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Puritans, Visionaries and Survivors¹

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Abstract

All readings take place in the here-and-now, even of texts written back there and then. Nowhere in management and organization theory has this been truer of anyone than Max Weber. Unread in English during his lifetime, it was nearly thirty years after his death before his ideas had much impact. When they did, they were read in a context and tradition years away from those in which they were conceived. And, ever since, they have been subject to systematic reinterpretation on the one hand, and neglect on the other. The paper addresses how one might use Weber today, in terms of his sensitivity to current issues, such as sustainability, as well as the still largely unacknowledged foundation that Weber constructed for contemporary cultural studies. The paper will bring these two themes together, using analysis of contemporary equivalents to the popular culture that formed the basis for some of Weber's own investigations.

Key words: Weber, culture, bureaucracy, rationality, puritans, visions, survivors, sustainability, McDonalds, nothing.

Introduction

To encounter Weber as a management or organizations student today is, by and large, to experience a representation that situates him, if at all, within the narrative of formal management theories (Robbins 2003). However, as these were first initiated in the late nineteenth century, in a great wave of mobilization around the notion of engineering, they barely occupied the same conceptual universe as Weber, a founding father of social science. These pioneers of management argued that, engineering, if applied appropriately, would not only legitimate the manager as a new class of highly skilled employee but would also justify the entire structures of control in which they were inserted. It would make these structures authoritative – for what could be a better basis for authority in the new world than the legitimacy of science (Shenhev 2000)?

Engineering rationality replaced older legitimation grounded in the Protestant ethic (Weber (1976) or ideas about the survival of the fittest, flourishing as Social Darwinism (Therborn 1976). Emerging out of the institutional sponsorship of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, Scientific Management was able to position itself as a rational and irrefutable bastion against the privileges that ownership allowed. Installing scientific management, it was claimed, would eradicate arbitrary and socially destructive domination, tame it, and make it authority: it would create a legitimate model of hierarchy and management conceived not just as the expression of a dilettante or capricious will. It was based, its protagonists said, on facts and technical analysis of the organizational situation. It was grounded in functional analysis of necessity rather than the arbitrary exercise of will by an overseer or master. It would fit the person to the job, after the job had first been scientifically analysed. Thus, people were to be slotted into their positions on the basis

of their aptitudes and abilities, formed through whatever circumstances. Above all, management would be the harbinger and hallmark of efficiency. It was into this brave new world of formally efficient administration that Weber was inscribed as a part of the classical canon by management writers (Pugh 1971).

Weber was never a conscious part of the classical management canon in any contemporaries' calculations, least of all his own. While he wrestled with questions of rationality and came up with an analysis that far exceeded the insights of early twentieth century management scholars, as he had published them only in German, few English writers knew of his work. He was not much read by Anglophone management theorists until after the Second World War, when his works were widely translated into English (Weber (1930; 1946; 1947; 1949; 1954; 1962; 1965; 1970; 1973; 1976; 1978). Weber (1978) was familiar with the work of Taylor and other scientific management writers but they were not familiar with him. Weber did not use the term “efficiency”, preferring instead to write about “technical rationality”. Today, efficiency is not only taken for granted as a pre-eminent value but is also bundled up with other cultural values such as the pursuit of “innovation” or “profit”. Such a focus is limited: as has been argued elsewhere (Clegg 1995a), Weber was rather less a classical management theorist and rather more a student of culture, practicing what today we would call “cultural studies”. He was a student of “contemporary culture”, concentrating on subjectivity, in the relation of culture to individual lives, which did not, of course, dissuade him from analysis of its historical genealogy, and he was an “engaged scholar” (During 1993:1-2); for Weber, certain scholarly, liberal and national values were pre-eminent (See Weber’s [1946] two essays on ‘vocation’).

Considered through the focus on organization analysis as an aspect of cultural studies, what are we to make of Weber today?

I will suggest that Weber's conception of rationality still needs to be read in terms of the central liberal values that framed his ideas on rational legal bureaucracy. Second, I will discuss those sources of substantive irrationality that Weber identified within the conditions within which formal rationality existed. Third, the value-basis of conceptions of rationality needs to be discussed with reference not only to Weber's times but also ours, when, at the apex of organizations, the strategic search is for visions with which to re-enchant the mundane world. For many organizations, however, such visions can only ever ring hollow: a mundane lack of visionary purpose is only too evident in ruthlessly exploitative organizations (March 2002). In such a McDonaldized world, suggest contemporary Weberians (Ritzer 2004a), there is little to do but go shopping – in pursuit of nothing. Just as Weber found the clue to his contemporary culture in the popular culture texts of his day, such those of Benjamin Franklin, the present paper will suggest that there are contemporary popular cultural texts at work today whose elective affinities suit the new times. These are situated within the genre of those 'Reality' TV programs which seek to re-enchant identity through strategies for the presentation and management of self. The upshot of this search for meaning, however, is an increasing escalation of a culturally McDonaldized world, in which there is little to do but go shopping, a world increasingly amounting to nothing, suggest contemporary Weberians (2004a).

