Tilburg University

Fashion and utopia in management thinking

ten Bos, R.

Publication date:
2000

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
ten Bos, R. (2000). *Fashion and utopia in management thinking*. [s.n.].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Fashion and utopia

in management thinking

RENÉ TEN BOS

Fashion and utopia in management thinking

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Katholieke Universiteit Brabant, op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. F.A. van der Duyn Schouten, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie in de aula van de Universiteit op dinsdag 30 mei 2000 om 16.15 uur door René ten Bos, geboren op 9 september 1959 te Hengelo.

Promotores:

Prof. dr. A.A.L.G. Wentink

Prof. dr. J.L.A. Geurts

“The peculiar thing about men of learning is exactly that they are never impressed by what they know: would they be capable of having this feeling, they would not have become men of learning.”

JAN EMMENS (1924-1971), *Een hond van Pavlov*

“La réalité est-elle cette totalité des signes noirs?”

JEAN GENET (1910 – 1986), *Un captif amoureux*

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	xii
1 Introduction: Management fashion as folk philosophy	13
Ambivalence and fear	14
<i>Fearing fashion</i>	
Fashion versus utopia	19
<i>Why is management fashion problematical? Why is utopianism problematical?</i>	
<i>Not fashionable enough.</i>	
(Post)modern characters	22
<i>Emotivism. Aesthete, Therapist, and Manager. Guru and Consultant.</i>	
Concluding remarks	32
2 Strategy's Great Utopian Twist	33
Unrealistic economics	34
<i>The neoclassical perspective. Behavioral theory of the firm. Transaction cost theory.</i>	
<i>BTF and TCT criticized. Property right theory. Criticizing PRT. Agency theory.</i>	
<i>AT criticized.</i>	
The pragmatic turn	43
<i>Binary utopias. Criticizing SWOT. Monopolistic utopias. Structure, content,</i>	
<i>performance. Defending Porter. Criticizing Porter. Navel-gazing utopias. Two</i>	
<i>schools. Kinetic obsessions. The strategic self. GUT.</i>	
The strategic self after GUT	58
<i>Stubbart and Mintzberg. Misrepresenting success. Mintzberg's holism. Ontological</i>	
<i>gestures.</i>	
Concluding remarks	68
3 Longing for leadership	71
The dialectics of leadership	71
Honor and disgrace	74
<i>Corrosive discourses. Spiritual nonsense and media nonsense. Leadership science?</i>	
<i>Founders, brainwashers and clockbuilders. Do leaders actually make a difference?</i>	
Leadership which has always existed	95
Concluding remarks	97
4 Culture and Domestication	100
<i>The Japanese inspiration. Fashion and utopia in the cultural discourse.</i>	
Engineering tyrannical idylls	102
<i>Is culture manageable? Special forms of togetherness. Criticizing the idyllic tyranny.</i>	
The prosaic use of metaphors	108
<i>Why using metaphors? The inevitability of metaphors. Morgan revisited. Culture</i>	
<i>and metaphor.</i>	

Process and domestication	117
<i>A processual view. The eye of the storm. The management of meaning. Stuckness.</i>	
Concluding remarks	125
5 Weltfremdheit and escapism	127
The zestful road to the desert	129
<i>Neo-autohypnotism. The desert principle.</i>	
Hegemonic disorganization	132
<i>Who is learning and who is not? Ignored aspects of learning. The nursery as imitatio mundi. Democracy and roses. Error tolerance and catastrophe-didactic</i>	
Concluding remarks	148
6 Real work, friendship and forgetfulness	152
<i>Pathos, rhetoric, and gospel</i>	
You are what you eat	154
<i>Abandoning structure. Process orientation. Diet. Portuguese man-of-war.</i>	
Debunking BPR	159
More utopian tendencies	165
<i>Real work. Friends. Forgetfulness.</i>	
Concluding remarks	174
7 Escaping fashion?	175
The new rationalists	176
The dream of professionalism	177
<i>Professional identities. The construction of identities. Why should managers be professional? Violence. Disparaging the senses. Does society need management professionals? Professionalism as discursive construct.</i>	
The dream of a management science	186
<i>The normalization of success. Misrepresenting scientific practice.</i>	
Concluding remarks	190
Afterthoughts	192
References	196

I love fashion. Take music, for example. I don't like outmoded classic music or sixties stuff. No, I like to listen to drums and bass, abstract hip hop, and techno. You name it. Mamma heartbeat stuff is just great! I like people with tattoos, piercing, eccentric jewelry or make-up. I love 'streetwear', that is, the kind of clothing you associate with Dr. Martin shoes, flared trousers and skateboarding. I also love other kinds of chic dress. Not long ago I bought an expensive suit and I felt exceptionally well in it. It even deluded me into thinking that I was important. Of course I am not, but I am still amazed that attire could mean so much to me. I like vegetarian Indian food, fine restaurants, and exclusive alcoholic beverages of the single malt variety (preferably from the isle of Islay). In many respects I am a happy middle class consumer of fashion. I don't like sports though. Neither do I like computer games. And some of my friends buy mobile telephones and expensive houses. I really hate that. Others invest in stocks and shares. I don't. It is so calculating. So boring. But then again, I guess I can't like everything about fashion.

During the months I worked on this text, I came to notice that not only some of my friends and colleagues, but also some of the managers and business students with whom I work seem to share a disdain for fashion. At least, that is what they contended in my debates with them. They would not spend their money on it. Fashion, they explained, is all conceit and gaudiness. Merely for spineless people. Or for those longing for a flash in the pan. Boycotting fashion, they argued, is a matter of principle, even a moral duty as one explained to me. Some of the people I talked to were academics and went even further by pointing out to me that I was either a mindless victim of the great capitalist conspiracy towards the people or a hard-boiled cynical person, that is to say, a person who knows the wrongs in the world but refuses to do something about it.

Some of them advised me to read Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*, a book which would surely cure me of my fascination with fashion. Much of what Simmel had to say 100 years ago has had a decisive impact on the way intellectuals have viewed and still view fashion. Simmel argued that fashion or, as he preferred to call it, style threatens to undermine the quality of life because it urges people to be both different and the same or to be both a unique and a passive member of the herd. Fashion is so full of contradictions that it is an alienating and dangerous force which isolates the individual not only from others but also from his or her deepest self (Simmel, 1996: 659). Simmel explicitly links the contradictions of fashion to the nervous, feverish, and over-exciting hassle of big cities and to the rise of the middle class. If well-to-do city-dwellers choose to follow fashion, Simmel warns, they are in danger of becoming neurasthenics. Fashion, after all, causes in its followers a "disorientated desire", a "desperate yet unconscious pressure", as well as "immoderation and restlessness". In short, fashion causes nothing less than "a lack of finality in the center of the soul" (1996: 675).

At this stage, which is almost at the end of Simmel's book, I began asking myself whether this kind of philosophizing did not exemplify the countryside pettiness Nietzsche already thought was typical for German philosophy. *The Philosophy of Money*, however, has been extremely influential. In its wake, fashion has almost invariably been described by academics as a sort of plague which infects not only our outward appearance

but also our inner self. Fashion subjugates the physical and the mental to a dangerous regimen of a beautifying yet gaudy style. Since Simmel we know that using expensive perfumes or wearing trendy apparel is not an innocent affair at all. As it goes, however, each plague comes to an end. Says Simmel. Some sort of entropic reasoning is involved: the way of fashion is always so energetic that its fire will soon be extinguished. Happy city-dweller. Happy me. My fascination for fashion is bound to disappear soon enough.

If ordinary fashion sucks, what to make of *management* fashion? For many people it seems to be totally unsettling that decision-makers in organizations seem to be susceptible to the seductions of fashion. And here again, the same words are conjured up: dangerous, contradictory, short-lived, nervous, fragmented, superficial, reckless, stupid ... you name it. Managers who follow fashion are endangering the organizations they work for and the gurus and consultants who seduce them to do so are merely the sinister engines of an equally sinister capitalism. Thus, when I was admitting to my friends and acquaintances that I was writing a text on management fashion which actually *approved* of it, many of them thought that I was only fooling myself and fiddling away my and other people's time. But this is the unvarnished truth: I do not only love ordinary fashion, I also love management fashion. In the pages to come I intend to defend it. Management fashion is not as bad for managers as the enemies of fashion proclaim. It may actually be very good. This is not to say that I do not have problems with management fashion. On the contrary, I have many problems with it. But these problems are, as I will argue, not related to management fashion's fashionability, but to what is not so fashionable in management fashion. To put it as clearly as I can, management fashion is problematic because it is not fashionable enough!

Before proceeding any further, it may be good to know that I use the word 'fashion' in three different senses. First, in agreement with common parlance, it refers to what is popular or, more precisely, to a style which is popular. It is perhaps this connotation which makes that fashion is no longer primarily associated with 'decency' (as is the French word *façon*) or with 'civilization' or 'edification' (as in *façonner*). The popular is often suspect. It can't be intelligent and it is linked to vulgarity, tastelessness, gaudiness, even to a certain laziness. Some people, presumably those who do not think they belong to the *populus*, argue that such terms perfectly refer to whatever it is that management gurus or consultants are doing. One of my tenets is that the popular or fashionable in management thinking should be treated with less condescension. This is, as I will explain in the first chapter, what brings me to think of management fashion as *folk* philosophy rather than as alchemy or trickery.

Second, throughout the text I will use 'fashion' as a metaphor which stands for anything that is volatile, plural, aesthetic, stylish, superficial, real, experimenting, emotional, embellishing, playful, loving, uncontrollable, ugly, enchanting, creative, and so on. This is, of course, not a neat definition. Indeed, in describing management fashion I will provide you, the reader, with other and different adjectives as well, merely to show you that fashion is not a phenomenon you can easily come to grips with. I would like you to understand the characteristics I just listed as 'family resemblances' in Wittgenstein's sense. That is, fashion hardly ever displays all of these characteristics but a substantial number of these and other characteristics should be there if we want to speak of fashion. One of my suggestions is that such characteristics (all of which are closely related to the realm of the senses) quite nicely capture what managerial work is about. It is my idea that

management theory, provided that we need such a theory, should be focusing on such characteristics rather than on essentials, fixed truths, in-depth analyses, causality, purity, procedure, malleability, escapism, control, reason, and other things that occupy the scientist's mind. These nouns belong to the realm of reason and indicate a disdain or suspicion of the senses. I will refer to them by using the metaphor of 'utopia'.

In short, what I am trying to do in this book is to describe what I suggest is the gigantic struggle between fashion and utopia in management thinking. Throughout the pages of this book I will argue that management fashion has not been able to dispense with utopian tendencies and that this and not its fashionability is the reason for its hollowness. Indeed, we should take fashion more seriously as a means of coming to grips with organizational and managerial reality. One way of doing this is to resist various forms of utopianism and idealization that pervade management theory. In chapter one, I will first provide a short introduction on how we should view fashion; then I will explain why I favor fashion over utopia; I will end by suggesting a fashionable (rather than empirical) understanding of those who set and disseminate fashion. The overall goal of the chapter is to provide a thorough introduction in my principal subject, that is, the collision between fashion and utopia in management theory.

Chapters two to six all enter into more detail by discussing five fashionable topics that have dominated the field of management thinking during the 1990s: strategy, leadership, culture, learning organization, and business process redesign. I have chosen these topics for various reasons. First of all, they seem to interlock thematically. Talking about strategy implies talking about leaders, cultures, learning processes and work processes (the proper subject of business process redesign). Not that this has always been the case. For a long time, strategy was merely a term functioning in an economic, non-managerial discourse. Even when the field of what came to be known as strategic management finally started to develop, somewhere in the 1960s, it remained firmly in the grip of economics. Yet, it also claimed to offer explanations or recipes for organizational success, something which was believed to be of interest for practicing managers. For a long time, planning, efficiency and monopoly building were seen as recipes for success, but nowadays leadership, cultural management, learning, innovation, and process thinking seem to be more important (Volberda, 1998; see also chapter two). They all seem to indicate that straightforward economic considerations are somehow becoming less important in the explanation of strategic success.

Another albeit less convincing reason for choosing these subjects relates to the number of publications about them. Grint (1997: 33), for example, reports that culture, leadership, and business process redesign are by far the three most popular subjects in management thinking, at least if we are to rely on the number of publications in the Anglophone world from 1986 to 1995. Leadership is in front: 148 articles per month were published in the same period. That is about seven articles per working day (1997: 116).

Grint, however, does not mention strategy and learning organization as separate fashions. This points to the general difficulty that quite irrespective of issues such as popularity, people seem to be in profound disagreement about what should be counted as fashion and what not. For example, if somebody sincerely believes in the importance of a management concept such as strategy or learning organization, he may very well resist labeling it as 'fashionable'. Moreover, there are many reasons for suspecting that the number of publications about particular management fashions does not relate to their

popularity in organizational practice. One explanation for this is that management fashions such as business process redesign are interpreted by practitioners in many different ways; a second explanation is that fashionability among academics or consultants is not the same as fashionability among practitioners. It has indeed been suggested that practical application often follows the creation of a particular fashion (Benders and Van Veen, 1999).

All these difficulties make clear that there is some arbitrariness in my selection of strategy, leadership, culture, learning organization, and business process redesign. I could easily have chosen other fashionable topics as well – ethics, empowerment, lean production, total quality management, friendship, commitment, management by objectives – to mention just a few of them. I did not, however, because I have discussed some of them elsewhere and because I did not want to do this all over again (ten Bos, 1997, 1998; ten Bos and Willmott, 1999). Moreover, some of these other fashions are closely related to the fashions that I did choose to discuss. For example, empowerment or flexibility seem to be close cousins of the learning organization and the same can be said of the relationship between lean production and business process redesign. Finally, adding more fashions would not add anything valuable to what I have to say about my principal subject, which is, as I suggested above, the conflict between fashion and utopia in management theory.

In chapter two, then, I will discuss the field of strategy – from its economic origins to more contemporary post-economic and perhaps more existentialist insights. I will argue that the field of strategic management, fragmented as it may be, is pervaded with utopianism and that this also holds for the recent, more fashionable efforts to free it from the economical. In chapter three, I will critically discuss the notion of leadership and show that leadership is in many types of discourses simultaneously constructed and corroded. I will hint at utopian elements: brainwashers, clockbuilders, communist China will all enter the scene. The overall argument is that leadership is not a notion we need to explain what is going on in organizations. In order to sustain my claim, I will use Kafka's insights in pre-modern China. In chapter four, I will enter into the discourses on organizational culture, claiming that such discourses often aspire to special, indeed, utopian forms of togetherness. A huge part of the chapter is also devoted to the popular idea of using metaphors to arrive at an understanding of culture. Metaphors have themselves become particularly fashionable in the discourse on culture. Yet I will point out that the widespread interest in them is subjugated to utopian and rational forms of understanding rather than to a more lyrical one. In chapter five, the learning organization and some of its more important images – microworlds, gardens, nurseries, microcosm, tabletop wargames, and other forms of 'hegemonic disorganization' – will be identified as being permeated by utopianism. The focus on images of the learning organization is, I suggest, an example of what a more fashionable understanding might bring about. I wish to make clear that learning organizations as they are presented in at least two core texts (De Geus, 1988; Senge, 1990) insidiously invoke politics of exclusion and hierarchization. In chapter six, I will focus on business process redesign and again identify utopian elements (such as forgetfulness, microworlds, or an obsession with productivity). One purpose of this chapter is to make make clear that there is a need to bridge the enormous cleavage between technical thinking and cultural thinking which haunts management thinking. Besides, I hope to show that redesign is still full of nostalgic wit, offering critical potential which is being undone by its proclivity to utopianism.

Finally, in chapter seven I will recapitulate and defend the central thesis of my book by confronting it with a stream of management theorists who like Simmel feel a deep contempt for anything that is fashionable. These 'new rationalists', as I will call them, argue that both management thinking and management practice should be liberated from fashion, that they should be based on good management science and, finally, that resisting fashion is really a matter of professionalism. Against this, I will argue that fashion may be what theorists and practitioners may need very much, that the new rationalists' ideas about scientific practice are hopelessly idealized and, finally, that the need for management professionalism based on a scientific discipline called management theory is no less than dangerous. It should be clear from this that my intention in the final chapter is to raise a lot of controversy. I flatly deny what others often seem to take for granted. What we need is not a redemption of science or management, as has been suggested by Hilmer and Donaldson (1997), but a redemption of management fashion. We should not free management theory from fashion but free management fashion from theoretical utopianism.

This brings me to a third sense in which I use the term 'fashion'. Oftentimes, fashion is seen as a phenomenon in the world which is in need of theorizing. This may be legitimate, no doubt, but I would also like to invoke an entirely different understanding of 'fashion', one in which fashion itself is seen as a theory. Not a theory in the usual sense of the word, that is, not a theory which is explicit, pure, neat, well-defined, causal, or as Descartes would have it, *claire et distinct*. The theory I have in mind is not one which is well-defined and neatly categorized. You may call it postmodern, undisciplined, interdisciplinary, folk, new, lyrical, literary, or simply in-between. You may also link it to the names of Giambattista Vico, Henri Bergson, Isaiah Berlin or Gilles Deleuze, all thinkers who have indeed been sources of inspiration. I don't care. What I do care about is that the following is, to paradoxically use a term linked with utopian discourses, crystalline clear: Fashion as I see it is a theory which believes in the primacy of the senses and focuses on processes and continuity. Hence it is to be understood as a theory which is highly critical of those who suspect that there is or should be an infrastructure lying under the suprastructure. It is a theory which urges us to stick to surface. As such I believe that fashion may offer us more plausible insights in the world of managers than scientific or utopian idealizations do.

Like it or not, it is this fascination for the surface which allows me to pass over all those who are so critical of management fashion.

René ten Bos

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for helping me in various ways while I was writing this book: Juliette Helmer, Jac Geurts, Ton Wentink, Martin Parker, Frits Haselhoff, Stewart Clegg, Aernoud Witteveen, Wim van Beers, Hugh Willmott, Jos Benders, Joost van de Wal, Ton Voogt, Plony Bovée, Monique Lindzen, Gerard Helmer, Willem de Wijs, Karin ten Bos, Monique van der Heijden, Kees van Veen, Ruud Kaulingfreks, Luchien Karsten, Henny ten Bos, Margot van Leede, Mihaela Kelemen, Marlies Witteveen, Bert van Heesch, Simon Lilley, Frans Roovers, my parents, and all my colleagues at Schouten & Nelissen.

