

Organization for Liquid-Modern Times? An Introduction

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The interdisciplinary field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS), especially the more sociological parts, has tapped into various roots from social theory. The most obvious and most historical being Max Weber's (1978), *Economy and Society*, especially as an abridgement of it was historically translated and interpreted through Parsons and Henderson (Weber, 1947). In the early days of the MOS field, Weber's writings on bureaucracy proved to be a virtual template for structural contingency theory (Pugh et al., 1968). More recently, social theory is still tapped (Clegg and Pina e Cunha, 2019a), but few of its sources have had the impact that Weber did in those early days. Of all the recent social theorists, it is probably Giddens' corpus that is most highly cited and discussed (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Den Hond et al., 2012) in relation to his 'structuration theory', a theory, in its 'pure' form (Giddens, 1984), not so much addressed to changing substantive empirical realities but to how theory might apprehend any reality.

One theorist who consistently addressed changing empirical realities, both historically (Bauman, 1989) and contemporaneously, was Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Bauman has been addressed on the margins of MOS (Bauman et al., 2015; Burrell, 1997; Clegg, 2006; Clegg and Baumeler, 2010, 2012; Clegg and Pina e Cunha, 2019c; Jermier and Clegg, 1994; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014) but was never really regarded as a mainstream social theorist as far as most scholars in MOS were concerned. Indeed, many scholars in MOS seem little concerned with the relation between a theory of organizations and a theory of society at all. For his part, Bauman did not focus explicitly on organization studies. There is his *Preface* to Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (2014) and his conversations with one of his daughters, architect Irena Bauman, as well as his compatriots, Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera (Bauman et al., 2015). The most significant contribution is undoubtedly *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989), a book dealing with the dreadful power vested in a rational organization apparatus and its devices for delivering death (see also Clegg et al., 2006). It is notable that although this book deals with the organization of one of the defining events of the 20th century, it is barely recognized in the mainstream MOS field.

Bauman, on one occasion at least, did write a paper on organizations that has only been cited four times, each time by the present author (Clegg, 2018; Clegg and Baumeler, 2014; Clegg and Pina e Cunha, 2019b, 2019c). The journal provides an opportunity to publish this work, with the

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agreement of Bauman's family, for the first time. About the circumstances of the paper's composition, for what occasion it was written, I have no knowledge, although a part of it was included in his Bauman (2013) book on *The Art of Life*. At the time of writing, search in the archives of The Bauman Institute (<https://baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk/bauman-archive/>) was 'temporarily suspended' so one was unable to search there for any documentation.

Briefly, the paper begins with some reflections on the verbs 'to manage' and 'to organize', locating them in a discourse of control. In a characteristically Bauman-like move, the past focus on control is immediately contrasted with a contemporary focus on the entrepreneurial experience economy. As Jensen (2014: 18–19) remarks, there were often binary elements in Bauman's thought, as a result, Jensen suggested, of being 'heavily influenced' by Tönnies (2001). The shape of things emerging is ambiguous, suggests Bauman; for some observers, it offers emancipation and freedom; for others, newer, more subtle, tighter forms of control. The former are the managerialists; the latter are not explicitly named but critical scholars such as Barker (1993), Sewell and Barker (2006) and Sewell (1998) have explored well how empowerment can lead to more subtle forms of normative control than that of an overseer. Drawing on Hochschild (1997) and Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), a new spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism is discussed in which the boundaries of work and play, work and home and emotional love and monetized seductive pleasures have all become blurred. Elites, detached, disembedded and dynamic, flourish in the hot house conditions created as the few, while the many endure the worst of what contemporary capitalism has to offer. The gig economy had yet to be invented at the time that the essay was written but is prefigured in it.

Even more presciently, Bauman goes on to discuss Aubert's (2003) thesis about the crucial role-played by states of emergency: the pandemic that started in 2020 offers a perfect example of such a state, in which for many workers, time was put on hold, work became home and the office, as a place of employment, a memory. The pandemic became both a zone of prohibitions as well as possibilities relating to what life would be like in the future perfect that time 'after' the pandemic will usher in. The present is a zone of possibilities in a 'state of emergency' in which changes desired by those in elite positions, those that can change the management and ordering of states of affairs, can be accomplished: rationalizations, new demand and subsidies, redundancies, all are easier to achieve in a state of emergency – even in universities (Zhou, 2021). The thing about the future perfect is that it is always ongoing (Ehrenberg, 1998) and, as the paper argues, best captured through a pointillist conception of time as something neither cyclical nor linear but broken into points lacking dimensionality and depth.

'The past is another country; they do things differently there' (Hartley, 1953: 1). Management's past was a revolution, in which, according to Berle and Means (1932), the managers became the new elite after the demise of the robber barons that emerged from the gilded age of capitalism in the United States. A second managerial revolution, Managerial Revolution Mark Two is underway, Bauman suggests, in which managerial control is increasingly vested to market transactions and subsidiarized to employees who are expected to, and do, give as much of their all as can be expected, performatively, playfully, liquidly, managing without borders between self and work, personal and organizational identity.

The paper is only a fragment; it would never have passed muster from either the desk or, if it got that far, the reviewers of the most prestigious MOS journals; it does not cite major works from that canon (apart from Berle and Means, 1932 – and few students or professors are likely to be familiar with that source in these days when a citation more than about three years old is considered ancient). Yet, there are lessons to be learnt from this text. The freshness of references from outside the mainstream discipline of organizations and its mainstream language of English; the rootedness of the arguments in a broader conception of the increasingly liquid nature of contemporary life and the

sense of reflexivity about the trends of the moment, trends that have intensified with the gig economy with its ‘freedoms’ (Tan et al., 2021) and ‘working from home’ as a result of COVID-19, making the boundaries of life’s living and working ever more liquid (Izak et al., 2023). As Bauman wrote in the manuscript, he was not a student of management, merely seeking to situate ‘organizations in the framework of seminal changes now taking place in the setting of modern life’. His insight in so doing is evident. Management and organization studies is less rich than it might otherwise have been had it connected to a greater extent with the legacy of this remarkable man and scholar, one that I first came to know as a PhD student visiting the Sociology Department at Leeds University from the Management Centre at Bradford University in the 1970s. Had I never made those journeys, my intellectual life would have been much more impoverished. Had management and organization studies made such a journey, it would have been less of an orphan of the sociology from whence so much of it sprang and more enriched.

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