How do cultural values become legitimated?

There is a wonderful exchange, from the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, about the nature of legitimacy, when King Arthur is asked:

WOMAN:

Well, how did you become King, then?

ARTHUR:

The Lady of the Lake ...

[Angels sing]

... her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur.

[Singing stops]

That is why I am your king!

DENNIS:

Listen. Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

ARTHUR:

Be quiet!

DENNIS:

Well, but you can't expect to wield supreme executive power just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!

ARTHUR:

Shut up!

DENNIS:

I mean, if I went 'round saying I was an emperor just because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me, they'd put me away!

(Written by Graham Chapman and John Cleese, from the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones in 1975)

In different epochs, distinct, more or less abstract, cultural values can be used to construct, model, and replicate particular rationalities. That is the point of the Monty Python sketch: the will of the people, a liberal conception, would be meaningless in the society represented in the film. Peasants shovelling shit in the Dark Ages could know nothing of such things, let alone their extension in socialist discourse to the mandate of the masses – the rationalities had yet to emerge historically. Hence, for those aware of history, as well as liberal and socialist discourse, the joke is one to be savoured with even greater appreciation. (The Python team clearly learnt something about politics while at Oxford University.)

The mandate of the people or Divine Providence both make reference to something outside the nature of executive authority to warrant legitimacy whereas bureaucracy, as executive authority, does not — it refers only to its own practice, according to rule; thus, at the core of Weber's (1978) conception of organization as a professional bureaucracy was the notion that members of such an organization would adhere to the vocation as well as the rules of that organization. Whereas earlier forms of rule, such

as those based on primogeniture or Divine Providence, could refer to something outside of itself as the basis of its rationality, rational bureaucracy was wholly reflexive: it referred to nothing other than its purpose and process as the source of its legitimacy; hence, it is by its claims to rationality that it will be judged. Rational-legal authority signifies that deference and obedience are owed not to the person or the title they hold but to the role they fill. It is not the officer but the office that is owed homage because it is a part of a rational and recognized disposition of relationships in a structure of offices. People obey orders rationally because they believe that the person giving the order is acting in accordance with a code of legal rules and regulations (Albrow 1970: 43). Moreover, they regard it as their vocation to do so for it is through such a form of life that their work finds meaning.

Identity neutrality and rationality

One of the ways in which bureaucracy generates its own legitimacy is through the limits it places on arbitrary power and privilege and the right of appeal that it provides, where one can construct a case that the limits of arbitrary power have been voided according to the law that is supposed and presumed to govern. Ideally, none are above the law, none can escape rules, and every office will be accountable. In short, bureaucracy should and would be a bulwark of civil liberty. Thus, a cornerstone of liberal bureaucracy for Weber was that it would operate “without regard for persons”. It wouldn't matter if you were black or white, Muslim or Jew, gay or straight, rich or poor. It shouldn't matter who or what you are. You would be entitled to be judged not on the prejudices of the community or the person applying a rule but strictly according to the rules, without regard for the specificities of whatever might be your identity. Counterfactual cases, such as applied in South Africa when the

Apartheid regime's notorious "Pass Laws" existed in the era prior to President Mandela assuming the Presidency of the new Republic, make the liberal case evident. The law differentiated its treatment of people in terms of their identity as administratively defined categories of "White", "Black" and "Coloured". While this may have been a rational bureaucracy it could never be a liberal one any more than could the White Australia Policy or the denial of civil rights to black people in the United States, from the same era.

Even in what might appear to be a liberal bureaucracy, being subject to abstract, impersonal rules might be menacing rather than comforting. It was not only novelists such as Kafka (1956) who voiced reservations about bureaucracy. Weber, too, had his doubts about this new instrument. Because of its 'purely technical superiority' bureaucracy seemed almost irresistible, Weber (1976) thought, and this irresistibility alarmed him. Rational calculation had become a monstrous discipline. Everything seemingly had to be put through a calculus, irrespective of other values or pleasures. It was a necessary and unavoidable feature of organizing in the modern world. While Weber admired the achievements of bureaucracy greatly he was also pessimistic about their long-term impact. On the one hand bureaucracies would free people from arbitrary rule by powerful patrimonial leaders: those who personally owned the instruments and offices of rule. They would do this because they were based on rational legality – the rule of law contained in the files that defined practice in the bureau. On the other hand, they would create an "iron cage of bondage" (or more literally as translated from the original German, a house of hardened steel). The frame was fashioned from the 'care for external goods' (Weber 1976: 181), which Weber thought, meant, if these goods were to come into one's grasp in a market economy,

mortgaging one's life to a hierarchy of offices that interlocked and intermeshed, through whose intricacies one might seek to move, with the best hope for one's future being that one would shift from being a small cog in the machine to one that was slightly bigger, in a slow but steady progression. However, the iron cage could rust.