1 Introduction: Management fashion as folk philosophy

There is a widespread sense of uneasiness with respect to management gurus. On the one hand, gurus are admired and adulated for varying reasons. Not only do they write, contrary to 'serious' academics who indulge in armchair knowledge and arrogantly scorn the ideas propounded by the gurus, accessible prose; they also have been able to re-enchant management thinking, for example by pointing out the limitations of an exclusively economic perspective on organizations. Moreover, they might be said to have contributed, perhaps not wholly intentionally, to the democratization of the discourse on management and organization. Questions pertaining to this field of interest do not only attract academic specialists as used to be the case until, say, 1980, but also the general public. If anything, this is perhaps the most important merit of management gurus. On the other hand, however, gurus have invited many people to express their worries about contemporary business and organization. Their very presence has been diagnosed as a symptom of the simplicity and shallowness that pervade management thinking. Somehow, gurus have become symbols of superficiality, emptiness, and stupidity. Authors like Hilmer and Donaldson (1997) or Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) claim that many ideas propounded by gurus may very well undermine the professional and scientific dedication of managers. After all, organizations are not really waiting for people who think the manager's job boils down to strategic soothsaying, stretching ambitions or Zen archery.

Still, the worries about managers who have forgotten or refuse to think about the professional norms of their job may be somewhat exaggerated. Managers are not blindly copying the well-known recipes (Benders, Van den Berg & Van Bijsterveld, 1998). Management concepts such as 'empowerment' or 'core competencies' can perhaps best be seen as Rorschach-tests during which people make their very own constructions of what they see. What people make of the spots they see, is therefore essentially uncontrollable. Analogously, what managers make out of the concepts offered to them is beyond the guru/consultant's control. In other words, a guru seminar may not be interesting for managers because they provide straightforward recipes, but because there is, for example, a 'motivational value' to be gained from these seminars. That is, managers may welcome gurus because they offer a sound piece of 'infotainment' and not because they seriously believe gurus offer unshakable panaceas that will allow organizations to miraculously enhance performance.

In this discussion the guru seems to fall between two stools. S/he is either a dangerous person who seduces managers to abandon their professional inhibitions or a relatively innocent jester who makes a welcome change in a world dominated by calculation and logic. In both cases words like 'guru' or 'fashion' tend to have pejorative connotations. 'Serious' organizational theorists often argue that gurus are responsible for the dissemination of management fashion and therefore undermine the quality of the discussion about organization and management. The indictment is that gurus are, to catch a phrase used by Mark Taylor (1998: 167), 'profoundly superficial'.

In this chapter, I intend to correct the often condescending attitude academics have

towards management fashion. In section one, I will discuss a well-known example of this condescending attitude. Besides, I will enter into why so many people seem to fear (management) fashion. In section two, I will compare fashion with utopianism and argue in favor of the former, thus hoping to shed light on my central thesis. In section three, I will develop an alternative way of viewing those who are involved in the dissemination of fashion. The overall point of the chapter is that the fashionability of a management concept cannot be explained by its contribution to the economical performance of the organization or by the manipulation of shrewd marketers, but by the fact that it offers a kind of folk philosophy that appeals to practitioners. This folk philosophy deserves, I argue, serious philosophical reflection and criticism rather than condescension.

Ambivalence and fear

Critics of management fashion sometimes seem to be overwhelmed by nostalgia. They long for the good old days when managers could rely on a "set of general concepts and principles which could be applied in all circumstances" (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996: 67). Where the world of managers, they seem to argue, was once in the grips of hard-boiled science, it now became infused with fashion. The rational world view upheld by science cannot but condemn the fashionable for being faddish, simplifying, trendy, trivial, ephemeral, dangerous, superficial, thoughtless and, perhaps most important of all, untrue.

An old Platonic theme emerges here: what is susceptible to change cannot be truthful. But even the most serious critics of fashion cannot deny that they may cherish their own fashions as well. Derrida or Foucault, for example. Some academics, I think, need those thinkers in order to establish their identity. Others, however, are in need of other heroes. As Lilley (1997) has suggested, differences between communities are often exaggerated because each one of them is engaged in a desperate fight for its own identity. Consultants may argue that the last thing practitioners need is "*to have their head filled with theories about managing people*" and that it is important to focus "on a few basic skills that all supervisors need and use" (Gower, cited in: Lilley, 1997: 55). Of course, academics, researchers, and scientists will point out that managers succumb to the immense need for quick fixes and that "managers would be better (and more cheaply) employed studying the entrails of chickens" (Anthony, cited in: Huczynski, 1993: 107).

Lilley suggests that the two sides of the divide generally have very much in common and that the vehemence of the debates serve useful marketing and psychological purposes. Lilley suggests that "each side serves as the scapegoat for the other, enabling each to protect a separate identity in the face of largely similar practices. It is through the mobilizations of indictments such as those presented above that both sets of actors can be saved from the horror of a homogenization of identity." (1997: 55) Fashion is thus simultaneously attractive (when it helps you to establish your own identity) and repulsive (when it seems to undermine your identity). Ambivalence characterizes our attitude towards fashion. We may deride one fashion while applauding another. What we applaud, however, is then carefully distinguished from what counts as a mere fashion. Hammer and Champy (1993: 215), for example, emphatically deny that business process redesign is a fad.

Examples of this ambivalent attitude can be found in literature as well. Eccles,

Nohria and Berkley (1992: 26), for example, claim that much in management fashion amounts to mere rhetoric; yet they argue that it is the kind of rhetoric which is able to "coax, inspire, demand, or otherwise produce action in (...) organizations". Or take Martin Parker, a well-respected academic in the United Kingdom. He feels "uneasy about attempts to manipulate the identity of organizational members"; yet, at the same time, he feels attracted "by the idea of working in an organization that I/we can believe in" (1997: 89-90).

Unconditional rejections of management fashion are relatively scarce. Harvey Ramsey (1996: 167) seems to be one of the few exceptions to the rule when he speaks about the "fashion plague" and argues for a kind of monstrous alliance between managers and academics who are supposed to help each other in debunking the kind of myths and hypes that are sold by consultants and gurus. According to Ramsay, skepticism is the only means of not becoming a victim of the plague. Such unmitigated rejections are, however, quite exceptional.

Rather than morally judging fashion, we may wonder why it is that parts of the management community or academic community feel attracted by it. Abrahamson (1996) has addressed the role of rhetoric in fashion and its relationship to broader social-psychological and techno-economic factors. His analysis has remained faithful to much older analyses of fashion such as Simmel's who already at the beginning of this century argued that fashion is a social dynamic which precariously balances between a desire to imitate and to be equal on the one hand and a desire to be unique and different on the other.

Such conceptualizations of fashion, however, miss the point that fashion might also be interpreted as an *aesthetic* phenomenon. That is, we do not necessarily have to resort to underlying social-psychological factors in order to come to an understanding of fashion. Kieser (1997: 54), for example, has identified ten 'aesthetic' elements which characterize management bestsellers:

1. One and only one factor is generally identified as crucial for success.
2. Readers are warned that the continuity of their organizations is seriously in danger if no attention is paid to the factor identified by the guru(s) as crucially important.
3. It is carefully pointed out that the new ideas propounded in a bestseller can and should be linked to values people generally hold in high esteem.
4. At all costs it should be avoided that readers will get the impression that the new ideas have been invented at universities or in the author's study.
5. Readers should be reassured that they are not guilty of not having been able to identify the crucial factor for success themselves. (What they have practiced so far, was beyond any reasonable doubt an example of excellent management.)
6. A cunning mix of simplicity or accessibility on the one hand and ambiguity and mystery on the other is necessary.
7. Cautionary remarks should go hand in hand with fabulous promises.
8. Although the new ideas have not been invented in universities, it is made clear that they are scientifically valid.
9. Academic jargon is avoided.
10. Timing should be perfect: The message must hit the 'nerve of today's managers'.

While appreciating Kieser's point about aestheticism (for reasons to be elucidated below), I have misgivings as to the accuracy of such a list. First, it does not capture the features of many management bestsellers. For example, most management books as I know them are really much more complicated than the first item on the list suggests. More generally, the ideas of gurus should be taken much more seriously than Kieser does, not because gurus are "great thinkers" (as Gibson (1996) seems to believe), but also and especially because their ideas might have a massive impact on the way people think about organization and management and perhaps even on the way they think about society in general. Without books such as *In Search of Excellence* or *The Fifth Discipline* it would have been very unlikely that organizational culture or learning would have received so much attention, even among the most serious of academics.

Second, Kieser suggests that the more of these elements a management book contains, the more likely it will become a bestseller. This perfectly illustrates the condescending attitude that many academics have with respect to gurus and which I find disturbing. Kieser's message is that writing a management bestseller is no big deal at all and simply boils down to the observance of some rock-solid principles (as if a good academic text escapes from such principles). That is, for any academic or practitioner who knows something about organization and management it is possible to become a management guru. That some of them choose to do so tells us more about their lack of academic integrity and their interest in money than about the quality of the message they have in store for their readership.

Fearing fashion

As was argued by Taylor (1998: 213), the secret behind the irony and condescension with which fashion is often treated is *fear*. So, why is it that many people seem to fear fashion and why do they think that it should not be allowed to enter the domain of management and organization?

Perhaps the most important reason is that fashion is *nonsense*. People who are fashionable are suspected to be obsessed by what is utterly unimportant or trivial. It is, for example, rather trivial to argue, as many gurus do, that more focus on social and psychological processes within organizations is necessary to establish clear and fair interpersonal relations. Most practitioners have always known the importance of transparent and fair relationships within organizations. Perhaps they only differ with the gurus because they think that the best guarantee for these relationships is an effective hierarchy and not flatness or more empowerment. Indeed, critics of fashion (Hilmer and Donaldson, 1997) have argued that concepts such as 'flat organizations' seduce practitioners to concentrate on matters which are utterly irrelevant to organizational survival.

A further reason why people fear fashion in the world of management and organization resides in its *whimsicality*. It is believed that the fashionable is never authentic or robust, but always untrustworthy, unpredictable, fickle and capricious. This is what fashion distinguishes from what science is generally believed to be: universal, rational, objective and disinterestedly interested in truth. According to this view, science is pre-eminently unfashionable. Fashion, on the other hand, is pre-eminently *unscientific*. For example, one can never tell whether the fashion of today will be the fashion of tomorrow, let alone predict what will become fashionable in the near future. The problem is that you can only start designating something as fashion when it has already become a

fashion. In trying to come to grips with it you are always hopelessly lagging behind.

Fashion is, in other words, essentially uncontrollable and ungovernable. This is what a true and dedicated follower of fashion accepts and even indulges in. People who follow fashion have given up the idea that they themselves can be in the lead. More precisely, it is argued by the skeptics that fashion fatally undermines people's rationality and autonomy since they find their sources of action or inspiration in something which lies outside of them. It is obvious that these aspects of fashion are flatly opposed to accepted management knowledge which hinges on the strongly modernist assumption that autonomous, objective and scientific decision making is possible. Abandoning this assumption is dangerous, indeed madness. Hilmer and Donaldson (1996) argue that fashion fatally undermines the autonomous and self-reflective attitude managers and leaders should have when they make decisions.

In line with its assumed anti-scientific qualities, fashion excludes progress. Some critics still believe that the quest for truth and progress is what ultimately drives the scientist. The follower of fashion, however, is driven by what Taylor (1997: 206) has aptly described as a "ceaseless quest for the moment". People who are always chasing the moment deny the possibility of progress. They know that each new fashion does not constitute something better or more hopeful, but merely something different. Not progress but *difference* makes the difference in fashion. It is therefore senseless to compare yesterday's fashion with today's fashion. The moment which is haunted by the dedicated follower of fashion is merely a moment, merely a 'just now' which is continually disrupted by whatever presents itself as new and innovative.

However, two interesting paradoxes emerge here. First, the new that makes the difference is unquestionably accepted by all dedicated followers of fashion. In other words, it is the difference that triggers a desire to copy (Schwartz, 1996) and in this sense the difference will ultimately undo itself and become the identical. This insight opens a surprising and profoundly tragic perspective on why so many disparate companies – encouraged by gurus and consultants – are looking for the same cultural or structural characteristics. In trying to pin down what is unique to them they all start to copy each other. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the ceaseless quest for the moment must inevitably end in disillusion. Fashion always has an appointment with disappointment.

Second, what seems to be new and innovative in fashion is from a somewhat different perspective always old and out-of-date. Where the follower of fashion always seeks the new, s/he is tragically aware that the cycles of fashion are always so that the new is the old and that the old might as well be the new. "The out-of-date forever haunts the up-to-date", as Taylor (1997: 206) expresses it. Many ideas propounded by management gurus and condemned by critics seem to be inspired by the past and not by the future. Management gurus have been inspired by age-old sources such as the old Greeks, the Renaissance or 19th century America (Jacques, 1996). In fashion, the past always pushes away the present.

A different and much neglected aspect of fashion is its ubiquity. Fashion somehow seems to be everywhere. There is nothing in our everyday surroundings which is not somehow affected by what the British novelist Jonathan Raban has acutely described as 'the imperialism of taste' (*cited in*: Harvey, 1990: 6). Fashion pervades all cultural, social and economical aspects of life and it may even be argued that science is not immune to it. As Taylor explains, "there is nothing which is not fashion(ed)" (1997: 211). There is no escape from it.

An aspect of this ubiquity is fashion's excessiveness. Living under the imperialism of taste, people witness a proliferation of signification, values, ideas, norms, and so on. In the management world this entails that, for example, organizations may choose to follow the empowerment fashion while their members entirely differ as to its exact meaning. Nobody seems to agree on what core competencies, empowerment, strategic vision and humble leadership, to mention just a few examples, are. In a world ruled by fashion, it is no longer possible to chain up meaning. The problem with fashion is, contrary to what many skeptics seem to think, not that it is meaningless but that it generates, just like the Rorschach test I referred to earlier, too many meanings. In this sense fashion is not 'non-sensical' at all.

A further and final point is that fashion always seems to be concerned with (aesthetic) superficialities. This particular characteristic has tempted many observers to describe fashion as something which is amoral, or even downright evil. For example, Barthes (1983) has argued that fashion tries to manipulate everyday decisions of people with regard to appearances: dress, haircuts, make-up, fancy cars, aesthetic cigarettes, etc. The manipulative techniques that are used by the fashion industries, or what Barthes has termed 'logotechniques', use ideology for the control of consumptive behavior. More particularly, consumptive behavior should be directed at appearances because the product and services, in and by themselves – that is, without superficial ornamentation – would not be able to seduce consumers to devote more than minimal attention to them. Thus, without the make-up or ornamentation of products and services consumers would merely relate them to their basic existential needs. Barthes's point is that consumers are manipulated by fashion in such a way that they do not only become interested in things they do not really need but also that they slowly learn to pay special attention to aspects which are not worth such attention. In other words, fashion alienates consumers from their real needs.

The problem with this argument is that it assumes that it can be known, at some fundamental level, which aspects of products such as cars or cigarettes really matter. Who is to define what people really need? Against Barthes, I would like to point out that it is by no means clear why appearances in and by themselves cannot be a sufficient reason for purchasing a particular consumer item. Barthes and many others rule out the idea that the consumer's fascination for the surface can somehow be genuine. They rather prefer to explain this fascination by pointing to underlying psychological or social circumstances that might explain such irrational behavior, all of which is based on the dogmatic refusal to accept that appearances can be attractive or interesting as well.

At schools and universities, we are taught that we ought to break through the surface as quick as possible in order to explore what is supposed to be hidden by it. To explain is always to penetrate in underlying realms. Explaining is digging deeper. In more theoretically laden terms, science assumes that the suprastructure cannot be and should not be explained in its own terms but in terms of infrastructure.

Fashion might be seen as "an indirect critique of all theories that presuppose a hierarchical distinction between suprastructure and infrastructure" (Taylor, 1997: 172-173). A 'fashionable' explanation does not need such hierarchies of explanation and is therefore more sensitive to surface. It allows us to see, for example, that the presence of computer terminals in different kind of organizations may have a more profound influence on culture than organizational norms and values. As academics or practitioners, we tend to simply take such superficial aspects for granted. As a result we generally ignore

them, probably because these aspects do not provide us with a clue to what we sense must be the indelible uniqueness of organizations. Indeed, we may have become so fascinated by this assumed uniqueness that we are inclined to forget that most organizations are in many respects also very similar.

A fashionable look at organizations may very well open our eyes for what social scientists and practitioners merely perceive as trivia. Fashion is, as Yukio Mishima has argued, "attracted by the profundity of the surface" (cited in: Taylor, 1997: 167), whereas a more scientific, managerial or rationalist perspective simply refuses to see any profundity in the surface at all.

In the next section, I will relate Taylor's insights to what I describe as utopianism in management theory. In this way I intend to develop a more sympathetic understanding of fashion. The section presents the core argument of my book.

Fashion versus utopia

Why is management fashion problematical?

Let there be no misunderstanding: I am not uncritical about management fashion. My criticism of it, however, is not launched in the name of rationality or science. My problem with fashion is not that it tends to be ambivalent, confusing, irrational or even idiotic. Exactly these characteristics, I am going to suggest, provide fashion with a rather unexpected liberatory potential that allows managers to critically reflect on and experiment with their professional identities. As I will argue in chapter seven, fashion might help managers to become more reflective, more philosophical if you like. It may even seduce them to occasionally escape from the economic bottom line.

If characteristics such as ambivalence or confusion are not problematical, what could then be wrong with management fashion? My problem with much fashion is that its critical or liberatory potential is undermined because it is not able to get rid of utopian desires. Somewhat ironically, fashion is still imbued with rational-utopian tendencies such as the reduction of complexity and ambivalence. Gurus or consultants generally do not endorse forms of complex thinking I think fashion might lead up to; they rather systematically and deliberately reduce "the complexes of human experiences into a transmittable and understandable form" (Chia, 1998: 344). One might think here of the dichotomies between reason and emotion or subject and object as well as of the simplistic realistic ontology often taken for granted. While management fashions are interesting because they have a critical potential much needed to resist simplification, most of their followers and disseminators do not wish to use this potential.

