past by use of the ideological tools of a future that emerges in and through the farmers’ gleeful parataphysical permutations. With tongues in cheek, the tenant farmers in Duthchas Hills carefully sketched out the particular agricultural qualities and skills which they would surely devote to the project of increasing the wealth of the laird if only he was capable of appreciating their investments. Coincidentally, these qualities and skills were also considered as a sine qua non for securing the productive implementation of ARTB.

Having set out from an initial understanding of distortion as ‘unavoidable and often desirable sui generis creation, whose potential utility and significance can only be established retrospectively’ (Nielsen and Pedersen 2012), the ethnographic exploration of the ‘crack’ has suggested a slight analytical detour. As a form of optimal distortion, the ‘crack’ operates by continuous mutations from within in order for the qualities of an ideological

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**Figure 6.1** The difference between a linear-cum-revolutionary (left) and a parataphysical (right) relation between gay moaning and ‘absolute right to buy’ (ARTB). (For simplicity, the ‘crack’ here connotes both the unequal hierarchical relationship between laird and tenant farmer, which ARTB will supposedly disrupt, as well as the recurring moaning sessions.)
future to become fully invested in the (counterfactual) present. By so doing, the distance between future and present is momentarily annulled: the revolutionary changes suggested by ARTB have, in a sense, always been guiding agricultural life in Duthchas Hills. In this sense, distortion is a matter of optimally twisting the realities of the present out of shape in order for a complete obliteration of change to occur.

During the ‘crack’, there is essentially no ideological or temporal difference between present and future.

Finally, in order to analytically capture the dynamics of the relationship between the ‘crack’ and ARTB, I have refrained from outlining immediate lines of causation. Although political pressure on the need for radical transformations of the distribution and possession of agricultural land is increasing in Scotland, the actual implementation of ARTB is still beyond the immediate temporal horizon. Hence, while also completely contradicting the overall objective with this special issue, it seems futile to even suggest any direct causal relationship between the revolutionary force of the ‘crack’ and ARTB. Rather than applying a seemingly inflexible analytical scale based on immediate causation, could it not be that the analysis of ‘pataphysical’ distortion, such as the ‘crack’, might require an analytical framework which is essentially ‘cut’ from the same ethnographic phenomena whose social dynamics it presumably captures? In other words, in order to ‘hold steady’ the scale by which to examine the ‘crack’, the analytical account of optimal distortion must move at the same pace as the ethnographic phenomenon. By examining the ‘crack’ as a form of ‘pataphysical’ distortion, I have thus attempted to allow the analytical account to emerge from within the ethnographic phenomenon. Rather than operating with a relatively inflexible analytical scale of causation, I have suggested that an ideological future might be fully actualized in the present as a series of counterfactual scenarios staged during recurring mourning sessions.

Notes

1. All personal names and place names have been anonymized.

2. According to the most recent agricultural census, there are currently about 6,700 agricultural tenancies in Scotland (The Scottish Government 2012). Roughly a quarter of all agricultural land is rented under a tenancy of a least one year.

3. Coincidentally, the second largest landowner in Scotland is Danish. With the recent purchase of the 20,000 acre Glace Bay Estate, the fashion magnate Anders Holch Povlsen has increased his portfolio and now owns roughly 160,000 acres of Scottish land (Wightman 2013).

4. This corresponds roughly to the national level where four-fifths of agricultural tenancies are based on the 1991 Act (The Scottish Government 2012).

5. As such, the situation in Duthchas Hills is not remarkable. Since the early 1980s, the number of tenancies has fallen steadily. Whereas in 1992, 41% of Scottish agricultural land was rented under full tenancies, in 2012, it had dropped to 24% (The Scottish Government 2012: 5).

6. A croft is a small agricultural unit. Prior to 1976, all crofts were on estates but it has since been common for crofters to acquire titles to their crofts. The crofting legislation was formulated in 1886 as a response to the complaints and demands of the tenant families after having been removed with force from their land during the so-called ‘Highland Clearances’.

7. Although it was Lochhead’s public announcement that put the ARTB back on the political agenda, in October 2012 it was, in fact, proposed by the Land Reform Review Group’s Call for Evidence to consider whether the position of tenant farmers should be enhanced ‘by giving them a right (similar to the right enjoyed by crofting tenants since 1976) to buy their farms’ (Land Reform Review Group 2012).

8. One of the first times ‘crack’ is mentioned in Scottish literature is in the song ‘The Wark o’ The Weavers’ written by David Shaw who died in 1856. In the first verse, it says ‘We’re a’ met thegither here late and tae crack. Wi’ our glasses in our hands an’ our work upon our back’ [We’re all met together here to sit and to crack. With our glasses in our hands and our work upon our back].

9. Consider also Fergus MacGregor’s suggestion that in order for a productive ‘take-over’ of power to occur, tenant farmers ought to commence acting as lairds right away. To be sure, Fergus was fully aware that this idea involved that he and not the laird (who was, in fact, formally required to do so) put up the march fences.

10. Indeed, anything else would probably be undesirable for a special issue on the analytical purchase of optimal distortion.

11. Here I am thinking of the kind of temporal scale that might be oriented by questions, such as: ‘to what extent does the ‘crack’ lead to the implementation of ARTB?’. The problem of the ‘crack’ is that it is ‘too narrow’ (ibid.): there are ‘no clear prospects of the ‘crack’ leading to the implementation of ARTB’ (ibid.).

References


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Chains of distortion
Awkward relations and productive resistance in a Danish consulting company
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Introduction
I was a BA student in anthropology when I first encountered the term ‘user driven innovation’ (UDI). Browsing through the selection of courses at my department, and adverts for internships and student jobs in and around Copenhagen, I stumbled upon the combination of the two words innovation and anthropology more than once. While being too late for signing up for the course ‘the anthropology of innovation’, I was lucky to obtain an internship in a newly started consultancy in Copenhagen that was looking for anthropologists to join their interdisciplinary team to help in building up the field of ‘applied business anthropology’ in Denmark. This was in 2006.

Seven years later I returned to the consultancy to do research for my PhD project. An odd feeling of equal frustration and fascination with the consultants’ methods had stayed with me since my first assignments as an intern. The consultants, who are mainly non-anthropologists, build and brand their business around notions of ‘ethnography’, ‘anthropology’ and ‘phenomenology’. Furthermore, I also often came across concepts such as ‘mental models’ and ‘need hierarchies’ that do not sound particularly anthropological to me, yet were used and described as belonging to anthropology. During 8 months of fieldwork in the consultancy in 2013 I also heard conventional anthropological phrases and descriptions of the ethnographic method, such as how ethnographers tend to ‘dwell with the unfamiliar’ and how the analytical process of an anthropologist is often one where an initial hypothesis is turned on its head. Finding these versions of ‘anthropology’ proposed as slogan-like statements in blogs and chapters, and as promotion videos through crisp speaks and soft music on the background of beautiful images of people in foreign countries, it took me a while to get beyond an intense feeling of awkwardness.

This awkwardness, which started as a methodological curiosity before and during fieldwork (how does an anthropologist study people practicing anthropology?), turned into an important analytical tool for investigating the consultants’ work and their work challenges, particularly vis-à-vis their clients. By unravelling a range of awkward situations in my fieldwork