Rust never sleeps²

The second chapter of Max Weber's (1978) *Economy and Society* deals with the relationship between formal and substantive rationality (see the excellent account of the different conceptions of rationality in Kalberg [1980]). For Weber, economic action based on the best technically possible practice of quantitative calculation or accounting would be the most formally rational: it would display the form of rationality. By contrast, substantive rationality would denote a concept of goal-oriented action where whatever the goals might be would vary according to the context within which they work: hence, they would be indivisible from the real substance of specific settings.

Economic action may be substantively rational to the extent that it is motivated and assessed according to an ultimate goal, even while it is technically irrational. Family businesses often fit this case. Family firms know what it would be technically rational to do, such as raising capital by diluting family equity, but the preservation of the family holdings, even if it means less efficiency, growth and profits, is held in higher esteem. Such a substantive orientation, Weber notes from the start, may lead the actor to see formal, quantitative calculation as less important, or even inimical to the

² Title owed to Neil Young (1979)

achievement of ultimate ends. Put simply, people will not necessarily be instrumentally rational managers, applying means-end rationality to the calculation of an economic bottom line, unless either they are in structured situations in which they have no choice other than to achieve this end, or they really want to achieve this end. Where their preferences are for other ends, such as the maintenance of tradition, or the family business under family control, or the design and creation of some thing that they love dearly, even when it is economically irrational in instrumental terms to do so, they orient themselves to other forms of rationality, such as affective or traditional conceptions of rationality. Think of a successful entrepreneur who invests a fortune in a football club with which they have a sentimental affinity, even when the team remains a motley collection of expensive losers.

The more the world approximates to a formally rationalized ideal of capitalist accounting in which ultimate ends hardly figure, the more chance that rationality will be wholly instrumental, says Weber (1978: 165). In such a situation a specific cultural value – efficiency, defined in terms of the categories of a particular form of knowledge – is raised to the status of an “ultimate value” culturally prized as an end in itself. The organizations that exist under these conditions do so because, in all probability, 'certain persons will act in such a way as to carry out the order governing the organization' (Weber 1978: 49). In other words organization is premised on an expectation of trust in the obedience of others. Trust and obedience function as resources in creating effectively functioning organization (as some central contributions by Fox 1974; Granovetter 2002; Gambetta 1988; Kramer 2003, and Sievers 2003 argue).

Weber (1978: 108) isolates three circumstances where “irrationality” can arise from the instrumental rationality of capital accounting as the perfect expression of means-end relations. First, where there are autonomous and antagonistic enterprises, producing only according to the criterion of arbitrarily distributed demand. Second, where capital accounting occurs in circumstances that presuppose absolute property rights over capital goods and where management has a purely commercial orientation, then speculative behaviour will be favoured. Such capital accounting is technically most optimal under ideal economic-liberal conditions, where there are unfettered proprietorial prerogatives and absolute market freedom. The conditions supporting this include free labour markets; complete freedom of contract; rational technology; a formally rational administration and legal system, and a complete divorce between enterprise and household organization. Rationality according to the capital accounting formula produces a free market and the most efficient location of capital among competing activities, but it will hardly be conducive, Weber thinks, to the cultivation of rational employees. Rational employees would show no necessary commitment to any particular allocation of capital that presently employed them but would treat the labour market just as rationally as an accountant in search of the best return. Just as a rational capitalist might seek to corner the market in a specific commodity so might a rational employee through the mechanism of collective organization and bargaining.

The third circumstance in which Weber sees formal rationality being compromised is where economic organization becomes prey to competing and contradictory calculations. Such a situation can occur when share-ownership becomes the subject of a takeover battle between competing interests. Where control is concentrated in proprietorial interests, credit and financial institutions, predators can acquire the

issued share capital for speculative purposes. Either way, the outside interests pursue their own business interest, "Often foreign to those of the organization as such" and "not primarily oriented to the long-term profitability of the enterprise" (Weber 1978: 139; also see the discussion in Clegg, Boreham and Dow 1986: 61-62). The implications become acute when such interests "consider their control over the plant and capital goods of the enterprise ... not as a permanent investment, but as a means of making a purely short-run speculative profit" (Weber 1978: 140). Weber recognized that rationality would not always be purely instrumental: people rationalized their own versions of rationality based upon contextual pressures and interests. Sometimes these would reward short-term rather than long-term rationality.