The critical point to be made is that management fashion has been largely unable to cast off its utopian desires. This inability undermines the willingness to exploit its critical potential. In subsequent chapters, I intend to describe at length the vestiges of utopianism in fashion. Not that I think utopianism is by definition a hallmark of fashion. On the contrary, *my suggestion is that utopian tendencies are the ill-fated effect of a rationality that seeks to undo the critical power of fashion*. As Achterhuis (1998: 24) pointed out, fashion and utopia should be expected to rule each other out. In Moore's *Utopia*, for example, there is no room for fashion because people are not allowed to play or experiment with identities. It is rather that they are coerced, in the name of utility, to

adopt particular identities. *Everybody* wears the same apparel, *everybody* develops the same taste, *everybody* endorses the same values. No differences, no openness, no variegation are allowed in the ideal world.

Rather than criticizing management fashion for being fashionable, we should criticize it for not being able to lay off utopianism. To put it somewhat differently, *my problem is that fashion is not fashionable all the way down*. It still resorts to (unfashionable) utopianism.

Why is utopianism problematical?

What is wrong with utopianism? Simply put, I do not wish to live in Utopia or to work for an 'utopian' organization'. To see why, consider the following characteristics which I derived from Achterhuis's splendid discussion (1998: 55-93):

1. Utopianism subordinates the individual to the *collective*. It is a rational experiment which is not so much about the betterment of the individual as about the betterment of the collective. This collective is present in even the most remote corners of each individual's life. Loneliness is simply impossible in Utopia, but the price to be paid for this is intensified social control and deafness for the individual voice.
2. It strongly believes in the *malleability* of dreams. By an effort of the will, people can try to overcome scarcity, which is seen as the fundamental problem of organization and economy. The technological means are available. A "terrifying logic of control" (1998: 63) pervades human action. Utopia is a world where nothing is left to chance and where the belief in God has been replaced by a belief in human self-production.
3. It belies the myth of the innate goodness of a human being. Goodness should be created and cannot be assumed (1998: 37) In this sense, utopianism seems to assume a more *neutral* and aloof perspective on human beings. One consequence of this is that people are decontextualized: they have no history outside the collective. The individual is seen as a *tabula rasa*.
4. It believes in the "unity of *totality and detail*" (1998: 65). The totality of utopianism can only lead to the betterment of life if all aspects of the individual life are controlled. Dissenting views are dangerous because they open the door for chaos and disorganization. Or to paraphrase George Orwell, there is nothing in the behavior of an individual which is unimportant.
5. It is *radical*. It wishes to break the ties of the past. It wishes, as Descartes already made clear, to deconstruct "the houses of the city" and to make a fresh new start. The senses are to be distrusted. Only reason counts. The past is irrelevant. History is, as Henri Ford pointed out, bunk. Progress in the name of reason is what matters.
6. Love and sexuality are dangerous because they are uncontrollable. If allowed a place at all, then only as a *useful*, organic function, not as something that might lead to passion, unhappiness, tragedy and other counterproductive tendencies.
7. An obsession with *hygiene* and purity. The inhabitants of Moore's *Utopia* do not fight their wars themselves because they fear that it would erode their purity. Linked to this is an obsession with isolation. Nearly all utopias are conceived of as islands. We are dealing with *hosophobic* worlds.
8. Utopia is not the land of Cockaigne (1998: 82). Labor is adulated to such an extent that even leisure time should somehow be *productive*. However, labor should not interfere with the hygienic requirements. Unpleasant and dirty work are considered

as unworthy and should be done by “internal foreigners”. For example, war is a job carried out by mercenaries or slaves, garbage collecting is carried out by children (who enjoy playing in dust) or women, and road work is carried out by convicts (Walzer, 1983). This is how utopia deals with the inevitable problem of dirty and hard work.

9. *Happiness* is what justifies utopia, but it is happiness in the utilitarian, calculating sense of the word. Matters of morality are profoundly mathematical: the happiness of most people legitimates the death or agony of a few. Besides, the individual is argued to be incapable of seeing where his or her own happiness might be sought. Most people do not know what they really need. That is why they have to be (re-)educated.
10. *Violence* is unavoidable, not only to keep others at a distance but also to keep every inhabitant under control.

According to Achterhuis (1998: 117), utopianism should be seen as firmly rooted in the Enlightenment tradition. Historically, it is an answer to the Plague, the dirtiness of cities, the uncertainty caused by the Great Discoveries and, perhaps most important, the “omnipresence of fear” (1998: 101) in the 16th and 17th century. It is an effort to create a new, safer, more rational framework for Europeans in anxious times. This effort began with the destruction of all that was built, that is, with systematically neglecting what was already achieved because, according to utopians, those achievements proved to be wrong. As Braudel (1979) pointed out, rational science set off as soon as people became able not to look at the world of which they were a part. *Weltfremdheit* is therefore an important ingredient in utopian discourses.

However, as Achterhuis (1998: 34) is careful to point out, the characteristics just discussed are not to be interpreted as constituting the essence of utopianism for there is no such essence. They should rather be seen as ‘family resemblances’ in Wittgenstein’s sense of the word. Utopian texts will generally display most of the characteristics listed, but not all of them and not always the same characteristics. The utopian elements identified – unity, community, malleability, neutrality, detail, totality, radicalism, usefulness, scientific, technologically-driven, homophobia, production, isolationism, utilitarianism, and violence – are also traceable as family resemblances in various branches of management thinking. As I hope to show, such elements are still persistent in fashionable thinking. Not always to the same extent, and not always the same elements. But, strategic management studies, the leadership discourse, the management of culture, the learning organization and business process redesign still display some or even most of these characteristics.

Not fashionable enough

To repeat, my point is not that management fashions should be criticized for being fashionable; the point is rather that they should be criticized for not having been able to get rid of such utopian tendencies. In a sense, *I believe that management fashions are not fashionable enough!* Fashion, after all, with its emphasis on nonsense, non-scientific understandings, aestheticism, difference, nostalgia, uncontrollability, complexity, plurality, fragmentation, alienation, ambivalence, confusion, and so on might be regarded as countervailing the predominant rationalistic and utopian discourses. And as we will see in the final chapter of this book, fashion is much closer to the world of management practitioners than is rationalism or utopianism. It is therefore regrettable that the fear of

fashion is so endemic in management theory. It is a fear inspired by the utopian, or as Onfray (1991) would argue, the dietetic and anti-Nietzschean wish to be not who you are.

I will return more extensively to my central thesis in chapter seven where I will also take issue with those who condemn fashion. In the remaining parts of this chapter, I will focus on three questions: Who is responsible for the dissemination of fashion? Why is it that they have been lured by the fashionable? And why should this be wrong? I will use some ideas that I borrowed from the American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre rather than empirical material to provide a more aesthetic and fashionable answer to such questions. I will end by introducing the term 'folk philosophy' to express the potentially critical and reflective aspects of fashionable management theory.

(Post)modern characters

Management gurus, consultants and entrepreneurs are involved in the dissemination of fashionable management knowledge. Borrowing a notion from Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), it might be argued that these people are important 'characters' in Western society. That is, in the social drama of postmodern society they play important roles with which the members of this society identify.

MacIntyre (1981: 26) relates his use of the notion of "character" explicitly to a particular dramatic tradition which goes back to medieval morality plays and which has been carried on by melodramatic plays that became increasingly popular during the 18th and 19th century. The actors in such plays possess, as MacIntyre makes clear, a stock of characters which are immediately recognizable to the audience. Contrary to the heroes in classic tragedies, melodramatic characters are hardly ever tormented by inner struggles. Psychological depth even in the principal characters is totally absent. As a consequence they are unable to learn from their actions or to attain self-knowledge, no matter what harm has been done to others or to oneself. The course of events in the play is totally determined by the easily recognizable aspects of the principal characters. The audience in a morality play knows how the story will unfold given the characters in the play. The essential melodramatic character is, ten Bos (1994: 14, 54) argues, one-dimensionally focused on the achievement of his/her goals (e.g. to win back the beloved person, to eliminate somebody, etc.) which are perfectly known to the audience. This remarkable lack of psychological depth is exactly what allows the audience to easily identify with (or against) the principal characters.

MacIntyre's suggestion is that the social character he has in mind resembles the character of a morality play or melodrama in at least two important respects. First, a social character within a particular culture is easily recognizable to other members of that culture. A character is a social role that "provides a culture with its moral definitions" (1981: 29), which is not to say, as MacIntyre carefully points out, that the members of this culture agree with these definitions. It is more that they provide "focal points" for moral agreement or moral disagreement.

Second, member of the culture also know or feel how in a particular setting actions of its dominant characters are likely to evolve, because the 'structure' of their behavior is known or taken for granted. For example, in debates about a healthy

environment we generally take for granted how the most important characters in this social drama will act. Under normal circumstances we do not expect managers or entrepreneurs, to mention just two candidates for the label of 'character', to endorse more restrictive environmental legislation.

This is of course not to say that an individual manager or entrepreneur will never endorse such legislation; indeed, s/he may adopt a very different social role than is suggested by what other members of his/her culture expect from the Manager as character. But insofar as s/he does, s/he will be considered to be an exception to the rule precisely because other people who identify with or against him/her did not expect this particular kind of behavior. When the manager does not display the kind of behavior friend and foe alike expect him/her to display, they will very likely become suspicious and, for example, conjecture the presence of hidden agendas.

Hence it is not surprising that MacIntyre stresses that ...

"... the requirements of a *character* are imposed from the outside, from the way in which others regard and use *characters* to understand and to evaluate themselves. A *character* is an object of regard by the members of the culture generally or some significant segment of them. He furnishes them with a cultural and moral ideal." (MacIntyre, 1981: 28).

Each culture, MacIntyre claims, has its own distinctive stock of social characters who can be seen as its moral representatives. They provide the culture to which they belong with the "moral focus for a whole cluster of attitudes and activities". Thus the moral assumptions that prevailed in Victorian England are best represented by such characters as "The Public School Headmaster, the Explorer and the Engineer". In other cultures other social characters emerge or have emerged. MacIntyre suggests that the moral representatives of Wilhelmine Germany were the Prussian Officer, the Professor and the Social Democrat. In Holland, to add a few more examples, the principal social characters have long been the Merchant and the Vicar and in America one may perhaps think of the Pioneer, Farmer and Soldier. MacIntyre's central claim is that in our society the principal social characters are The Aesthete, the Therapist and the Manager. These three characters can be seen as the moral representatives of a highly industrialized and *modern* society.

My suggestion is that the Management Guru and/or Management Consultant combine elements of these three characters and as such emerge as two out of three dominant social characters of what is commonly described as a post-industrial and *postmodern* society. The other social character emerging in this society is, of course, the Entrepreneur. It might be argued that the Management Guru and/or Management Consultant are endorsing typically *entrepreneurial* values.

What might be understood by this? At least some of the obsessions of gurus and, in their wake, consultants *seem* to be highly critical of typically modern achievements such as bureaucracy, control, management, rational science, and so on. In this respect they might be seen as encouraging members of organizations and indeed members of our society as a whole to become more 'entrepreneurial'. Behind this encouragement lies an apparently radical rejection of bureaucratic values which should be replaced by allegedly postmodern achievements such as flexibility, laissez-faire management styles, charismatic leadership, intuition, autonomy, and so on. How postmodern such ideas really are, remains to be seen. Gurus and consultants generally do not abandon the modern

discourse of instrumental rationality and profit-making.

But perhaps one does not have to be truly postmodern in order to be a moral representative of postmodern culture. I think something like this is the case with management gurus and management consultants. They have clearly become characters in the sense MacIntyre uses this term. As I suggested above, Gurus and Consultants combine elements of the three modern characters: Aesthete, Therapist, and Manager. In order to make sense of this claim it is necessary to describe these characters. But before doing so, I will have to elaborate on the notion of emotivism.

Emotivism

Emotivist morality, MacIntyre argues, prevails in modern industrial culture. In philosophy emotivism is a philosophical doctrine which argues that all moral judgments are merely expressions of subjective feelings, preferences, or emotions. In the view of the emotivist, a moral judgment is to be sharply distinguished from a factual judgment in the sense that the latter can be true or false whereas the former can be neither.

Although MacIntyre is at pains to philosophically refute emotivism, he is clearly more interested in what he thinks are the awkward social consequences of this doctrine. The problem with the claim that moral judgments are merely expressions of feelings is that people who are no longer able to base their moral attitudes on some rock-solid and universally acknowledged foundation like the truth are by definition without any moral authority. As a consequence, emotivism encourages people to arbitrarily discredit any moral statement. Indeed, this has become something of an inalienable individual right. There are "no limits set to that on which [the moral subject] may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria" and the problem is that these criteria are not available to him or her (1981: 63; Kelly, 1994: 130-131). But the price we have to pay for this right is that there are no longer any cogent moral claims to be made. The paradox is that while having gained the right to speak about moral matters, everybody seems to have lost moral authority. I suggest that under postmodern conditions this paradox is even more clearly felt. Indeed, my postmodern characters – the Guru, the Consultant and the Entrepreneur – drive on it.

The words people use in order to exercise their moral judgment or to express their moral anxiety have become unintelligible to people who do not happen to share their insights, preferences or feelings. This is why moral debate has deteriorated into a game of *persuasion, manipulation and seduction*, a process which has gone to extremes under postmodern conditions. There is no rational alternative for the moral subject who finds him/herself submerged in a moral debate that is characterized by a) a sheer endless proliferation of standpoints, perspectives and insights; b) by a fundamental incommensurability of the concepts and values that play a role in this debate; and c) by the absence of any moral authority whatsoever. The consequence is that moral debate has become profoundly interminable in modern and postmodern society. Although some authors (Bauman, 1993; Kunneman, 1998) think that this provides us with an inspiring starting point for a new, postmodern morality, MacIntyre argues that it is the very cause of our moral predicament.

The moral debate in emotivist culture is, if we are to believe MacIntyre, necessarily ingrained with *manipulation*. More precisely, it is characterized by the "obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations" (1981: 22). MacIntyre explains that for Kant morality was primarily a matter of treating the

other 'as an end' and not 'as a means'. The significance of this famous expression – 'treating somebody as an end and not as a means' – is that in a moral relationship I am merely entitled to offer the other what I consider to be good reasons for acting one way or the other, but that I leave it to him or her to judge the soundness of my ideas. I respect that the other is his/her own judge and it is only by an appeal to rational criteria that I can try to influence him or her.

The emotivist, however, denies the existence of such rational criteria and this leaves him or her to wonder how the other can be influenced at all. In the absence of rational criteria to which the moral subject might appeal, there is only the possibility to seduce, persuade, or manipulate. The human sciences, most particularly psychology and sociology, have developed the techniques to do so. Because our moral utterances are, according to the emotivist, merely an expression of our own feelings and preferences, we can only try to align our feelings with those of others. That is, we have to treat others as means. The moral debate in which we engage as emotivists is fundamentally manipulative.

I will turn now to the three characters that excel in this debate.

Aesthete, Therapist, and Manager

The Aesthete sees the social world as a meeting place for individual wills that compete with each other in order to achieve as much satisfaction and pleasure as possible. S/he interprets social reality as "a series of opportunities" (1981: 24). MacIntyre is especially sensitive to the parasitic qualities of the Aesthete and points out that s/he generally has enough money to be at a comfortable distance from the necessity of work. But how comfortable can this be? If the world is nothing but an endless series of possibilities, boredom and dissatisfaction are always a threat (1981: 70). Think here of the dedicated follower of fashion who in his/her frantic search for new possibilities is always bound to meet with disappointment. The world of the Aesthete may in this respect very well become the "tyranny of possibilities" as Hannah Ahrendt once called it. People who are so well-to-do that they will always be able to search for what they can only conceive of as *their* possibilities without having to fear austerity, will sooner or later become incapable of attaching any value to anything.

They will, as Bauman (1997: 73) has explained, become parvenus, people who are desperately in search of their own identities and definitions but who are not able to find them simply because they are doomed to be restless. The parvenu is never at home, because in such a home they will inevitably arrive the moment that other people are going to resist the manipulative techniques that s/he uses in order to satisfy him/herself. Thus, the parvenu is always *in* and never *of* the place and being merely in the place s/he carries with him/her "the bacillus of restlessness" (1997: 72). Borrowing from Sloterdijk (1993: 82), we can say that the Aesthete runs from *oikos* to *oikos*, from home to home, and is therefore "fundamentally *metoikoi*", i.e. s/he lives a transitional existence.

In this aesthetic experience we may already anticipate the postmodern character of the *Entrepreneur* who on behalf of his profession sees the world as a bundle of *opportunities* and not as a bundle of limitations (Keat, 1991). At the moment you are reading this, perhaps thousands of entrepreneurial minded people are traveling through places and ever more places, either as tourists or as business people. Indeed, tourism and business are perhaps the only legitimate reason for traveling nowadays.

The Therapist is the second moral representative of emotivist culture. This character has given up its interest in truth as a value and is, according to MacIntyre (1981: 29) basically interested in psychological effectiveness. It is well known, for example, that many psychotherapists, from Sigmund Freud to Otto Rank, have invented mythologies and other fantastic stories in order to provide their clients with an ego that is capable of handling the demands of life (Sloterdijk, 1993). For MacIntyre this merely proves that emotivism reigns supreme among psychotherapists. Emotivism, after all, denies the possibility of an overarching moral truth. The Therapist accepts this and focuses all his/her attention on professional techniques rather than on the truth and in this respect s/he resembles the Manager as we will soon see. It is not that truth is not important anymore but that it is subordinated to the effectiveness of the techniques that are used to make people normal citizens again.

What to think, for example, of the 'ethic of reversibility' (Schwartz, 1996: 280) that became so popular among therapists treating people who were suffering from trauma's? The traumatized person has, according to this ethic, to relive the traumatic experience in order to find peace with him/herself. The assumption behind this is as misleading as it is effective: "What we most fear has already happened." Therapists by and large have based their practices on this assumption and "started to bring dark pasts and patterns to light and so to begin recovery" (1996: 280.).

Perhaps this is only a special case of what Sloterdijk (1984: 441) has called 'medical cynicism', but there can be no doubt that also on a more general level truth has assumed an extraordinarily painful quality in medical discourse. Take the example of a doctor who works for a company where jobs can be hazardous to health. It might be argued, somewhat cynically, that it belongs to the professional ethic of this doctor not to discuss the circumstances in which people have to work and hence to really do something about the causes of disease. Such truths would not be accepted by the powers that be. Instead, the company doctor (and not only a company doctor, one is inclined to add) generally restricts him/herself to fighting the effects, which is tantamount to saying that s/he only takes action when it is too late.

Sloterdijk (1984: 452) argues for a medical practice which is truthful in the sense that it unconditionally sticks to its allegiance to life. As such it should become "the scientific core of a more general theory of survival". Part of this very old and forgotten self-image of medical practice is the understanding that it should be, at least to a considerable extent, redundant. This points to a medical ethos which tells its practitioners that people should not be primarily seen as creatures who are or will be requiring medical help, i.e. as potential patients. Such an ethos assumes that the willingness to provide help to other people is a human and pleasant trait which can, however, become very unpleasant and obtrusive as soon as it begins to '*pathologize*' human existence.

Current medical practice is far from realizing Sloterdijk's dream. It sticks to a form of "cynical myopia" which conceptualizes man as *homo patiens* (Sloterdijk, 1993: 56) and which is, of course, encouraged by pharmaceutical industry, politics and well-off citizens with self-destructive habits of a kind. In other words, practitioners are manipulated and manipulate. Contemporary medical practice thrives on the belief that we are all patients and in need of their services. How can its lost allegiance to life be restored in such a way that it governs daily practice? Sloterdijk (1984: 444) refers to old medical practices in China where physicians and surgeons were only paid as long as people stayed healthy. As soon as people fell ill, therapists would not receive their fees. Interesting analogies with

consultancy practices can be drawn here. As management guru Gary Hamel has suggested, the central objective of the strategic consultant should be his or her own redundancy.

The Manager, our third character, resembles the other two characters in that s/he also accepts the tenets of emotivism. The Manager is not interested in truth as a value but in effectiveness and efficiency and therefore he also obliterates, just like the Therapist, the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative relations. The Manager is different from the other two characters not only because s/he embraces effectiveness as a morally neutral value but also because s/he claims authority with respect to this effectiveness. MacIntyre is at pains to show that the managerial claim of effectiveness is a 'moral fiction' (1981: 70.). The essence of a moral fiction is that it desperately disguises something which, provided that it becomes widely known, would undermine the authority of those who use it in order to deceive others.

A persistent moral fiction in our society is, for example, the concept of *rights*. Not only is their ontological status very insecure, but also does the contemporary emphasis on rights conceal the fact that a moral society cannot do without certain self-limits imposed on people who are exercising those rights. Without these self-imposed limits, rights take the form of fictitious moral values which merely serve as means to arbitrary, non-rational ends. Managerial effectiveness is yet another moral fiction which disguises the empirically observable fact that many managers are not succeeding in controlling their own corporations or that success in business is more often a matter of luck than a matter of strategic cunning.

But MacIntyre does not take an interest in such observable facts, although he could not resist the temptation to mention some of them. What is on his mind is rather that the claim to managerial effectiveness, a claim on which managerial authority as such is based, is not and cannot be epistemologically founded simply because we, as members of an emotivist culture, do and can not know what kind of knowledge would be required in order to sustain it. Of course, the Manager uses law-like generalizations which are derived from human sciences or organization sciences, but in an emotivist culture such knowledge can never serve to sustain the claim to effectiveness simply because such a culture believes that the gap between the realm of fact and the realm of value can by definition not be bridged (1981: 83).

In sum, there is in principle no factual knowledge available to back up the managerial claim to effectiveness. To put it more straightforwardly, as a moral representative of the emotivist culture the Manager should resign to the fact that s/he will never be able to back up claims to moral (and, for that matter, political) authority with scientific expertise. That is, managerial practice which aspires to moral authority by referring to its alleged expertise acts in bad faith. It merely trades in moral fictions such as effectiveness, efficiency, utility, neutrality, impersonality and in doing so it is nothing less than a masquerade.

Paradoxically, MacIntyre builds his point on what two emotivist philosophers, Alfred Ayer and Rudolf Carnap, have had to say about belief in God. According to these philosophers, religious and metaphysical assertions about God and similar entities do not contain any information about some transcendental reality but are merely the expressions of subjective feelings and attitudes of those who make them. That is, a religious utterance like "God is the cause of all things" has a factual and scientific

appearance which disguises certain social and psychological realities.

MacIntyre projects this argument to the moral fictions that are so popular in emotivist society. Managerial effectiveness is nothing but “the name of a fictitious, but believed-in reality, appeal to which disguises certain other realities” (1981: 73). Just as Ayer and Carnap contended that the belief in God cannot be rationally justified, so it is with the claim to managerial effectiveness. It simply cannot be rationally justified for one simple reason: moral values can never be justified within emotivist culture.

The same holds for all other claims to (moral) authority. Emotivist culture provides the stage for a tragic play full of moral illusions in which our three characters play their own distinctive role. They are moral representatives of emotivist culture not because they embody effectiveness, expertise, neutrality or some other moral fiction but because they embody the idea that manipulation is acceptable and necessary if one is to achieve one’s ends. The moral fictions we have discussed so far are nothing less than instruments that are manipulated by managers in order to back up their own claims to authority.

Gurus and Consultants, who can be seen as the successors of the three characters I have just discussed claim to have knowledge about the smooth operation and management of organizations. Besides, they also have many moral claims to make, as we will see below. So, what Gurus and Consultants have to offer is, in my view, a very peculiar mix of knowledge claims and moral claims, a mix which would be considered impossible in a strictly emotivist culture. In this sense, it might be argued that Gurus and Consultants represent a shift away from the Aesthete, the Therapist and the Manager. Whether this shift is a major one remains to be seen, but the gap between fact and knowledge does not seem to be a problem for what I take to be the moral representatives of a *postmodern* society.

While the modern emotivist argued that there is a realm of objective and value-free knowledge (science) and a realm of subjective preferences and attitudes (aesthetics, morality, metaphysics), the postmodern emotivist argues that there is only one realm and this realm is thoroughly subjective. A practical consequence is that we do not objectively know why and under which circumstances organizations can be successful. There are, apparently, so many roads to success or failure that science is not able to map them. Under postmodern conditions we cannot accept any authority or expertise with respect to the question what has to be done in order to improve organizational performance. The reason is that for a postmodernist, moral authority can never be legitimated by factual knowledge. The distinction between fact and value is obliterated because there are no facts. Everything has become a value.

My postmodern characters – Gurus, Consultants, and Entrepreneurs – have become so fashionable precisely because of their indifference with respect to the distinction between fact and value. Moreover, *only a person who refuses to acknowledge the modern distinction between fact and value can gleefully accept that fashion is an apt term to describe what is going on in management thinking.* S/he does not need the moral fictions the scientific manager needs in order to back up his or her claim to authority. S/he understands that such authority is fictitious.

Guru and Consultant

As moral representatives of postmodern culture, the Guru and the Consultant not only

blend some of the characteristics which were typical of their modern precursors but they have also added some new flavor to their own roles. The result is a highly fashionable mix of characteristics which will evoke the ambivalent response that is also on a more general level typical with respect to fashion. However, before listing some of the characteristics that pertain to the Guru and the Consultant, it is necessary to shed some light on how I see their mutual relationship.

To begin with, it is virtually impossible to become a management guru without being a consultant. The consultancy job offers a person who wants to become a guru the practical knowledge and sensitivity which is necessary to appeal to managers. An academic who does not have the experience of working with managers in the field will very unlikely become a guru, unless s/he is a co-author of a best-selling book or can recur to some other forms of practical experience. The guru is, I suggest, on a level of popularity, income, status and, who knows, expertise to which many but not all consultants vainly aspire. Thus, while it must be granted that many gurus are consultants, only few consultants will become gurus.

The Consultant as the moral representative of postmodern culture is itself the result of a historical process which is firmly rooted in the early days of modernism and which began with such notorious actors as courtesans, jesters and/or sorcerers (Saul, 1993; Clark and Salaman, 1996; ten Bos and van der Wal, 1997). In the wake of people like Frederic Taylor, these colorful people were increasingly being replaced by colorless, scientifically oriented people who carried out time and motion studies in order to enhance organizational efficiency. My father who worked for more than thirty years in a cotton mill used to tell me stories about reticent and somehow mysterious people in white coats who were, with measuring rods, stopwatches, notebook, crayons and pencils in the ready, regularly visiting the department where he earned a living. They were called the 'doctors'. You always could tell that two or three weeks after a visit of the doctors an acceleration of work pace would take place only to be stopped a few days later due to the protests of my father and his colleagues. These mysterious colorless people turned out to be the consultants who became characteristic of modern industry. Although the colorless consultants with their scientific world view are still active, they are increasingly being replaced by people with a very different outlook. In the postindustrial society, consultants have become fashionable and colorful again.

A major part in this drama is played by the Guru who can be seen, I suggest, as a consultant *par excellence*. By means of this expression – *the consultant par excellence* – I intend to capture something which is often forgotten in the literature about gurus (see for a notable exception: Jacques, 1996) and which is extremely important in order to understand the character of Guru and Consultant. Contrary to the mysterious people in white coats or to the Manager or Therapist, the Guru professes to be an expert not only with respect to organizational matters but also with respect to matters of life and death. Unlike the consultant under modern conditions, the postmodern Guru or Consultant offers you advice on matters of both the system world and the life world as Habermas would have it (see: Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). They do not only tell managers how to manage their organizations, they also tell them which kind of people they should become in order to be happy and morally conscious citizens with fulfilling lives.

This reminds us of MacIntyre's idea discussed above that under emotivist circumstances – and perhaps postmodernism might be viewed as an intensification of emotivist tendencies – no limits are set on whom is going to participate in the moral

debates of the age. But, as MacIntyre explains, the price for this accessibility is that nobody can speak with authority. Gurus do not hesitate to moralize because they are very well aware that you do not need to morally legitimate yourself in postmodern conditions. The absence of authority may be the cause of many academics' condescending attitude.

As moral representatives of postmodern culture Guru and Consultant have blurred another pre-eminently modern distinction. Not only do they, as we saw in the previous section, abandon the distinction between fact and value; they also abandon the distinction between the public and the private. This second distinction, of course, echoes the first one. It is important to see that it runs against deep-rooted and highly modern ideas about professionalism.

In the view of the Manager or any other modernist nothing is so unprofessional, indeed blasphemous as blurring the dividing line between the public and the private (Simon, 1965; Ladd, 1970, 1984; Michelman, 1993). According to the modernist, management is essentially about keeping the private at bay. No moods, no emotions, no moralities are available to the bureaucratic Manager. The officials of an organization are ...

"envisaged as more or less ethically neutral ... (and) the values to be taken as data are not those which would guide the individual if he were a private citizen." (Bergson, cited in: Ladd, 1970: 492).

What makes gurus like Charles Handy, Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins, Tom Peters and many others 'postmodern', *at least to a certain extent*, is that they vehemently challenge the validity of this distinction. This is one of the reasons why they have been accused over and over again of undermining managerial professionalism. However, the very fact that these management experts have also ventured into the private realm and to become dealers in what can best be described as *folk philosophies* is, I suggest, what has made them so colorful and fashionable. When Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996: 351) argue that the work of Stephen Covey "is total quality management for the character, re-engineering for the soul", they are despite their critical and modernist attitude the best spokesmen Covey could ever dream of. What would have been detested by modern spirits such as Micklethwait and Wooldridge is perhaps the single most important reason for the guru's popularity under postmodern circumstances.

Apart from this, I do not want to suggest that the dividing line between modernism and postmodernism in management thinking is clear. Not only are there many differences of opinion among gurus and consultants which makes it rather difficult to bring them under one heading (such as 'postmodern'), but in many respects they also continue and perhaps even radicalize specific modern themes. Much of what I wrote about the Manager, the Therapist and the Aesthete is also pertinent to the Guru or the Consultant. I have already pointed out that postmodern characters share with their modern precursors a concern with techniques and efficiency, a concern which is deemed to be more important than the concern with truth. But while many modern characters would not deny the possibility of truthful knowledge (see for example Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996: 197), most postmodern characters have serious doubts. This has seduced some of them to embrace stark forms of cynicism. People like Peters (1988) or Hamel and Prahalad (1994) have repeatedly pointed out how important it is for

managers to be willing to manipulate the truth, for example, to create a 'sense of urgency' among the workforce.

Such postmodern cynicism, however, does not seem to be shared by all gurus. People like Stephen Covey clearly believe what they say is true. Yet, it is not very plausible that Covey (1990a: 101) honestly believes that "real leadership power comes from an honorable character". I at least do not believe that such a statement can be the result of a scientific, objective and rationalist inquiry. It is more an expression of what Covey desires to be the case. Peter Senge (1990: 159) provides another example of the strained relationship many gurus or consultants have with factual truth. At face value he seems to adopt a pretty straightforward position for he explicitly argues that "being committed to the truth is much more powerful than any technique." But then he weakens this position by claiming that "commitment to the truth does not mean seeking the 'Truth', the absolute final word or the ultimate cause." He then goes on to explain that such commitment entails that one should be unconditionally willing to "root out the ways we limit and deceive ourselves" and "to continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are."

We may conclude from this that Senge profoundly believes that truth can become a "truth trap" (Jacques, 1996: 16) if you seriously believe that there is a truth. The belief in the possibility of factual and truthful knowledge can become an obstacle which prevents one from facing reality as it is. Although Senge – who is in my opinion one of the leading *folk philosophers* in management thinking – refers to all great religions in order to support the claim that the truth shall set you free (1990: 161), he clearly does not think the truth is a goal as such. Instead, the truth appears as a means in order to enhance creativity. Organizations, Senge explains (1990: 357), are not helped by "true believers" but by learners. This is, I suggest, clearly not the type of insight which would be intuited by my modern characters.

Summarizing, we must accept that the dividing line between modern characters and postmodern characters is very thin indeed. But while acknowledging the validity of this point, I have also hinted at some changes in management thinking the consequences of which are highly incalculable. My suggestion is that management science is increasingly being replaced by management fashion. This shift also points to other fundamental changes that are underway: the distinctions between fact ('is') and value ('ought') on the one hand and public and private on the other are under serious attack.

This is why the Guru and the Consultant are becoming or have become highly fashionable folk philosophers who do not only muse about organizational structures or global strategies but also about how individuals feel, act, and think. As fashionable folk philosophers they endorse the values of the Entrepreneur who, after all, seems to be the character who has fully accepted that the public/private or the value/fact dichotomies are disappearing.

In this regard, the Entrepreneur is the most important representative of postmodern culture. The members of this culture increasingly identify as employees and as private citizens with this character. They see and are encouraged to see their jobs and their lives as an adventurous and risky enterprise which not only entails that they, for example, earn a good salary but also that they invest in their houses or in the stock market, that they strategically and psychologically prepare themselves for the rainy days ahead, i.e. for the demands of a turbulent and merciless market and, most important of

all, that they adopt a fashionable, a very fashionable imago. Where the Entrepreneur was once the symbol of limitation, boredom, narrow-mindedness, and greed – one only has to consult the novels of Dickens or Zola – s/he has now become “sexy” (Jameson, 1992: 274).

Concluding remarks

In what follows, I will try to develop a more sympathetic, non-rational and not-condescending perspective on management fashion. Much of my sympathies and antipathies are not clearly understood by myself, but I do think that much critical debate misses what makes management fashion so attractive to practitioners. Much of the ideas that nowadays pervade management thinking are not for those who stick to the belief that science is somehow the Real McCoy and as such signifies “all that is best and most genuine” (Van de Water, cited in: Schwartz, 1996: 12).

I do not agree with this belief. Therefore, I wish to argue for a more fashionable perspective on what is so enormously fashionable in management thinking. That is, we should not be looking for the Real McCoy which is supposed to be hiding somewhere underneath the surface. Following Taylor (1997), we may stick as firmly as possible to this surface. Critics of management fashion should not merely act as *detectives* who disenchant and debunk mysteries. Instead they may wish to find answers to the questions I have derived from my analysis of why people tend to fear or detest fashion. In subsequent chapters, I will regularly (but not systematically) return to these questions :

1. what do we fear in management fashion?
2. what is nonsense in management thinking?
3. what is specifically anti-scientific or unscientific in management thinking?
4. what is distinctive or different in management thinking?
5. what is nostalgic in management thinking?
6. what happens to the meaning of meaning in management thinking?
7. what is manipulative or alienating in management thinking?

We do not need to debunk fashion in the name of efficiency, rationalism, or morality. In this way we may enable a more sensible or aesthetic understanding of what seems to have such a firm hold on practitioners and consultants. If we insist as academics on debunking management fashion, we will blind ourselves to meanings it may have for those who follow it. This is of course not to say that we do not have to develop a critical attitude towards gurus and consultants.

On the contrary, the major point of this book is to make clear that *fashion is not fashionable all the way down*. I will argue that management fashion is infested with utopian and rationalistic tendencies that undermine its critical or liberatory potential. In other words, my point is not that we need to resort to allegedly superior forms of rationality or morality to become critical of management practice and management fashion. My point is rather that we should dispense with such would-be superiority if we are to understand both.

2 Strategy's Great Utopian Twist

"It is no longer necessary to wait for the revolution to begin to realize ourselves: the self is the new strategic possibility."

Paul Veyne (cited in: Halperin, 1997: 73)

Strategy is mind-boggling. This pertains not only to the word 'strategy' itself, but also to the theoretical domain known under various names such as 'strategic studies', 'corporate strategy' or 'strategic management'. While very few people seem to be willing to cast doubt on the usefulness of strategy for organizational practice, there is widespread disagreement as to the theoretical underpinnings that should guide the Guru, the Consultant, and the Manager. Most of these disagreements are, I will argue, centering round an implicit or explicit notion of reality. As we will see in this chapter, students of strategy criticize each other in the name of this 'reality'.

Chia (1996: 26) has described realism as ...

"... a fundamental ontological posture which asserts that reality pre-exists independently of observation and as discrete, permanent and identifiable 'things', 'entities', 'events', 'generative mechanisms', etc. This version of realism underwrites the still dominant academic predisposition which takes as unproblematic such commonsensical notions as the 'the organization', its 'goals', 'culture', 'environment', 'strategies', 'life-cycles', etc., as theoretically legitimate objects of analyses."

Is this to suggest that charging a particular theory with lack of realism entails that it somehow does not correspond to a pre-given reality? Is such a lack of correspondence the deathblow for any theory? There is every appearance that students of strategy think this to be the case. They seem to be eager to sacrifice beauty, clarity, and ingenuity, to mention just some other valuable characteristics of theories, on the altar of what they believe is reality. As a consequence, scholars believe that followers of different fashions than their own are at best 'unrealistic' or 'naïve' and at worst 'idiotic' or even 'dangerous' (see for a striking example: Donaldson, 1996; Hilmer and Donaldson, 1997).