Values-based rationality and organizations

Weber foresaw that ultimate values would be in inexorable decline as modernity, defined in terms of an increasing rationalization of the world through new institutions and a concomitant decline in beliefs in enchantment, magic and fatalism, developed. In large part this would be because the "calculability" contained in the disciplinary rationality that the Puritans embraced – such as double-entry bookkeeping – would progressively replace values with technique. As techniques increasingly achieved what previously only great value commitments could ensure, then the necessity for these values would diminish. The future would be one in which we strive to work ceaselessly in jobs and organizations that neither served ultimate values nor adequately filled the space left by the values they purported to replace. The outcome of this process of rationalization, Weber suggests, is the production of a new type of person: the specialist or technical expert. Such experts master reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts. Statistics, for example, began in the

nineteenth century as a form of expert codified knowledge of everyday life and death, which could inform public policy. The statistician became a paradigm of the new kind of expert, dealing with everyday things but in a way that was far removed from everyday understandings. Weber sometimes referred to the results of this process as disenchantment, meaning the process whereby all forms of magical, mystical, traditional explanation is stripped away from the world. The world stripped bare by rational analysis is always open and amenable to the calculations of technical reason. It holds no mystery. New disciplines colonize it (Clegg 1995b). Weber argued that identities would be increasingly subject to specialization and routinization processes in bureaucracies.

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, considerably more space for identity creation and less space for specialized and routinized formation seems to be in order, and the arena for identity construction has shifted perceptibly from relations of production to those of consumption. That change should occur is not surprising: rationalities are historically structured differently in varying periods, as different kinds of knowledge dominate. (We saw this with the earlier Python example.) As the rules of the game shift historically, then different issues become critical for organization strategy. As these issues shift, different forms of occupational knowledge give personnel an advantage in terms of the shifting rules of the game. Rationality concerns not just technical efficiency because it is always culturally and politically framed. As Dyck (1997) demonstrates, transformational changes are more likely to be implemented if supported primarily by value-based rationality. But the values based rationality of yesterday does not necessarily cut the mustard today.

Re-enchanting values based rationality

Today, the notion of a calling no longer prowls around in our lives, like a ghost in the night. Stripped bare of belief, I will propose as a hypothesis that the cultural meanings attached to work have, once again, become what Spencer (1904) always thought they were, for those who play the game, the survival of the fittest. In terms of contemporary popular culture everyday conceptions of rationality are best seen as represented in TV shows, (the equivalent, in circulatory and social impact terms, of the nineteenth century homilies of Franklin or Smiles). One index is the hugely successful comedy series, *The Office*. Here "fun" becomes the basis for organizationally situated actions and vocabularies of motive (Mills 2002) with which some, at least, of the characters, form publicly available rationalities through which they seek to justify their organizational action. The characters act out their aggressions and hostilities, as well as their attractions, to each other, through the contestation of this rationality and its constant undercutting through as artful a use of silence such as John Cage (1961) or Thelonius Monk (1955), as well as of reflective glances, that another musician, Alfred Schutz (1976) might have appreciated. Silence and glances punctuate and puncture pretensions that have to be tolerated. Structures of authority and resistance to them are never far from the surface, even of fun. Indeed, the fun renders authority less amenable to discussion and, as such, works to reinforce social hierarchy in organizations. Enjoying business is a common ideology of highly competitive teams, often expressed in terms of sporting team metaphors.

The expertise of sport produces hyper-competitive and hyper-individualistic identities, even in a team context. It produces brands, such as Beckham. Today, in an age of mass media, a contemporary Weberian seeking to gauge the spirit of the age would

not confine attention to the homilies of a Samuel Smiles or a Benjamin Franklin: not only would they watch *The Office* and *The Footy Show*, they would also read the tabloid newspapers and watch the tabloid television to tap into the *geist*. However, it is not only on the sports field that one can be a competitor. In everyday life, as represented in popular culture anyone, in principle, can also be a competitor.