Many authors do indeed believe that there is an identity crisis in strategic studies. This identity crisis, often described in terms of fragmentation (Zan, 1990) or lacking cross-fertilization (Rumelt, 1997), has led to a proliferation of 'realities' in a field which was once the privileged domain of people with an economic background. New contributions tried to combine economy with organization studies or organizational behavior and, more recently, it has even been tried to escape from economy altogether. All these contributors had their own 'reality' to bring into the discussion, arguing that it is this reality that offers the best explanation of strategic success. Economic experts in strategic studies are likely to react to such contributions, especially when they are of the post-economic sort to be discussed below, by venting their wrath, in the name of their own realities and rationalities, upon what they can only see as faddish and stylish innovations entering the sacred territory. The crisis they perceive is invariably described in terms of fragmentation, lacking boundaries, conceptual confusion, and unclear

foundations, all of which lead, of course, to scientific hollowness. Are they right or are they merely people who, in terms of McCloskey (1990: 111), do not want to learn anything new because they think this would erode their positions as experts? Or, to rephrase this question, are they merely people who refuse to allow for other realities than their own? And in what sense do these realities differ from each other?

These questions and others will be discussed in four sections. In the first section, I will discuss some micro-economic contributions to strategic studies all of which were claimed to ignore the reality of the firm. In the second section, I will discuss the pragmatic twist inspired by people like Porter or Wernerfelt who have, from various perspectives, argued that students of strategy should help practitioners with the explanation and achievement of strategic success. In the third section, I will discuss the important move towards the strategic self that recently took place in the field, a move which I will define as strategy's Great Utopian Twist, because it *seems* to allow for a perspective on a non-economic or non-technological strategic discourse. I will argue that the Great Utopian Twist may not be so great after all because it is, like all other contributions, entangled in the causal reasoning that is typical of ration-utopian perspectives. In the last section, I will briefly draw some conclusions and hint at a more fashionable way of looking at strategic decision-making that avoids this way of reasoning.

The overall aim of the chapter is to explore utopian tendencies in different branches of strategic studies. What all these branches have in common, even the more fashionable among them, is that they are not able to get rid of the idea that there is some deeper, underlying 'reality' in the name of which strategic and/or economic behavior should be explained. Such 'realities' include, *inter alia*, Hobbesian opportunism, the deeply felt desire to be economically successful, dog-eat-dog competition, calculation and economy, or simply irrational behavior. The different branches in strategic studies can be interpreted as providing an escape route from these underlying and often grim 'realities'. That these underlying 'realities' seem to be at best speculative and at worst ludicrous does not spring to mind when one reads texts about the subject. But do we really see opportunism holding sway among business leaders? Do we really feel that these people are profit-maximizing automatons? Are markets and competition really so merciless? Would decision-making really be irrational if no clear-cut method would be provided? What we assume about deeper realities is, I suggest, not evident to the senses.

As will become more clear in later chapters, assumptions about a hidden world that is largely inaccessible to the senses, and the related utopian desire to escape from it, are non-fashionable elements in an area which has always been closely linked to economic science. Such elements erode a more fashionable and aesthetic fascination with surface aspects. That is, they divert attention from issues such as informal communications (gossip, rumor), the irresistibility of luck and chance (e.g. creativity, serendipity) and other uncontrollable and unpredictable aspects that affect strategic behavior. Most branches in strategic studies ignore these surface aspects and focus on what is assumed to lie underneath.

Unrealistic economics

The neoclassical perspective

Undeniably, fragmentation has occurred in strategic studies. An early motive for this has

been the widespread disenchantment with neoclassical assumptions that once pervaded the field. The focus of neoclassical studies was not on what happened in firms themselves, but on what happened in the broader economic environment of which they were a part. Organizational idiosyncrasies were considered to be irrelevant. Firms were, from a neoclassical perspective, the "quintessential black box" (Mahoney, 1992: 106). They were simply assumed to always strive for profit maximization under conditions of perfect or unbounded rationality. Later, critics became increasingly dissatisfied with these assumptions about the firm, mainly because they were felt to be unrealistic. Why was this the case?

The neoclassical perspective was interested in macro-economic issues such as price mechanisms under conditions of decentralized decision-making, the relationship between productive activities in a society and its demands for goods and services, the competitiveness of nations, and, finally, the effects of all this on societal welfare. The price to be paid for this 'structural' focus was an extremely static view of the economic organization itself. So static indeed that some have argued that the 'organization' or 'firm' is, from a neoclassical perspective, a technically redundant concept (Reed, 1996: 38). As a result it was felt that neoclassical theory had only minor practical implications for the Manager (Van Cayseele and Schreuder, 1988; Mahoney, 1992).

Rumelt (1997: 134), however, has argued that it would be "unfair and beside the point" to criticize neoclassical theory simply because the discipline as such is not interested in the same phenomena as those who study business strategy. Besides, ...

"... [a]ll models in the social sciences are unrealistic: good models are specialized and simple, generating descriptions of the phenomena of interest with the fewest necessary constructs and assumptions. [The] mismatch [between neoclassical theory and students of business strategy] arises because policy researchers and economists have been interested in different phenomena."
(ibid.)

Unfair or not, students of what came to be known as 'micro-economy' have generally not been as polite as Rumelt and have vehemently argued against the neoclassical assumptions about the firm. Meanwhile, they have, as I hope to show in this chapter, remained faithful to at least some basic neoclassical premises, most of which are related to a utilitarian understanding of human beings. Rumelt's point about the incompatibility of different disciplines ignores that there are such shared understandings.

At face value, however, the differences are striking. Neoclassical economy assumes away what micro-economists thought was most interesting: the real firm. Strategic studies, it came to be argued, should take the *real firm* as an object of analysis, that is, ...

"... the firm which exhibits both an economic abstract dimension as an *economic operator of exchange*, and an organizational dimension as a *social construction*" (Zan, 1990: 91).

Ideally, strategic studies should become an interdisciplinary area blending economical theory and organizational theory. Only such an interdisciplinary approach could help to develop a more dynamic perspective on the firm. What once used to be dismissed as "irrelevant associations with the *real world* of firms" (Machlup, *quoted in*: Zan, 1990: 92;

emphasis mine), now became the principal object of strategic studies. The link between economy on the one hand and organizational studies or organizational behavior on the other would allow the strategic scholar to get inside the black box of the strategic firm (Rumelt, 1984: 561). This black box is a reality lying out there for those who want to observe it empirically. Rumelt (1997: 132) has listed some of the more important empirical observations:

- general managers make choices and some of these choices have more impact on business performance than others
- strategic choices are not always explicit; they are also uncertain, infrequent, or simply the consequence of irreversible commitments
- the most critical strategic choices are those concerned with the selection of product/market areas or segments
- similar firms with similar strategic problems may respond differently
- firms competing in the same industry use different bundles of resources and disparate approaches (due to different “histories of strategic choice” and due to managers who seek “asymmetric competitive positions”).

These are all aspects of a reality that was once simply assumed away. Interdisciplinary micro-economic approaches rather than monolithic macro-economic approaches were expected to open the black box.

Behavioral theory of the firm

The so-called ‘behavioral theory of the firm’ (BTF) was among the first of such micro-economic approaches. It used insights from cognitive psychology in order to describe strategic processes in organizations. It argued against the neoclassical assumption of unbounded rationality. More than half a century ago, Simon laid the foundation of BTF by famously claiming that (strategic) decision-makers were “intendedly rational, but only limitedly so” (Simon, 1947: xxiv). What he meant by this was that it was simply “*unrealistic* to expect managers to meet the stringent requirements of wholly rational behavior”, as did neoclassical economists (Miller, Hickson, and Wilson, 1996: 295; my emphasis).

This was, however, not to say that managers were spurred by BTF to behave irrationally. On the contrary, their behavior should be ‘reasoned’ in the sense that they ought to act with great caution and deliberation. Simon pointed out that decision-making or strategic thinking should not only be understood in terms of content or result but also in terms of psychological processes. He believed that decision-making processes existed inside human heads. Much later, strategic studies became infested with mental models, learning processes, cognitive schemes and other concepts that seem to have more links with psychology than with economy. The overall point to be made here is that psychology was introduced in the name of reality. The case of BTF against neoclassical economics rests on the notion that it corresponds more accurately with an underlying psychological reality.

Transaction cost theory

BTF had a major impact on transaction cost theory (TCT), which emphasized the need for vertical control on economic transactions. It borrowed the idea of bounded rationality

and combined this with a set of grim behavioral assumptions which could be seen as a corrective on neoclassical ones. As economic agents, TCT argues, people are all, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, prone to opportunistic behavior. Such behavior includes bluffing, lying, misleading, disguising, obfuscating, cheating, and sometimes even stealing (Williamson, 1985: 47). The catchword in this discussion became 'self-interest with guile'. Economic agents were supposed to cunningly look after their own self-interest.

As Noorderhaven (1995: 611) has argued, TCT is very far removed from Rousseau's idea that evil is "exterior to nature". With TCT we enter into a Hobbesian world where opportunism is the hidden core of all economic actors. If this is true, we cannot allow individual economic actors to fend for themselves in the markets where they wish to operate. They would not stop haggling, bartering, or fighting over the transactions they wish and do not wish to make. For each transaction new agreements will have to be made, a tedious process seriously undermining the efficiency of the transaction process as such.

In other words, the market where transactions are taking place is costly if trust is lacking. What markets need is hierarchy, or a kind of governance structure (Mahoney, 1992) that encourages economic actors to engage in transactions. Note that markets are posited here, fully in line with liberal and capitalist assumptions (Clegg, 1990), as the natural and original means of resource allocation. However, a war of all against all would hold these markets in its grip if people would not intervene with peace-keeping hierarchies. Indeed, the existence of these hierarchies conceals an underlying, dangerous, and merciless world.

From these assumptions about the underlying nature of people and markets, it is inferred that unbridled distrust and conflict are the inevitable result of opportunism meeting mercilessness. The idea to reduce this conflict potential by means of a governance structure is essentially 'Hobbesian'. Hierarchy, says Williamson, is needed in order to bridle reckless opportunism and hence to safeguard trust. Firms are Williamson's preferred examples, but legislation, governmental control, and national culture, all of which are ignored in TCT, also come to mind (Pitelis, 1991). Such hierarchies help prevent 'adverse selection' or undo its consequences. For example, a customer who has been lured by a sales manager into buying a deficient product (a typical case of adverse selection) may resort to the firm by pointing out that guarantee conditions were not met. If his or her complaints are inadequately dealt with, s/he may eventually sue the company (Mahoney, 1992). Without such means of vertical control, the willingness of people to engage in economic transactions will evaporate.

Hierarchy and authority thus help to attenuate nasty consequences of bounded rationality and Hobbesian opportunism, "in part because of the ability of authority to stop prolonged disputes, but also because members of a hierarchy feel part of a whole." (Pitelis, 1991: 12; see also: Barney and Hesterly, 1996: 119) Convergent expectations are likely to arise, something which is a precondition for efficient economic transactions, but the price to be paid for this is, of course, a certain restriction of individual freedom.

BTF and TCT criticized

Just as was the case with neoclassical studies, both BTF and TCT have been criticized for being unrealistic. Much of the criticism focuses on the assumptions about a hidden reality in people as well as in markets.

To begin with TCT: the assumption that markets are primordial and firms are secondary has been disputed; the distinction between markets and hierarchies (such as firms) is believed to be too static; opportunism is not only natural but also, and perhaps even more so, cultural; the role of pre-existent social relationships is underestimated; the focus is rather one-dimensionally on firms as means of responding to market failure (governments may also play a role); finally, firms may, under circumstances, cause market failure rather than being a response to it (for example, in case of monopolistic tendencies), etc.

BTF met similar criticism: it has been pointed out that decision-making does not merely exist in the head (in order words, it cannot be simplified to a purely cognitive process); broader social aspects such as politics, culture, and morality are merely treated as extraneous complexities causing rationality to be bounded; the liberal-humanist frame of mind where notions such as intention, purposefulness, and reason still play a pivotal role, is naive or too mechanistic, etc.

In spite of these criticisms, BTF and TCT have been treated by students of strategy with remarkable mildness and politeness. Indeed, much of the criticism came from outsiders. BTF and TCT remained extremely influential both in- and outside strategic studies. Chia (1996: 194) has argued that ideas related to BTF are still "embedded in the intellectual priorities of writers on decision". Among such priorities are linear causal thinking and a "a subtle privileging of the conscious over the unconscious in accounting for decisional 'events'". Such intellectual preferences form "an interlocking and self-sustaining web of beliefs which help to uphold the notion of choice, intentionality, consequence and optimization." Mahoney (1992: 111-113) points out that, in spite of its rather orthodox economizing tendencies and its incompleteness, TCT has been applied in the study of mergers, hybrid organizational forms, joint ventures, corporate finance, marketing, politics, business ethics, and many more. It has even reinvigorated seemingly outmoded research domains such as property rights theory (PRT) and agency theory (AT) which are supposed to help compensate for TCT's incompleteness.

Property right theory

PRT embroiders on the idea, a long time ago promulgated by Berle and Means (1932), that the firm might be studied from a legalistic perspective. What business is really about is property. Neoclassical studies, it is argued, entirely missed this dimension. It assumed that the cost of information is zero, that private property rights are fully defined, that these rights are enforced at zero costs, that the state upholds the institutions of market exchange, and so on. PRT discredits all this and it does so, of course, in the name of yet another reality:

"However, in the real world (...) some rights are not fully delineated (e.g. common rights in some fisheries); some rights are not fully enforced (e.g. thefts are not reduced to zero); some rights are not priced (e.g. parking space in some shopping centers) ..." (Mahoney. 1992: 116)

The point is that property rights have an important influence on the way in which transactions between economical agents are negotiated. Alchian and Demsetz (1972) proposed to define the firm in terms of property rights. Such rights include the rights of

stockholders to claim residual profits (i.e. profits that remain after all other claims on the firm, including taxes, have been satisfied) or the right to use and change the form of assets (e.g. the right of labor to revise or renegotiate the contract with the employer or, if judged necessary, to leave the firm). People within and outside the firm are constantly negotiating about property rights. Researchers, PRT argues, should focus on such negotiating processes rather than on the firm itself. Just as was the case with neoclassical theories, the firm became once again a redundant concept.

In order to know what happens on micro-economic level, the focus of analysis should be on the ever-changing nexus of contracts in which property rights are described. A static, Parmenidean view of the world is replaced by a Heraclitean one in which contracts are always liable to change due to, for example, changing size of involved groups or to politicized or antagonistic circumstances (that might occur when the distribution of wealth is believed to be unfair). Employees and employers may always wish to start new debates about the acceptability of terms they formerly agreed to. This implies that the relationship between employers and employees is symmetrical, an insight which has tempted some writers (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972; Machan, 1987) to defend some controversial insights.

Take, for example, the idea that firing can be bi-directional: not only the employer can fire the employee, but the employee can also fire the employer by leaving the firm. Analogously, a customer may leave the grocery if she cannot find the vegetables she is looking for. Not viewing the relationship between employer and employee as symmetrical is, Machan (1987: 49) argues, "insultingly paternalistic". Alchian and Demsetz claim in fact that the firm is really nothing more than a market where equal partners meet, thereby discrediting TCT's absolute dichotomy between firm and market.

All this is not to suggest that the relationship between the employer and employee is as free from engagement as is the relationship between the grocer and the customer. On the contrary, employees are working in teams, a form of engagement which is, I dare to say, alien to customers in a grocery. As team members they are, this time fully in line with TCT, assumed to have a Hobbesian incentive to be monitored by "a centralized contractual agent" (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972: 780), generally a person who might be a manager, a boss, a coach, or, under circumstances, a slave-driver:

"My own favorite example is riverboat pulling in China before the communist regime, when a large group of workers marched along the shore towing a good-sized boat. The unique interest of the example is that the collaborators agreed to the hiring of a monitor to whip them." (Cheung, 1983: 8, *quoted in*: Mahoney, 1992: 117)

The major task of this contractual agent is to reduce shirking on behalf of the team-members, something which is easier said than done since team-members might be expected to shirk since they know perfectly well that it is exceedingly difficult to assess individual contributions in teams. However, under such Hobbesian conditions, the contractual agent (employer, manager, slave-driver) emerges as a "coordinator or orchestrator of a private market (firm)" who is simply assumed to ensure "efficient production *vis-à-vis* the ordinary market" (Pitelis, 1991: 24).

Here, PRT becomes inextricably intertwined with TCT (Mahoney, 1992) in the sense that vertical control is once more introduced in order to temper Hobbesian

conditions that are assumed to prevail in the private markets known as firms. The disagreement between both is that TCT refuses to see firms as markets whereas PRT does.

Criticizing PRT

Many objections have been raised against PRT. Its exclusive focus on teams and contracts leads to a neglect of the firm as such; the need of vertical control is taken for granted rather than argued for; it is based on cynical assumptions about people. However, the critique that PRT is based on a profound misapprehension of the employee-employer relationship is more important. Once again, we see that an micro-economic approach refuses to learn from what is simply visible at the surface.

That is, PRT takes the idea of negotiated property rights to such an extreme that even slavery can be treated as the result of some hidden contract agreed upon by masters and slaves. Departing from the view that firm behavior can be explained merely by focusing on an underlying process of property negotiations can lead to blatant absurdities. Many authors (e.g. Langlois, 1987; Werhane, 1988) have rightly argued that slaves and employees are not in the position at all to start such negotiations. Only in a *purely legalistic* sense of the term can there be no difference between employer and employee. In a not so pure world, most employees have but the choice to slave away from early morning to late at night or to starve. The only liberty they enjoy is to choose the employer they wish to obey (Pitelis, 1991: 33).

Thus, as Langlois (1987) soberly remarks, the employee/employer relationship is not at all like the grocer/customer relationship. It is, he argues, ludicrous to portray the firm as a market without hierarchy. Not only are most employees not in the position to inflict any serious harm upon the employee by firing him or her, but also do they have generally no reason at all to continuously renegotiate the contract. On the contrary, such contracts are not there in order to warrant efficient production vis-à-vis markets, as PRT holds, but to protect employees against the caprices of an employer who can be as Hobbesian as the average employee, a reality which is simply ignored in TCT or PRT.

Contracts, therefore, might help to decrease the vulnerability of employees in face of a hierarchy which is, albeit an invention to temper the war of all against all which supposedly takes place in the market, profoundly 'Hobbesian' itself. The monitor does not differ from the monitored in the sense that s/he herself has also an incentive to shirk. S/he may therefore be in need of monitoring her/himself. Relationships in and around organizations are asymmetric and people who engage in them have divergent goals.

Agency theory

Agency theory (AT) purports to address such realities. It is closely linked to BTF, TCT and PRT. Mahoney (1992: 126; see also: Mahoney and Pandian, 1997: 213) even suggests that AT on the one hand and TCT and PRT on the other are not only commensurable but also isomorphic. AT shares with the other micro-economic approaches the anti-neoclassical assumptions about bounded rationality, opportunism, and self-interest. It might, however, be argued that it departs from TCT and PRT in the sense that it focuses on risk attitudes among those who enter into agency relationships (Barney and Hesterly, 1996). Here, risk attitudes seem to make up the underlying world.

Agency relationships' come into being when a person (the principal) delegates authority to another (the agent). Crucial is that the principle's welfare might be affected by decisions of the agent. This implies that she is running a risk when delegating

authority to an agent, basically for three reasons: a) her interests may not be the same as the agent's; b) perfect monitoring of the agent's performance is impossible and not without costs; c) the agent may be withholding information, say, about the real level of performance that he attains to.

In order to reduce these risks, 'agency-costs' must be made. Such costs include those made by the principal to monitor the behavior of the agent ('monitoring expenditures') and those made by the agent to reassure principals that they are performing in conformity with expectations ('bonding expenditures'). However, generally parties understand that "in many situations it will be simply too costly for principals to completely monitor agents and too costly for agents to completely assure principals that interests do not diverge" (Barney and Hesterly, 1996: 125). Although the contracting environment is invariably described as a Hobbesian world where conflicts of interest prevail, AT assumes that principal and agent still have at least one common interest: minimizing agency costs, or, perhaps more accurately, finding a form of cooperation that makes problems (a), (b), and (c) manageable.

Initially, AT was developed to address formal relationships between shareholders and managers (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). As such it lies at the heart of the nowadays highly popular literature on 'corporate governance' and 'stakeholder theory', both of which have received a lot of attention in strategic studies but also in business ethics. However, it has also been pointed out that AT may be applied to evaluate many more risky 'contracts' in and around the organization, such as those between managers and employees, between franchisers and franchisees, or between companies and customers (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; White, 1988; Bergen, Dutta, and Walker, 1992).

All these relationships are infested with Hobbesian uncertainty, which is generally studied and interpreted from the principal's perspective (how can franchisers ensure that franchisees will promote the business or how can shareholders ensure that managers will strive for profit maximization?), although this is not necessarily the case. Meanwhile, the organization is, much in line with PRT, seen as "a nexus for a set of contracting relationships among individuals" (Jensen and Meckling, 1976: 125). Rewards, punishments, evaluations, performance measurements, and delegation methods are all conditioned by such contracting relationships.

The principal's uncertainty is always caused by information asymmetry, something which can occur before and after entering into a contract with the agent (Arrow, 1985; Eisenhardt, 1989). In the pre-contractual scenario, the principal faces problems of *adverse selection*. AT assumes that she knows what the agent must do and that she also knows what kind of characteristics the agent needs to have in order to do what the principal wants. The problem, however, is that the principal does not know if *this* particular agent is able to do what she wants. How is she to know whether a particular person is an eligible candidate? How is she, in other words, to avoid 'adverse selection'? Can she, for example, take the candidate at his word if he promises to meet expectations?

This would, of course, be naive under 'Hobbesian' conditions. Agents may be inclined to distort the truth if they think that not doing the job the principal has in mind for them would be disadvantageous to them. Thus comes, AT argues, a typical case of information asymmetry into being. The principal is submerged in uncertainty, whereas the agent is assumed to know with certainty when the truth about his intentions or capabilities is being hidden behind a smoke screen. The literature has suggested a plethora

of alternatives to attenuate the agency problem the principal is facing: independent directors, corporate boards, profit-sharing, compensation packages, pension plans, control by institutional investors, and even cultural management (cultural clans, for example, may help to minimize diverging interests and goals; see: Ouchi, 1980). The principal, however, will always face a tradeoff between the costs of gaining better information and the risk that poor performance will be the result of hiring the 'wrong' agent.

In the post-contractual case, the principal needs to assess the agent's performance in order to give him an appropriate reward, but again she faces the problem of obtaining the right information. The problem is acute not so much because the agent is entitled to a fair treatment, but because the principal wants to ensure good performance in the future. It is, therefore, in the principal's own interest to come to a fair judgment that will motivate the agent. However, since it is by no means sure that she has access to the right information required to reach a fair judgment, the situation is seen as morally hazardous. For example, it may be in the agent's interest to withhold crucial information. Another aspect, which substantially complicates the matter, is that it is not always necessarily clear to which extent contextual or environmental factors have an influence on the agent's performance (Kreps, 1990).

Risk is thus inherent in the contract between both parties. From economic decline and whimsical actions of competitors to marital problems or the death of a pet animal, all sorts of circumstances can affect the performance of the contract. So, how is the principal to tell shirking from working? Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that there are two possibilities. First, the principal can try to gather more information by entering into 'behavior based contracts', which allow for strict control systems. However, such systems may for various reasons not deliver what is expected. Clegg explains why this has been the case with subcontracting systems in the 19th century:

"[T]he monitoring of the contracts (...) offered little control over quality and pilferage, for instance. Some of the internal contractees acted 'opportunistically with guile', that is they did not do exactly what the capitalist or contractor expected of them. This should hardly be surprising to anyone familiar with that large literature in industrial sociology which demonstrates how the rationality of action by different economic actors in the same firm is invariably constructed situationally (...). One person's 'rationality' may as well be another person's guile." (Clegg, 1990: 67)

Second, by entering into 'outcome based contracts' both parties agree that the agent's reward should be determined by performance results. The difficulty, however, with this kind of contract is that they shift risk from the principal to the agent. For example, he might have been unable to meet expectations due to circumstances beyond his control. If unreasonably punished, the agent may henceforth shirk or he may even cancel the contract, which can be disadvantageous to the principal. We may conclude from this that behavior-based contracts nor result-based contracts are able to rule out risk.

AT criticized

AT claims that uncertainty and risk lie at the heart of economic organization, no matter what kind of control system you put in place to reduce both. Although AT has found some empirical support (Barney and Hesterly, 1996), it has been criticized for several

reasons. First, AT is argued to offer an overly mechanized account of contract relationships in and around the firm. For example, AT merely focuses on financial gain as the major force driving human beings. It therefore ignores valuable insights from psychology, sociology, and institutional theory. Such insights would allow for a more fully fledged perspective on the contracts underlying economic activities.

Second, AT does not convincingly explain why agents should wish to enter into contracts with principals in the first place. It assumes that such contracts are asymmetrical in the sense that agents are supposed to obey principals. In other words, principals are seen as unflinchingly autonomous actors, whereas agents are supposed to willingly sacrifice their autonomy. But why would they do so? One of the explanations offered is that they may have come to the conclusion that sacrificing their autonomy is in their own interest because they realize, like the people in China who were pulling riverboats, that the benefits of cooperation during the productive process tend to be higher if it is closely supervised by people who know how to organize.

But this explanation is hardly satisfactory. From a historical perspective, the riverboat-pullers were rather exceptional. Most agents were not and are not voluntarily cooperative. Power and coercion have therefore been employed to bring agents (employees, managers, franchisees, subcontractees, etc.) to heel. Clegg (1990) and Pitelis (1991) argue that a more historical perspective on principal-agents relationships is necessary to explain how such relationships and, indeed, how firms came into being. Such a historical perspective is painfully lacking in the universal and mechanized accounts of AT. The hidden reality is singularly described in terms of risk. One might concur with Barney and Hesterly (1996: 128) when they argue that AT offers "an unrealistic view of humans and organizations".

The pragmatic turn

The attempt to free strategic studies from its unrealistic neoclassical assumptions has only been partially successful. Admittedly, the domain of strategic studies was enriched with new, oftentimes hidden, realities: cognitive limitations, bounded rationality, idiosyncrasies, trust, hierarchy, opportunism, property rights, uncertainty, contracts, and risk attitudes entered the area. The struggle to open up a perspective on something called the firm has no doubt been successful. Yet, micro-economic approaches have been criticized for being unrealistic. The way they try to deal with the new realities is felt to be too reductive and mechanistic. Theoretical constructs could help to explain why firms came into being but they had nothing to say on how firms actually acted and responded to their environments. The following citation of two consultants who work for Ernst & Young Business Innovation illustrates the dissatisfaction of practitioners with the economic paradigm:

"Your college economics theories just don't describe the real world today. Their assumptions are mostly invalid, and many of their deeply held tenets (...) are living on their reputations, not on relevant empirical evidence." (Davis and Meyer, 1998: 83)

How then were students of strategy to cope with such criticism? Well, one obvious

response was simply to dispense with theoretical hairsplitting altogether and to take a *pragmatic* stance. That is, strategic studies should not primarily contribute to economic theories about the firm but should simply help members of the firm to achieve outstanding financial performance. Strategic studies' sole reason for being was not to offer sound theoretical explanations of strategic or economic processes or to offer insights in what lies underneath the world of appearances, but to help practitioners to uncover the secrets of economic *success*, yet one more reality overlooked by micro-economic theory. Although pragmatic approaches sometimes stayed quite close to their (micro)economic underpinnings, a clear shift from descriptive theory to prescriptive advice could be traced down. In this section, I will discuss the planning approach of strategy, the structure-conduct-performance approach, and the resource-based view of the firm.

Common to these approaches is the assumption that success is an economic reality. That is, success has to be defined in financial terms. Non-financial success is a contradiction in terms. Porter (1991: 96), for example, assumes ...

“... that firm success is manifested in attaining a competitive position or series of competitive positions that lead to superior and sustainable financial performance.”

He adds that behavior which does not contribute to the firm's financial performance does not constitute an object of study for strategic management. Why a particular firm chooses to use the fruits of its competitive position in order to meet non-financial ends is a “separate question”. Students of strategy should be primarily interested in helping practitioners to achieve economic success.

Binary utopias

Learned *et al.* (1965) were among the first to give a pragmatic twist to this economic frame of mind. They introduced the notorious SWOT-model which is argued to help practitioners with the task of aligning the company and its environment by first scanning the latter in terms of opportunities and threats and then by analyzing the former in terms of strengths and weaknesses.¹ Such an alignment is assumed to be a prerequisite for the achievement of financial targets. It is sometimes advised to start the procedure with the environmental scan (or external analysis) since this is supposed to warrant objectivity during the whole process. Starting with strengths and weaknesses would color the analysis of the environment (Nijssen en Ligthart, 1999). Others, especially those who endorse the resource-based perspective, have argued that opportunities and threats are meaningless without thinking of strengths and weaknesses.

Even more important is that a SWOT-analysis should be executed in the context of a set of internally consistent goals and policies if it is not to lose its purpose. Consistency is crucial because it helps countering the forces that lead several functional departments or units in separate directions. As Porter (1991: 96) remarks, explicitly formulated strategic goals help to circumvent the agency problem because ...

“... senior management cannot participate or monitor all decisions and directly ensure the consistency of the myriad of individual actions and choices that make up a firm's ongoing activities.”

Here we see the first utopian idea used to encounter Hobbesian assumptions in economy:

an overall, consistent, and well understood strategy will rule out deviant action (suboptimization, misdemeanor, self-centeredness, political strife, etc.).

It is assumed that top managers are responsible for providing the organization with the integrated and overall goals needed to achieve its financial targets. Already in his 1957 book *Leadership in Administration*, Philip Selznick (see also: 1997: 24-25) pointed to the utopian tendencies in these ideas. He claims that the idea to formulate "overall generalized purposes" rests on "utopian wishful-thinking", which will, however, be frequently corrected by "more realistic *but uncontrolled* criteria". Contrary to the intentionally unrealistic assumptions which are, as we will see in chapter five, characteristic of texts on the learning organization, Selznick wishes strategists to maintain a sometimes painful balance between utopianism and opportunism. Only in this way, says Selznick, can strategic leadership become a distinctive competence, that is, a unique strength that will help organizations to achieve their goals.

The early literature on strategy thus identifies three sources of success: a clearly articulated goal, a willingness to analyze both the external and the internal environment, and the kind of leadership which is utopian *and* realistic.

Criticizing SWOT

It might be argued that the propagators of SWOT-models endorse an ethics which is based on the power of the subject to conceptualize, plan, design, or think about movement even before it has been put into real action. Added to this came the all-important idea that the conceived possibility of movement is already its moral justification. In chapter five, we will see that this kind of ethics, which I will describe there as 'kinethics', is still prevalent in a highly fashionable concept such as the learning organization. The kind of dynamics assumed in SWOT-analyses is thus still very influential. These 'dynamic' or 'kinetic' intentions, however, have often been overlooked. Apparently, people who believe in one best method of making strategy are generally not supposed to be dynamic. But dynamism, perhaps even a dangerous kind of dynamics, is really what SWOT is all about. This becomes particular clear when we look at the binary logic that is assumed in the model.

This logic – threats versus opportunities; strength versus weaknesses; thinking versus doing – is useful for two reasons. First, a model which represents the world as a set of dichotomies helps to reduce managerial indecisiveness. Managers are seduced by SWOT-models (but also by such inventions as the portfolio-model developed by the Boston Consulting Group) to believe that strategic decisions are in fact choices between mutually exclusive alternatives. Vagueness, ambivalence, or fuzziness are ruled out on beforehand and as a consequence doubt will not likely enter the decision-making process. The idea is that a simplified world laid down in neat dichotomies is more efficient in enabling managerial action than a complex and fuzzy world that will merely increase doubt. It is supposed to speed up the decision-making process.

Second, the SWOT-model assumes an subject/object relationship, in which the strategist or planner is supposed to stand *vis-à-vis* a reality full of not overly bewildering phenomena waiting for interpretation. Coolness, distance, and objectivity are prerequisites that will further enhance decisiveness. That managers in actual practice may very often feel bewildered by problems, tensions, dilemmas and contradictions, in other words, that they are very often not subjects that coolly face an object-world, is denied by

the rationalist assumptions underlying SWOT-models. Again, there is an underlying desire to speed up decision-making.

The kind of dynamics assumed by SWOT are, I would suggest, still very influential. Although in many texts on management and organization it has by now become common parlance to speak about 'fuzziness' (Grint, 1997) or 'blur' (Davis and Meyer, 1998), the subject/object relationship still remains largely undisputed. Davis and Meyer (1998: 85), for example, criticize binary assumptions, but do so in the name of an underlying reality. They urge their readership not to lay off their strategists but "to consider that there are still decisions to be made about the company in relation to its environment". In other words, organizational and environmental reality are still viewed as objects to be studied and handled by a managerial subject. The belief in hard facts is still firm in place. They are the stuff reality is made of. Managers therefore should find and describe these facts and base their decisions on such activities. That facts are fabricated, conjured up, or invented during the decision-making process and that managers are part of reality rather than subjects outside it has no place in this rational world. (I will extensively elaborate on this issue in chapter seven.) The way to achieve success is also based on an underlying idea of distance, rather than on intimacy with whatever is at hand. Managers are expected to act like Cartesians and to distance themselves from the world rather than submerge themselves in its dynamic messiness.

Monopolistic utopias

Another problem with the early pragmatists was that although they purported to know how success might be achieved – goals-setting, SWOT-models, and utopian yet realistic leadership – they could not explain the cause of performance heterogeneity. Evidence indicated that some organizations clearly outperformed others while still using the same kind of techniques advocated by early pragmatists. Success thus still retained much of its mystery. It could not be explained so easily as early pragmatists suggest. Porter (1991: 99) describes this as a problem of causality:

"We might observe a successful firm and find that its profitability is due to a low relative cost position compared to its rivals. But the firm's cost position is an outcome and not a cause. The question becomes: Why was the firm able to attain this cost position? Some typical answers might be that it is reaping economies of scale, or has moved aggressively through the learning curve. But again, the question becomes why? Some possible answers might include entering the industry early, or the firm's ability to organize itself particularly well for cost reduction. Once again, however, the question become why? And we could continue moving along such a chain of causality even further."

Porter suggests that theoretical differences in strategic studies are not to be seen as conflicts but as the result of different perspectives. Some will prefer to focus on a point early in the causal chain leading up to success, even though this may lead to a lack of operability and thus to a gap with practitioners; others will prefer a focus on a point later in the causal chain even though this leads to a certain fixation on short-term results and superficiality. The idea is that these causal chains represent a variety of underlying preconditions for organizational success.

The picture Porter offers is compelling but has limitations. The causal chain which

strategic studies should explain is not expected to go beyond the market-environment-economy triad. Individual idiosyncrasies, sheer luck, cultural context, moral inhibitions, political circumstances, and other variables that may or may not influence organizational success are, once more, assumed away. So, Porter does not wish to escape from the economic framework in order to explain success. As we have seen, organizational success is by definition economical. Porter explains financial success in terms of 'industry structure' and 'relative position' in that industry.

For reasons I will elucidate below, Porter's position can be seen as the best known example of the 'structure-conduct-performance paradigm' (SCP). According to this paradigm, there are causal links between the structure of the industry (concentration, barriers to entry, product differentiation, etc.), the conduct of the industry (pricing policies, advertising, strategic behavior, etc.) and the performance of the industry (profitability, efficiency, etc.). During this play and interplay of economic forces, the success of a particular organization is always at risk, primarily because other organizations tend to copy the activities that made this success possible. If rival copying will be successful, it will seriously restrict if not undermine profitability. The company will therefore naturally try to prevent rivals from imitating its profit-enhancing activities by erecting entry barriers which will deter potential newcomers. Porter (1980) has discussed these entry barriers at length, thus spawning a whole new domain in the field of strategic studies which focused on nowadays fashionable notions such as 'sustainability' and 'contestability' (Porter, 1985; Ghemawat, 1986; Baumol, 1982). The underlying picture that emerges from such considerations is that menace is everywhere and that relaxation is impossible. Economic success is by definition short-lived. Hobbes still reigns supreme.

Examples of entry barriers are R&D costs, tariff barriers, or economies of scale, all of which have an influence on price setting and thus on profitability. Such entry barriers can be seen as preventing firm mobility between different lines of industry. Successful companies will thus naturally try to create a space to which those who long for success have, at least for the time being, no success.

Again, utopian tendencies are unmistakable here: a monopolistic microcosm is what strategists in firms should try to construct, at least if we are to take serious Porter's warnings for restless rivals. Firms are thus, very much in line with TCT, assumed to fear the dynamics of free markets and free competition rather than to indulge in it. In a recent article, Porter (1996) emphatically warns against fashionable ideas such as re-engineering, downsizing, or benchmarking, all of which are described as "dangerous half-truths ... leading more and more companies down the path of mutually destructive competition".