Competitive edge is judged democratically by the use of digital technology, especially mobile and virtual technologies, as competitors are ritualistically voted out of the game. The winner takes all; everyone has the democratic potential to be a winner, although it helps to be the token gays, blondes, and metrosexuals, because you fit the identity scripts that the focus groups tell the producers are required for a seriously stereotyped competition. Such identity is a matter of demographics rather than of unique individuality (as per Foucault's [1997] notion of bio-politics). The point of winning is to provide an entertaining spectacle that provides the informed viewer with voyeuristic pleasure (*Big Brother, Survivor, The Apprentice*). The democratic values of the genre are easily situated within a frame of elitist expertise, where humiliation is the measure of the currency in which most experts deal as they flout their knowledge in order to construct a superior subjectivity in otherness to the everyday person. In some of the shows, such as *Other People's Houses, Selling Houses, What Not to Wear, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the everyday person is seen as someone whose identity is questionable: they are not effective managers of the presentation of their selves and lives to the world. (We are dealing with something existentially real here rather than a failure to be familiar with Goffman [1959]) They cannot decorate their houses properly, so it is hardly surprising if they cannot sell them; they do not know what aspects of identity to accentuate and what to mute, and, if they are women, they have not developed a canonical knowledge of what is absolutely fabulous and what is

not, and if they are straight men they cannot differentiate brown from taupe, do not know how to groom, and so are deemed clearly clueless, useless, and hopeless. Only expertise can save them — as it can save you — to go out and compete at life and work more successfully. Once there in work, as in life, it's a *Survivor* syndrome: survive this assessment, that promotion, make the right presentation and you may thrive to survive — but you're only ever as good as your last presentation — of self, that is. Not quite what Spencer had in mind, perhaps, but a long way from any notion of vocation (other than that of shopping, perhaps: of which more subsequently).

Such theatre sees the presentation of self in everyday life as the key responsibility of the self in question (Goffman 1959). Now if this were only a matter of entertainment then it would hardly have organizational implications. But it is far more pervasive. Contemporary organizational subjects, as others manage them, must learn to see themselves as effective managers of their self as they are subject to 360-degree feedback, to coaching, and related techniques of self-management and self-surveillance. Existentially free they cling to whatever team, community, or clan they can aspire to, join, or become. With the churches largely empty, and communities fragmented, in the West organizations emerge as a viable (if not unreliable) source of community.. From this point of view, we are all accountable for our destiny – not before God but the objective mechanisms of the organizations that hold our fate in their contractual hands and reflexively constitute their rules of practice in doing so, just as we reflexively constitute our designer selves to negotiate a fit between imagined community and organizational images: it is, once again, time for Goffman (1959).

The dialectics of organization enchantment

Where Weber saw an increasing rationalization of the world with the separation of bureaucratic means from whatever political ends drove their purpose, modern writers instead point to an increasing enchantment. Ardent bureaucratic reformers, such as Peters (1992), Osborne and Gaebler (1992) and Kanter (1990), urge leaders of bureaucracies to develop new relations of meaning and purpose, framed by the 'vision' conceived by their chief executive(s), or their consultants. Chief executives and consultants have come to be defined as the charismatic visionaries of a secular age. Visionaries were not always so divorced from religious connotations. We should, perhaps, not forget the religious, pre-modern derivation of vision and visionaries: in feudal times – against which the economic conditions of a rational legal conception emerged – when one was as likely to be condemned as lauded for having visions (Roper, 1994). Visions were generally dramatic and unsettling challenges to the keepers of knowledge – the priesthood. While they might excite the populace they were as likely to enflame them and hence were best avoided in favor of the reiteration of organizational orthodoxy. Visions are no longer enchanted religious convictions: or, rather, they retain their enchantment only in as much they have made themselves in the image of people for whom the market is their icon (Schreurs, 2000).

Modern managerial capitalism has solved the unsettling effects of visions by making them the preserve of the powerful rather than the powerless: of CEOs rather than peasant girls, such as Joan of Arc. The vision becomes a tool of prescribed action rather than emancipatory change. The less bureaucratically powerful are urged to attend to futures imagined for them by the more powerful – rather than the vision being an articulation of an aesthetic made pure by its supposed distance from power,

as enlightened knowledge. Indeed, as one might expect, in a rationalized age, visions can no longer be left to authentic individual insight but are designed, created and crafted by vision consultants able to make a business statement capable of turning core purposes and values to visionary goals, in what clients no doubt accept as a reasonable facsimile of a thing of extraordinary beauty, authenticity and uniqueness.

In the public sector the effect of visionaries upon employees' work are reasonably well known. Since the set of policy initiatives that analysts loosely termed "Thatcherism" (Gamble, 1988) emerged in the early 1980s, the preferred route for changing the public sector entailed replacing the dedicated career bureaucrat at its apex with political appointees who would ensure that technical virtuosity did not undermine their attachment to political vision. Such appointments appear to require the adoption of a *new* subjectivity by public servants: they are the key mechanism whereby classical liberal bureaucracy transforms into contemporary market efficient bureaucracy (see for example, Newton, 1996; Cálas and Smircich, 1999; Mol, 1999; Callon, 1998; 1999) even as old ways of doing things stick and settle down, deeply sedimented, in both consciousness and organization, irretrievably there, prowling about like a ghost, as Weber (1976) might have said.