Structure, content, performance

The assumption that competition does not lead to progress was borrowed by Porter from early work on the SCP-paradigm. The original intentions of SCP were, however, at odds with those of Porter. People like Bain and Mason, who published in the 1950s, designed SCP-research in order to "help government regulators to increase competition in an industry" (Barney and Hesterly, 1996: 130). They argued that organizations would always try, by means of erecting entry barriers, to render the industries in which they were active "less than perfectly competitive". While this had obviously positive effects on the economic performance of some organizations, it had disadvantageous effects on social welfare. Why would this be the case?

One of the more obvious positions in the burgeoning discussion on the tension between economic success and social welfare was that lacking competition would not motivate organizations to experiment with new ideas or to deliver superior quality. Paradoxically, only Hobbesian market conditions would engender social welfare. On a deeper level it was felt that superior economic performance under near-monopolistic conditions merely indicated that customers were paying too high prices. Governments were thus expected to act on behalf of social welfare and to prevent companies from constructing their own monopolistic utopias. Governments rather than firms or entrepreneurs were to be seen as the guardians of a truly free market, because only such a market would prevent companies to enjoy excessive benefits. Competition is thus needed in order to constrain profitability. Under conditions of perfect competition, profitability in a particular industry will always invite new entrants keen on having their share of the pie. The SCP-paradigm holds that this process will continue until profitability has been competed away.

Although the SCP-paradigm has, as we will see below, been criticized strongly, it has played a crucial role in Porter's work. However, Porter clearly abandoned the welfare perspective of the SCP-paradigm and simply utilized its insights in order to help strategists in organizations to find "settings that are less than fully competitive" (Barney & Hesterly, 1996: 132). This has tempted many academics to dismiss the Porterian perspective as amoral. Not only does Porter persuade practitioners to embrace the profoundly pessimistic and paranoid (Hobbesian) view, shared by the micro-economists discussed earlier, that market and competition are forbidding natural forces from which you should try to find shelter, whereas such forces are, of course, merely man-made; he also suggests that oligopolistic or monopolistic strategies might offer the best shelter. Porter's advice to strategic managers can thus be cynically put like this: ACCEPT DETERMINISM AND IGNORE SOCIAL WELFARE!

Defending Porter

I myself am not sure whether such criticism does justice to Porter's own position – he also stresses the importance of choice, creativity, and imagination in order to overcome deterministic tendencies (e.g. Porter, 1991: 106; Porter 1996) – but his ideas have laid bare the disquieting possibility that under global conditions firms, especially powerful, multinational and often state-backed corporations, have strong incentives to undermine markets, states, and social welfare. Porter's ideas thus had the effect of turning the original intentions of SCP-insights (which urged governments to develop anti-concentration policies) upside-down. Without mentioning Porter at all, Pitelis (1991: 90) offers us a bleak picture of what might be going on in a rapidly globalizing world:

"The point is simply that the logic of the [capitalistic] system leads to an ever-increasing concentration of power, and thus potentially to an eventual undermining of the economic basis of democracy. The process incorporates both efficiency and inefficiency aspects, but this is not the issue. The issue is who controls the process, and to what extent and how such control can be shared by all stockholders. Should it be shared? Answers to this are beyond the scope of my discussion here. Suffice it to note this implication: that efficiency aspects of firms and industries, however important or even dominant, do not constitute a claim for 'free market forces'."

Is this to rule out Porter's view of the world as cynical and amoral? Again, I am not so sure. What he does seem to have captured with strategic concepts such as entry barriers, competitive forces, value chains, etc. is the stone-cold truth that some monopoly power is *always* the result of superior performance. If a particular firm serves its customers better than all its rivals, it will inevitably albeit often for a brief moment enjoy some of it. Indeed, it is difficult to see why firms would want to compete if there is no prospect of gaining this power. As Demsetz (1997: 75) has argued, as individuals we all expect our new ideas to be protected against free imitation and the usual way we try to do this is protecting our ideas by means of patents, copyrights, or trademarks. Such are the 'monopolistic' rewards we expect to get for our new ideas. Analogously, monopolistic power can be seen as a reasonable reward for, say, superior customer service. Anti-concentration policies, as proposed by the first propagators of the SCP-paradigm, may very well undermine the incentive for innovation. This is not so say, of course, that cartels, colluding, and other monopolistic activities should not be penalized or otherwise counteracted, but that overly rigid anti-concentration policies might prove to be a remedy which is worse than the disease.

Porter refuses to stoically resign himself to the inevitable and intends to offer practitioners a way out of the Hobbesian inferno, apparently *without* resorting to soul-engineering and techniques of the self. While most strategic fashions, including much of the resource-based perspective to be discussed below, have abandoned the utopian idea that managers can or should change the world and argue that they should begin with self-change, Porter refuses to indulge in what he judges to be a fashionable obsession with the self. On the other hand, Porter's ideas have become, at least to a certain extent, fashionable because they are appealing to individual people who take for granted that success, especially their own success, has the right to be protected. For all his efforts to be an economic scientist, he has become, at least to a certain extent, fashionable.

Criticizing Porter

Many academics have raised doubts about Porter's suggested way out of the Hobbesian inferno. It has been argued that Porter's pragmatic advises are simply wrong-headed (Volberda, 1998: 14), that real companies wish to regulate rather than blockade new entry (for example because such entry does not seriously threaten short-term profitability or because organizations understand that barriers are costly and thus not durable in the long run (Pitelis, 1991: 62-70), that the notion of entry barriers merely focuses on the relationship between incumbents and new entrants and overlooks the relationship between incumbents themselves (Wernerfelt, 1997: 120); that Porter relies too heavily on formal-rational planning (Mintzberg, 1994), that he does not have anything to say on values and beliefs and thus lacks strategic perspective (Mintzberg, 1994: 28; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1997: 57), that he merely focuses on product markets and underestimates the practical importance of so-called strategic factor markets (Barney, 1997: 146-147), that he underestimates the importance of luck (Barney, 1997: 156), that he overlooks the importance of power (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998), etc.

All these criticisms are launched at Porter in the name of reality: real companies do not do what Porter advises them to do, they are much more tolerant towards entry than Porter suggests, they also compete against those who already entered the market, they do not plan rationally, they do have values and beliefs, they do act and react on strategic factor markets, and they sometimes enjoy the benefits of power and luck. Thus, even

non-economic factors may boost and block economic success, something which Porter refuses to see.

The most devastating criticism has been directed at the idea that organizational success should be explained by analyzing both the industry in which it is active and the relative position it has in that industry. Such a focus is believed to be too abstract to be real. It just cannot accommodate non-economic and/or firm-specific factors. It is even worse in the sense that it misrepresents the real causes of strategic success. What is at stake here is the very usefulness of the industry-concept for explaining organizational success.

The critique has been vented in different ways. First, defining and classifying industries is a task for SCP-inspired economists who are employed by governments and not for practitioners who create, destroy, and combine rather than neatly outline industries (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998: 115). The focus on industries, in other words, is simply too academic and too utopian for people in real-life companies. Second, this focus cannot accommodate the empirical fact that performance heterogeneity exists within one and the same industry (Rumelt, 1997: 133-134). An old objection lurks in the background here: economically inspired theories on strategy – from neoclassical theory to SCP – have difficulties gaining perspective on real firms. Third, the aspects of industry that cause firm success, that is, the attractiveness of that industry, should not be assessed in terms of industry characteristics but in terms of the “unique skills and abilities that a firm brings to that industry” (Barney and Hesterly, 1996: 133). Using the SWOT-terminology, O’s and T’s cannot be properly understood without a deep understanding of S’s and W’s. Firms cannot understand their environments without taking into consideration their very own situation. To echo Hillary Putnam’s felicitous phrase, organizations cannot scan their environments as if they are nowhere. This insight has inspired the so-called Resource-Based Perspective (RBP) to which I will now turn.

Navel-gazing utopias

Arguably, all the strategic perspectives discussed so far have focused on the ‘market’ rather than on the organization itself. This is what made these perspectives so vulnerable to accusations of lacking realism. In her book *The Theory of the Growth of the Firm* which was originally published in 1959, Penrose tried to rectify the problem by proposing to see the firm as “a collection of productive resources” (1997: 31). Rather surprisingly, she argued that such resources do not have an input in the production process. Only *services*, says Penrose, do. Such services are yielded by the resources and are a function of the way in which these resources are used. For example, the same resource when used for different purposes may provide wholly different services. Penrose adds that the distinction between resources and services does not reside in their respective durability, but ...

“... in the fact that resources consist of a bundle of potential services and can, for the most part, be defined independently of their use, while services cannot be so defined, the very word ‘service’ implying a function, an activity.” (1997: 31)

Penrose’s insights laid the foundation of what 25 years later came to be known as RBP. The central idea in RBP is that it explains organizational success in terms of the resource side of the firm. More specifically, those who work from within the RBP-paradigm are interested in “linking the explanation of competitive advantage, and the dynamics of competitive advantages, to the characteristics of resources, and how these characteristics

change over time." (Foss, 1997a: 4) They should, however, keep in mind Penrose's warning that the presence of resources itself is not enough to explain strategic success, but that it is rather the effective use of such resources that works the miracle. In other words, strategic success is strongly dependent on the service or set of services that a resource might provide.

But how exactly should we understand such a resource? One definition is provided by Wernerfelt (1997: 119) who speaks of the firm's resources at a given time "as those (tangible and intangible) assets which are tied semi-permanently to the firm" (Wernerfelt, 1997: 119). Wernerfelt mentions the following examples: brand names, in-house knowledge of technology, employment of skilled personnel, trade contracts, machinery, efficient procedures, capital, and so on.

Barney (1991: 103) adds the element of controllability to his definition: resources are "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by the firm". Control is here understood as a means of handling resources in such a way that they can lead to strategic success. Such success is only possible if the resources are: a) valuable (i.e. they enable the organization to exploit opportunities and handle threats); b) rare (i.e. they are not commonly possessed by competitors); c) largely inimitable (i.e. it either very costly or downright impossible for imitators to copy them); and d) difficult to substitute (i.e. there are no resources available that might address the same opportunities and threats).

Finally, Mahoney (1992: 126) describes resources as the "genetics of firm heterogeneity" and under this heading he distinguishes human capital, physical capital, legal capital, and intangible capital. It is the combination of these four types of resources that constitutes the 'genetic code' of the organization. The genetic metaphor has become very powerful in the world of RBP-inspired consultancy. There are consultants who, following Hamel and Prahalad (1994: Chapter 3), talk frequently about 'organizational DNA-strings', 'mutations', or 'genetic manipulation' in order to hammer home their recommendations for practitioners.

With such descriptions of the resource in mind, RBP starts from two empirical generalizations: a) resources needed to implement strategies can vary significantly across firms (even within one and the same industry); b) these differences tend to be relatively stable. Both observations are linked to the following economic assumptions: c) differences in economic performance are caused by differences in resource endowments or, perhaps more accurately, by differences in the effectiveness with which resources are utilized; d) firms want to increase (not: maximize) their economic performance (Foss, 1997a: 4; Barney and Hesterly, 1996: 133).

Such theoretical propositions have straightforward practical implications and it is here that RBP's most important contribution should be sought (Foss, 1997b: 345, 362). Firms can secure sustainable and strong performance if they are acquiring the appropriate resources and are able to make the right use of them. In both the popular and academic literature, the pragmatic consequences of RBP have been described extensively.²

To take a famous example, Wernerfelt (1997; originally published in 1984) has tried to combine the best of two worlds. Remaining faithful to well-known economical assumptions, he has explicitly tried to translate law-like economic generalizations into practical advice. In some sense this makes him an ally of people like Hamel and Prahalad (1994) who, however, do not care very much about giving a sound economical basis to

their ideas. One only needs to cast a quick eye on Wernerfelt's practical advises and especially the language in which they are molded to see what I mean:

- gain a position of bargaining power with respect to suppliers and buyers
- establish a resource position barrier which makes it difficult for others in and outside the industry to catch up
- try to become a pioneer since "it is much easier to pioneer a position than to replace someone else who already has it" (1997: 121)
- understand that, as a pioneer, you will be able to retain "better people in a more stimulating setting" (ibid.)
- remember the truth of the following analogy: since "a high tree in a low forest ... will get more sun, it will grow faster and stay taller" (ibid.)
- prevent that experience and knowledge leaks to others
- try to combine new resources with what you already have (this is, for example, a prerequisite for mergers and acquisitions)
- try to recycle resources (they may be utilized for more than one product)
- remember that it is not always optimal to expand your position in a single resource by simultaneously entering several markets; it is often better to "develop the resource in one market and to enter other markets from a position of strength" (1997: 124); in other words, sequential entry may be recommendable as well

This is clearly not the style we would expect in the highly formalized accounts delivered by the average micro-economist. It is a style that is expected to close the gap between the academic and the practitioner. RBP promises to bridge this gap. Wernerfelt's list of recommendations, which I constructed out of his text, also serves to illustrate the intellectual gap between RPB and earlier more economically inspired approaches. Rather than focusing on the market or the product, RPB alerts the practitioner to focus on the organization itself as a source of strategic success. And this can only be done if you are willing to think of the firm as a pool of resources.

Interestingly, it is this inward orientation that has lead Foss (1997a: 5-6) to believe that RBP is much more modest than other strategic perspectives. Why? RPB does not focus anymore on the industry but on the firm; it also dispenses with long-range planning, positioning techniques, scenarios, and other attempts to make reality malleable; and, finally, it persuades practitioners to relate strategy to the "functional level". Foss also claims that many management fashions can be classified under RBP. The book he edited (1997) starts with a fragment written by Selznick (1997) on leadership (see chapter three) which is, of course, a resource of its own; he claims that ideas about culture (see chapter four) are the source of inspiration behind RBP and his book; he further claims (Foss, 1997a: 5) that the learning organization (see chapter five) and business process redesign (see chapter six) all share RBP's basic assumption that "firms are *essentially different* and that the analysis of strategy and competitive advantage has to begin from this fact". Fans would argue that the book you are holding in your hands right now is merely an elaboration on RBP. I myself am not sure about this, but it nicely captures the reasons why I chose leadership, culture, redesign, and learning as the issues to be discussed in this book.

Two schools

That all these subjects seem to fall under the heading of RBP, however, is not to say that these fashions should be lumped together or that they are in fact merely variations on one well-known theme. Such a claim would misapprehend the important branching that has taken place within the RBP-paradigm. Some authors claim that there are two schools within RBP (Mahoney, 1995; Foss, 1997a, 1997b; Vrieling, 1998). Roughly, the distinction between both schools is one of whether dynamic factors are to be included in theory-building or not.

For the *traditional* school, dynamic factors are not of primary interest. The most important task it sets itself is "clarifying and examining the conditions that must obtain in order for resources to yield rents in equilibrium." (Foss, 1997a: 15). The traditional school is thus consistent with standard economy: it assumes supply-demand equilibrium. This has, as we will soon see, led some authors, generally belonging to the 'dynamic school', to suggest that much of what counts as RPB is too static. The protagonists of the traditional perspective hold that it offers clear-cut concepts, superior formalism, and theoretical rigidity, and that this may be well worth the price of lacking realism. The most important point is that relatively unequivocal guidelines are offered to practitioners, even though they may, under circumstances, "hinder an understanding of real-world phenomena" (Foss, 1997b: 354).

More particularly, it is claimed that the most important task of practitioners is to identify resources that may, if used properly, bring strategic success. People like Wernerfelt and Barney clearly belong to this traditional school. As we saw above, out of his economical formalism Wernerfelt conjures up all sorts of practical recommendations and Barney describes conditions resources must meet in order to be strategically successful. Culture, for example, is such a resource: it should be valuable, rare, and inimitable if it is to engender competitive advantage (see also: Vrieling, 1998: 20). Insights from organizational theory and organizational behavior are mixed here with standard economic assumptions, but, just as is the case with such assumptions, these insights might well be disputed.

The *dynamic* school refuses to accept the traditional dogma of equilibrium. The discussion about equilibrium is as old as RBP itself. Already Penrose explicitly rejected the equilibrium concept:

"The attainment of such a state of rest is precluded by three significant obstacles: those arising from the familiar difficulties posed by the indivisibility of resources; those arising from the fact that the same resources can be used differently under different circumstances, and, in particular, in a specialized manner; and those arising because in the ordinary processes of operation and expansion new product services are continually being created." (Penrose, *quoted in*: Foss, 1997b: 363)

Traditional economy holds that a situation of equilibrium in a competitive market occurs when the price is such that supply and demand are equal (Roll, 1993: 358). Economic agents are thus expected to engage in price competition. Provided that these agents are not assiduously trying to corrupt the process, for example, by striving for monopolistic hegemony, price competition will ultimately result in the stable condition economists have since long described as *equilibrium*, a notion which is linked by many of them to the moral concept of *justice* (Roll, 1993: 218).

As noticed above, this preoccupation with justice and social welfare has clearly inspired traditional SCP. It also lies at the heart of the criticism directed at Porter who was argued to cynically employ SCP-insights merely in order to help practitioners with their monopolistic and equilibrium-undermining policies. The problem with this criticism is that people like Porter do not seem to be wrong when they argue that in reality economic agents do not care so much about justice or equilibrium. Moreover, why should not *some* monopolistic power be a morally justifiable reward for outstanding performance? In spite of his alleged cynicism, Porter's position is thus not necessarily amoral. It is, in fact, rather ambivalent. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the Harvard-professor gets support from rather unexpected corners.