In general, albeit that they are taken as the source of entrepreneurial enchantment, March (2002) is less sanguine about private sector visionaries setting a radical change agenda than are the advocates of the new public sector management. March stresses that adaptiveness involves both the exploitation of what is known as well as the exploration of what is not yet known and might come to be so. Exploitation is aided by strongly legitimated and uncontested organization cultures where people know and

perform in highly institutionalised appropriate ways. By contrast, exploration thrives on accident, randomness, chance, and risk-taking. It requires more relaxed attitudes to controls and institutional norms. Risky behaviour is more likely to occur when organizations are failing to meet targets than when they are achieving them, when they are failing rather than succeeding. However, risks are best taken when there are sufficient slack or surplus resources that the organization can afford to risk different ways of doing things. In many respects, however, it is least likely that risks will be taken at this time because the grooves of success are already directing the organization.

March suggests that those organizations that become specialist at short-run efficiency in exploitation will fail in the long run, because of their inability to explore. Where a rigid organization fails to explore sufficiently, another will replace it by successfully mutating through exploiting what the previous one failed to explore. He foresees a future of short-term organizations that are effectively disposable. These organizations will efficiently exploit what they know how to do until some other organizations emerge to do this better. Then they will die. Adaptability will occur at the population rather than necessarily at the specific organizational level. Overall, efficiency will be served while specific organizations may not survive. Not every organization can be a survivor. For March's scenario to be realised, however, there has to be a pool of organizations that are discontinuously exploring learning through active imagining. Of course, without the pioneering of new forms and structures there would be no new and more efficient mutations of organization forms to succeed those that already exist. Now, if March is right, what this probably means is a double-edged movement: what is foreseen is a type of *Blade Runner* scenario with highly innovative science-based

knowledge organizations situated in gleaming towers and pristine parks for the highly paid, skilled and educated on the one hand, while for the rest there are exploitive and relatively impoverished street level organizations, providing a poor working environment. No wonder that the *Survivor* syndrome should be so widespread.

Weber, of course, was famously disenchanted with those creations he surveyed, a tendency that persists in contemporary Weberian work. The American sociologist George Ritzer (2004c) coined the term “McDonaldization”. It refers to the application of technical rationality to all areas of human life. It is, as Ritzer acknowledges, a contemporary variant on the Weberian theme of the rationalization of the world. The model of the McDonalds fast food restaurant is a metaphor for a highly rationalized and “cheap as chips” approach to business processes “by which the principles of the fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.” (Ritzer, 2004c: 1) However, McDonaldization does not stop at the fast food store – it spreads to all areas of everyday life, to recreation, informal and interpersonal relationships and even love and intimacy – think of “speed dating”.

McDonaldization may be seen as a soulless prefiguring of the kind of Hell – the endless repetition of being in the frying pan of life as if one were already in the fire of purgatory – that is usually served from the pulpit (with apologies to James Joyce’s [1977] *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*). However, as it mostly employs young people, part-time, as students, many put up with it because they know that it is not a life sentence. Not everyone working in a McDonaldized organization is so fortunate. For some people the segmentation of the labour market condemns them to a lifetime

of junk jobs, punctuated by the odd 'escape attempt' (Cohen and Taylor 1976) into 'cathedrals of consumption' (Ritzer 2004b), to enjoy the spectacles mounted there. But even enchantment can be routinized and made mundane, can be made into nothing rather than something.

If most working lives are soulless, so are the lives of consumption they sustain: increasingly we consume nothing – at least according to Ritzer's (2004a) latest work. Nothing refers to "*a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive or substantive content*" (2004a: 3; italics in original). Nothing should be contrasted with something. Something is a "*social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content; a form is to a large degree substantively unique*" (Ritzer 2004a: 7; italics in original). As he is at pains to express, his definition is not judgemental but merely descriptive. (His initial exemplar of nothing is the credit card.)

Phenomena that fall towards the nothing end of the continua are largely devoid of individuality and specificity, while those that fall towards the something end are highly specific in terms of place, thinghood, persons, and service; by contrast, phenomena that tend towards nothing are offered anywhere, for anything (non-things), by anyone (non-persons), and in such a way that they largely displace service elements on to the customer (non-services). Ritzer's argument is that what is increasingly being marketed and consumed, which is fuelling globalization, is the proliferation of generic and interchangeable goods and services that lack any

specificity and embeddedness in place, are relatively time-less (lacking in temporal specificity), dehumanized and disenchanting.

With Ritzer, Weber's world-weary worker steps out of the office to dwell in an existential house of consumption, where most of what is consumed is nothingness, in an endless round of shopping, (which is invariably reported as the number one leisure activity in the UK). Ritzer paints this bleak terrain as essentially modern but there are pre-modern precursors, as Weber was well aware. In many ways, the prototype of such nothing would be traditional Catholicism, where the catechism was in Latin, a language of which, on the whole, the peasants and proletarians who partook of it, knew nothing. Run from Rome, tightly controlled by Papal edicts, and substantively meaningless in its particulars, other than as a form of ritual consumption, Catholicism was the perfect prefiguring of the *forms* of nothing that Ritzer (2004a) sees as so pervasive today, albeit that the *content* of Catholicism was full of enchanted things: angels, devils, hell, seraphims, cherubim's, and so on. The thesis about the rationalization of the world and its disenchantment began with the Protestant ethic, which personalized the form of worship as it rationalized the content. Today, the vast majority enjoy re-enchanted forms of secular presentations of self at work and in play that the world was supposed to be rid of as a result of Protestantism (Trinca and Fox 2004), even while, in some countries, evangelical and fundamental forms increasingly seek to mobilize public spaces. By this analysis, shopping rivals religion as the central life interest – or great opiate of the people. *I work to shop, therefore I am what I can become*, positions a new duality at the core of contemporary existence, rubbing up against more fundamentalist creeds.

In the course of one hundred years Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy and its core construct of rationality has been colonized, maligned, and misrepresented by some of the best-known names in organization theory. While bureaucracy represented the best that the organizational world had to offer at the time that he wrote, it no longer finds much resonance as an inspiration in contemporary organization theory. For one thing, the emphasis has switched from a world of disciplined producers to one of disciplined consumers, as Ritzer charts. For another, the new conceptions of managerial work, even in the public sector, are more centred on the creativity of vision than the discipline of rules. While senior bureaucrats *were* interchangeable identities, at their best, today senior organizational managers strive *to be* a unique identity: s/he is an expert in a world shaped by competition rather more than conformance, who dispenses normative judgements about identity rather more than treatment according to the rules, irrespective of the person. Surviving the various projects of a self-managed and individual career takes precedence over serving the organization.

In research terms, the questions that Weber asked were of his time, not ours, and there is little point in labouring over them again today. Things have changed. Dramatically. There is no point in nostalgia for a world irredeemably lost. By that metric the times of our lives are bleak for contemporary theorists of rationality, even as some of its defenders, such as du Gay (2000), fight a rearguard action against the demise of liberalism. In post-liberal worlds, according to Ritzer (1994) we encounter meaningless work; March (2002) similarly regards most of us as trapped in exploitative organizations. Ritzer sees our existence in the McDonaldized world of work mirrored in consuming passions that nothing can sate, in markets in which all must compete (Ritzer 2004a). On this latter account, nothingness pervades the far

horizon of most of our times and only the *haute bourgeois* – who can afford taste – seem able to escape it (Bourdieu 1984) – a position which, as critics such as Lewis (1975: 77-78) allege, would remain faithful to Weber in its values.

What is perhaps most worrying about a world of nothing, in which things are voraciously sought as props for identity, is that nothingness becomes an escalator for consumption. Identity positions one in terms of the social economy of positional goods (Hirsch 1976) and their distribution, rather than the material economy of things. In the material economy Adam Smith's competitive forces may indeed produce more for everyone. With increased demand, wider markets, greater international divisions of labour and economies of scale the unit cost of goods will be lowered. But the positional economy is characterised by goods that Hirsch describes as "social" – whose sociability becomes the very source of Ritzer's nothingness. Our enjoyment of a thing is affected by whether or not other people are consuming it as well. The key aspect of positional goods is that if everyone who wants them, have them, they no longer enjoy the same value. Luxury goods such as Armani suits, Cartier watches, or Manolo Blahnik shoes obviously fall into this category, but perhaps more interesting are commodities that more obviously meet the criteria of nothing as Ritzer defines it. Perhaps the best example would be a mobile phone, if only because the success of the 'democratically' voted 'Reality' shows, such as *Idol* or *Survivor*, depends on mass participation by consumers using the SMS function of their phone. Their unique vote, (or votes if they follow the adage of 'vote early, vote often,)', not only states a preference but makes a profit. The finale of the 2004 *Australian Idol* show earned one of its sponsors, Telstra, the telecom carrier, \$25m.³

³ In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, page 1, November 22 2004.

Mobile phones are a perfect example of an unsustainable and positional nothing. A mobile phone that is five years old will do much the same basic things as a current model but the additional features of the current model are what style-conscious consumers crave; the video-phone, camera, and polyphonic tunes. It is the additional features, heavily promoted, that sells and diminishes the appeal of earlier fully functioning models. It is not so much a case of planned obsolescence, as Vance Packard (1962) observed in the 1950s, as stylistic, aesthetic and material discontinuity: the dematerialization of nothing. But, when dematerialized, the batteries that power this type of nothing end up in a landfill.

Contemporary affluence in the material economy now means that more people can compete in the positional economy. The cycle of status ascription has sped up enormously; today, people who, a generation before would have been peasants or proletarians, can dress in the finest designer clothes that money can buy but, of course, as soon as such items become widely distributed – or copied – they no are no longer something so much as being on a rapid descent to becoming nothing. The globalization of nothing – especially of global media positioning what's hot and what's not, which, of necessity, is driven by commercial dictates that speed up the cycle of fashionability – ensures that more and more means less and less. It also means that more and more is consumed as the life cycle of things diminishes due to the requirements of fashion rather than the functionality of use. We consume more material goods and use more material resources simply to preserve our relative position on an escalator of consumption that only knows how to speed up. Hirsch argued that the rise of positional goods would limit growth, since by definition they

had to be scarce. Yet people have proved ingenious at creating ever more sources of exclusivity. That is how the simultaneous movement of nothing being globalized and something being distinguished occurs. For as long as elites can maintain some things as positional goods, they may mean something. But the time in which they mean this diminishes exponentially; hence nothing always threatens something.

While there is neither need for nostalgia nor existential exhaustion at the nothingness of consumption that stretches before us at every turn, there is every point in recalling Weber as an exemplar, pioneering organization analysis as a facet of a broader cultural studies, not only concerned with issues of sustainability but also as one who provides a compass capable of steering insight into the new cultural meanings that frame our lives, not only the game players who compete to survive but also those who do not play the game. Many increasingly drop out, making more space for themselves and their families, embracing new non-materialist values, such as those of the “green” movement, and trying to apply these in their working lives: the growth of the concern with “sustainability”, for instance (see Dunphy, Benevise, Griffiths and Sutton 2000). The concern with sustainability was already uppermost in Weber's mind over a hundred years ago. For instance, at the end of his study of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976), he noted that, while it would be instrumentally rational to consume resources till the last ton of fossil fuel was exhausted; only a fool bent on environmental folly would undertake such industry. In substantive or real terms this kind of rationality was idiocy. It was, of course, also rife, especially as many of the decisions that contributed to it were made by experts in bureaucracies run on rational principles of efficiency in which ‘externalities’ did not to count because

neither the expertise embedded in the private bureaucracy of the firm nor the public bureaucracy of the state made them do so.

That the solution proffered in contemporary times to problems neglected in the past is a new set of cultural values forming around nature, would not, one thinks, have been a surprise to Weber. While the social project that might carry these values was hardly legitimated in his day, and was, at best, seen as part of an eccentric Arts and Crafts movement, associated with people such as William Morris (1967), it nonetheless found echoes in Weber, who saw the significance of “the last ton of fossilized coal”. Perhaps, when he suggested that escape from the iron cage demanded the advent of new “prophets” and a re-birth of “old ideals”, there was already an intimation of what responsible scholars and intellectuals should have been thinking about these past one hundred years. Hirsch (1976) took these issues seriously but scholars who contribute to organization studies do not discuss his work frequently. (For exceptions, largely from cognate areas rather than the core organization studies field, see: Zukin and DiMaggio 1990; Pierson 2000; Campbell 1998, and Birch 2003).

Conclusion

Wherever the market economy has triumphed we can relate to a form of life spawned by excessive individualism, guided by illusionary visions, mediated by democratic rituals, inculcated in a culture of narcissism, expressed though metaphors of sport, engaged in a struggle for survival. According to the present analysis, it is the life our most pervasive popular culture tells us we live, and Weber's example, pointing us to the intersection of organization and cultural studies, remains as relevant for this turn of the century as it did for the last. The fusion of engagement and contemporary

culture, and the analysis of lifestyle guides as small texts of everyday life, whether those of Benjamin Franklin or Tranny & Susannah, should be a central project today as it was in Weber's times. And just as the analysis of Franklin's small texts told us a great deal about the *geist* of those times, so more contemporary lifestyle texts, from SMS to Reality TV, can inform us about the spirit of the present age, in which, it is suggested, working, surviving and profiting by constructing and organizing an appropriate identity is a "life project", in every sense of those words.

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