Marxists, after all, made us aware that competition will always lead to monopolistic situations, but they also reminded us that this is not the end of the story since monopolies inevitably attract new rivalry. This is indeed the kind of dialectics that keeps capitalism going. Thus even the most rigid monopoly does not have a permanent and stable character. It is, as Schumpeter (1987: 102) put it, "not a cushion to sleep on". So, the moral need to debunk Porter's monopolistic exploitation of SCP-insights may not be so very strong after all. No monopolist is invulnerable. Moreover, why should one wish to debunk certain ideas in the name of something which is totally unrealistic? The stipulated link between (non-monopolistic) equilibrium and justice is itself unrealistic, if not utopian. It is, in other words, a myth that Porter, Schumpeter, and those who belong to the dynamic school of RPB (including Penrose) wish to dispense with, not only in the name of reality but perhaps also in the name of morality. Schumpeter argued, very much in a Marxist vein, that neither capitalism nor economic agents under capitalistic conditions are striving for equilibrium:

"The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop and factory to such concerns as US Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation ... [This process] instantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism." (1987: 83)

Under such dynamic conditions, a new kind of Entrepreneur pops up. S/he does not engage in price-competition, but competes for new commodities, new technologies, new sources of supply, even new types of organization (Schumpeter, 1987: 84). S/he is an innovator who constantly destroys rather than engenders equilibrium. His or her eventual monopolistic gains should be seen as a fair and just price society has to pay for having successful innovators in its midst (1987: 102). As Nelson and Winter (*quoted in*: Rumelt, 1997: 134) have noted:

"For Schumpeter the most important firms are those that serve as the vehicles for action of the real drivers of the system – the innovating entrepreneurs ... The competitive environment within which firms operate is one of struggle and motion. It is a dynamic selection environment, not an equilibrium one. The essential forces of growth are innovation and selection, with the augmentation of capital stocks more or less tied to these processes."

'Schumpeterian entrepreneurs' destroy the dream of equilibrium but replace it by the dream of constant innovation, something which will be extremely important in ideas about the learning organization (see also: Pitelis, 1991: 56-61; Nelson, 1997: 261-262; and Volberda, 1998: 66-69). Strategic studies, so the argument goes, should take the Schumpeterian nature of business into account. If anywhere, the secrets of success are to be found in the idiosyncratic nature of enterprise itself rather than in analytical tools or mobility barriers, even if this is to accept that the domain of analysis has become so fuzzy that prediction, formalization, and generalization is well-nigh impossible. Although it is often recognized that analytical models like SWOT, portfolio matrix, product-market combinations, or the five-forces model developed by Porter can be complementary (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, 1997; Foss, 1997a), it is implicitly and explicitly argued that they do not help students of strategy to unravel the often intricate processes that bring about success.

Kinetic obsessions

Inspired by the dynamic branch of RBP, students of strategy invented a wholly new and, to a certain extent, fashionable vocabulary to come to grips with Schumpeter's whimsical, dynamic, and unpredictable reality: core competencies (e.g. Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), dynamic capabilities (e.g. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, 1997), imitation, replication, tacit knowledge (e.g. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen); Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), higher-level learning (e.g. Volberda, 1998), leveraging effects (e.g. Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), strategic paths (e.g. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, 1997; McWhinney, 1997; Vrieling, 1998), organizational change (e.g. McWhinney, 1997), and so on. Many of these notions are, however, as obscure and ambivalent as the reality they purport to describe. I will, however, not enter into the semantic complexities involved here, but briefly indicate some of the more important *kinetic* obsessions in this dynamic RBP-literature:

- *Processes and positions.* 'Processes' are the way things are collectively done in an organization. It is, from this point of view, not interesting what an individual does. They are also described as organizational routines, as organizational culture, or as patterns of learning (see also chapter 4 and 5). Two restrictions must be made. First, there is a lot of terminological confusion and debate. For example, not everybody thinks of culture in terms of processes; some seem to argue that culture is a control system that allows for stability. Second, processes are supposed to display high levels of coherence, or, as Teece *et al.* (1997: 272) call it, "a certain rationality". Events that do actually take place in organizations but do not clearly contribute to its performance are not regarded as 'process'. Unworkable conflict, political strife, misdemeanors, love relationships, and presents are not process. They are assumed away. This is, as we have seen, one of the utopian tendencies I wish to take issue with. What to make of 'position'? The position of a firm is its location at any point in time with respect to its difficult-to-trade assets. Position is what organizational members would think of when asked where the organization stands with respect to its collective knowledge, its technology, its reputation, its network relations, its flexibility, etc. The ability to recognize position assumes the ability to liberate oneself from organizational affairs and to take an objective stance.

- *Capabilities and competencies.* Individual resources do not matter when it comes to strategic success, only their interconnections. Capabilities and competencies are the words used to designate 'clusters of resources'. Generally, capabilities and competencies are considered to be one and the same. Differences of meaning are made possible by the use of typical RBP-adjectives such as 'dynamic', 'combinative' or 'core'. Capabilities and competencies are roughly the outcome of particular processes and positions as defined above. In line with Schumpeter's ideas, managers and entrepreneurs are seen as constantly competing for new capabilities and competencies, or for new combinations that might arise out of them. Words such as 'commitment' or 'engagement' are crucial in this Schumpeterian discourse. People in organizations, i.e. very often but not always top managers, are expected to develop, at various points in time, commitments in particular areas of competence. Strategic choice is in fact about particular zestful commitments (see also chapter 3 and 5). It is thus assumed that only committed people are able to develop capabilities or competencies. The latter are often simply defined as the (organizational or managerial) ability to respond to environmental demands. At this point, kinetic impulses are unmistakable. What is described as a 'capacity to change' (rather than, say, buffers against environmental change) is regarded as a crucial source of organizational success. Capabilities or competencies should allow rapid response, speed, etc., even to such an extent that they might indeed be defined as the collective capacity to change. Often we find detailed discussions of the manifold ways in which such rapid response might be hindered. Still more often, however, we find detailed discussions about broad managerial mindsets, experimentation, double-loop learning, etc.
- *Pathfinders and builders.* Organizations are generally considered to follow and to have followed a course. The dynamic discourse, especially the Guru-version of it, teems with 'traveling' metaphors. We read about roads, routes, paths, ways, journeys, pioneering, survey maps, cars, vehicle, migratory paths, four-wheel drives, pathfinders, and so on. Importantly, paths are not merely leading you from the present to the future, but also from the past to the present. Where you are right now is the result of a rather complex story. 'Complexity' as I use it here has two sides to it. First, it relates to the limited availability of strategic choices: you cannot make strategic commitments just like that. In other words, you have to take into account the history of the organization you work for. Strategic freedom is thus, at least to a certain extent, tempered by the awareness that history matters. Schumpeterian entrepreneurs are thus inevitably bounded in their freedom of choice. Capabilities and competencies are embedded in the history of the firm. To use another catchword in the literature, the entrepreneur has to account for "path-dependencies". Second, complexity relates to the uniqueness of the organization. The journey so far is an utterly lonesome journey: the organization follows its very own course through history. In fact, while being immersed in all sorts of activities, the organization constructed its own course and this process has led to unique, often hidden capabilities and competencies that strategists have to unveil or build upon. It is this very uniqueness which might be the key to strategic success since it protects you against imitation or replication. The essence of capabilities and competencies is becoming clear just now. They are or should be built into the organization and not be bought. In short, organizational strategy is not so much about seeing, analyzing, or predicting, but about building. (Note the use of

words such as 'architecture', 'clockbuilder', etc. which can be frequently encountered in this literature.)

Building unique, inimitable resources in a never-ceasing flow of managerial commitment is, if we are to believe the dynamic school of RBP, the secret of strategic success. This is a far cry indeed from the more economically inspired perspectives discussed earlier, including the traditional school of RBP (in spite of some stylish analogies à la Wernerfelt). The urge to bridge the alleged gap between practitioners and academics, or between managers and economists, has resulted in even stronger bifurcation rather than in reconciliation or synthesis. This is perhaps why it is inadequate to think of RBP as a single paradigm or research program. As Foss complains, RBP is split ...

"... into, first, a formal, stark, abstract branch strongly inspired by economics and *gradually losing contact with reality*, and, second, an increasingly loose and free-wheeling branch where almost anything goes on the analytical level." (1997b: 359; emphasis mine)

Is this to entail that you can only be in contact with reality if anything goes? Acknowledging that something like this must be true, is I think a first step towards a more fashionable perspective on organizations.

The problem is that dynamic perspectives of resource creation cannot be formalized within RBP, which is why it has difficulties describing Schumpeterian reality. This has indeed tempted authors such as Hamel and Prahalad to apparently dispense with economic formalism altogether. Foss, however, still believes that the best of two worlds might be brought together and he suggests a few (utopian) ideas that might help to remedy the schism within RBP. The notion of the firm as a bundle of resources, he suggests, should be replaced by a notion of the firm as a portfolio of 'real options'. He also believes a closer intellectual alliance with evolutionary theories should be aimed at because such theories cope with dynamic or temporal elements in more formal ways (see also: Mahoney, 1992: 130f.).

Moreover, it might be argued that RBP can be related to still more perspectives. Porter (1991), for example, thinks that RBP at its best offers some complementary insights to his own, more externally oriented approach and, as we already saw, Barney (1991) hopes that RBP will run together with organizational behavior. Another topical issue relates to the unit of analysis: like the other perspectives discussed so far, RBP assumes that organizations are entities with clear boundaries. This assumption leads RBP to presume that organizations have or pursue strategies, but do they? Should not the focus of analysis be the individual or, to mention the opposite alternative, the alliance between two or more organizations?

The strategic self

Such debates need not concern us here. Like all other perspectives on strategy discussed so far, RBP is ridden with uncertainty. If it is to catch more than a glimpse of reality, it should be complemented by other perspectives on strategic success. Whatever its limitations, however, RBP, at least the dynamic version of it, directs attention in strategic studies to the role of the strategic (Schumpeterian) self. As such it refers to a new stage in

the history of strategic studies. Where the field was once dominated by an economic orientation towards society at large, and, somewhat later to industries, and sometimes even towards firms themselves, the dynamic version of RBP, perhaps unwillingly, opens up a perspective on what was yet another black box: the individual strategist. The branching that took place in RPB hinted at the possibility to free strategic studies from its close ties with economy and to link it to, for example, psychology or philosophy, each of which provides perspectives on what goes on in the mind of those who are involved in the business of strategy-making.

This focus on the strategic self is, I suggest, where utopianism and fashion, depth and surface, infrastructure and suprastructure, paradoxically meet. The fashionable element resides in the description of organizational life as volatile, ambivalent, whimsical, intuitive, and so on. The Schumpeterian Entrepreneur is a profoundly fashionable character. However, the dynamic version of RBP is also obsessed by well-known utopian ideas such as efficiency, purity, malleability, professionalism, and so on. I will elaborate more on the tensions between fashion and utopianism in chapter seven, where I will argue that fashion can be seen as an indictment against the utopian, scientific, and rational obsession with depth. My problem with fashion is not that it is fashionable, but that it is not capable of dispensing with utopian elements. That is, the problem with the fashions I discuss in this book, including dynamic RBP, is that they are not fashionable all the way down.

GUT

Returning now to strategic issues, it seems that students of strategy dream of freeing the field from its economic straitjacket. On the one hand, this is a fashionable move which might offer better insights in the life of some strategic decision-makers; on the other hand, however, it still relies, as I hope to show in the next section, very much on established forms of economic utopianism. To capture the paradoxes involved, I will refer to the attempted and somewhat half-hearted escape from economy as the Great Utopian Twist. (Needless to say, I hope that the expression itself will become fashionable; it is, after all, full of paradox, ambivalence, meaning, nonsense and hopefully it will prove to be as short-lived as any other fashion.) GUT has a firm hold on my fashionable characters, that is, on the Guru, the Consultant, and the Entrepreneur. People who are in GUT claim that practitioners should not worry so much about analysis, control, and prediction as rely on gut-feeling, holism, metaphors, folk philosophies, and other self-techniques that are useful in a world that is beyond analysis, beyond control, and beyond prediction. GUT claims that the Manager should transmogrify into an Entrepreneur. In sum, what people like Porter would simply dismiss as extra-theoretical or, perhaps better, as fashionable nonsense, now turns out to be essential for the explanation of strategic success. But, and here lies the heart of the paradox, has GUT really brought us beyond economy?

The strategic self after GUT

Stubbart and Mintzberg

Stubbart (1985) has been one source of inspiration for post-economic strategic studies. Concluding that "the state of the art is far behind the state of the world", he urges

nothing less than a revolution in the field, something which he justifies by pointing out that traditional strategic management has failed to work from "the actual condition of the world" and hence to become an "intelligent management theory" (1985: 75). Such an intelligent theory would be:

- more restrained because the objective is not to predict and control but to facilitate
- more attentive to actual strategic processes in organizations because the focus is on the strategy maker (and not on normative models)
- more consistent with contemporary research models rather than urge the practitioner to follow impossible methods.

In this intelligent theory, there is no reference to economics or financial success. There is, however, a strong normative inclination. Strategic managers are urged to become, *inter alia*, more self-reflective (since future developments cannot be forecast), genuinely inspired, experiment-friendly, forgetful about the past, and socially skilled (since social skills rather than intellectual skills are the quintessential strategic skills). Moreover, they should treat the organization as an open system and indulge in uncertainty and paradox. On the face of it such recommendations seem to be the result of certain academic obsessions, but there is a strong anti-academic undertone in this intelligent management theory. Academics and the rational-economic methods they are said to employ are suspected to alienate practitioners from the real world. And here there is, finally, an academic, Charles Stubbart, who warns practitioners not to unconditionally believe what other academics are saying. The methods they are proscribing are useless in a turbulent world. Even worse, trying to understand and control what is going on in the world would be nothing less than temerarious and arrogant. It is better to stick to the here and now and to become agnostics with respect to the past and the future.

This anti-scientific or anti-academic posture is also endorsed by Henry Mintzberg, although Mintzberg's ideas about academics are more complex than Stubbart's. Mintzberg accuses academics of ignoring temporal aspects of strategic processes (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998: 302-304). According to the Canadian guru, academics tend to describe strategy as a steady state, whereas for practitioners and consultants strategy is, if anything at all, constant transformation, or, to put it differently, "a process of leaping from one state to another". Academics are not interested in leaping, they want to cling to a particular state, they want to analyze and describe it, they want to get to the bottom of it, and, as a consequence, they merely focus on partial aspects of strategic reality. *An academic perspective on strategy is, however, a luxury practitioners cannot afford.* They should constantly consider possible leaps to other states, they have no time to scrutinize parts of reality, they have to face the whole beast, as Mintzberg puts it.

To repeat, academics are 'splitters' who are expected to split up the whole in parts and then to study the part as if it is independent of the whole; they are interested in what would happen if the part under research is isolated from its context; they are, in short, interested in *the real consequences of unreal events*; they are utopians. Practitioners, on the other hand, are 'lumpers' who see the different parts in their manifold interrelationships; they use concepts, categories, and classifications not as means to scrutinize parts of a whole but as means to envisage the whole 'configuration'; unlike academics, they do not want to assume reality away. *Weltfremdheit* may be good for science, it is bad for management.³

The practitioner is thus expected to refrain from an academic style since the kind of work he or she is expected to do does not suit this style. Exit economical formalism and analysis. Mintzberg believes that practitioners should adopt 'holism', a word he does not use very much but which plays an essential role in his work. He also refers to it as 'synthesis' (Mintzberg, 1994) and argues that the idea of analysis automatically leading to synthesis might be the most serious problem in our society. Perhaps managers will help us to save the day:

"[M]anagerial work appears to be more simultaneous, holistic, and relational than linear, sequential, and orderly. (...) If managers have to "see the big picture" and create strategic "visions" – clearly more than just metaphors – then their perceptions require the soft, speculative information they favor, which is better suited to synthesis than analysis. (...) Indeed, the whole nature of strategy making – dynamic, irregular, discontinuous, calling for groping, interactive processes with an emphasis on learning and synthesis – compels managers to favor intuition. This is probably why all those analytical techniques of planning felt so wrong. [As Weick has put it], "people may resist steplike structures because the procedure they prefer is basically holistic in the sense that all steps are considered simultaneously." (...) The key to [novel and compelling strategies] would seem to be integration rather than decomposition, based on holistic images rather than linear words." (1994: 319)

The use of visual metaphors is remarkable here. Mintzberg tells us about images which have the power to liberate us from language. Strategy might be more about the creation of images than about the formulation of words. Using ideas of Frances Westley, he argues that strategy as image-creation is a kind of "bricolage, a piecing together of a group image from the bits and pieces of individual imagery" (1994: 319-320). Visual holism, knocking together individual images, and, more generally, relying on the right hemisphere are characteristic of the true strategic manager. The work of this manager might have far-reaching consequences. Mintzberg believes, rather surprisingly, that managers of the future are not mindless consumers of (economic) science and technology but heroes in the struggle against technological and calculating determinism.

Such brave heroes are, needless to say, not at all like the practitioners envisaged by the economical perspectives discussed earlier in this chapter. A new kind of leadership discourse, about which I will have to say much more in the next chapter, has begun to pervade strategic studies. Practitioners are, for example, depicted as full-blown existentialists who do not solve problems in a mechanical way but must make painful choices between the polarities of often ethical dilemmas (Lessem, 1990; Hampden-Turner, 1990); even the old voluntarism/determinism dilemma has popped up again and has led authors to argue that human agency might, at least to a certain extent, be reconciled with what sociologists refer to as 'structure' (Whittington, 1994: 54; see also: ten Bos, 1997b; Child, 1997); not unrelated to these philosophical debates are the discourses about what came to be known as 'the management of meaning' in which it is argued that strategic managers "generate the context for meaning in organizational life" by means of symbolic expression, drama, language, vision, and enactment of the environment (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985: 730).

Strategic managers should thus become story-tellers and enter into an open dialogue with people in and around the organization. Such insights have led to musings

about a new role for the researcher of strategic processes:

"The role of the analyst is to show the practitioner how the practitioner's patterns for enacting environments can fundamentally alter the range of available choices."
(1985: 734)

But how is the role of the strategic self envisaged? Smircich and Stubbart hope that strategic managers of the future will consider themselves as 'playwrights' rather than as 'heroes', as 'creators' rather than as 'co-aligners', as 'background-generators' and 'context-composers' rather than as 'decision-makers' or 'commanders'. Mintzberg thinks of them as 'bricoleurs', 'craftsmen', and 'holists' rather than as planners, engineers, and analysts. All these ideas seem to suggest that students of strategy are increasingly replacing the economic, calculating, and technological self by a self-reflexive, non-calculating, and creative self.

Misrepresenting success

Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that such a shift is indeed taking place in the field of strategic studies. What would it mean for our notion of strategic success? Is it possible to think of such success without having to resort to some sense of calculation? But would this not be a contradiction in terms? Is strategy possible without calculation and technology?

Law (1994: 265) has argued that all these post-economic ideas might very well prove to be "opportunism dressed up in the fancy clothes that are used by the powerful *to misrepresent the origins of their success*" (my emphasis). Or to put it in Porter's terms, *post-economic discourse may merely focus on a different and perhaps less important part of the causal chain that can be constructed in order to explain strategic success*. A misrepresentation of the origins of success would then come into being if it is argued, for example, that mysterious characteristics of a particular business leader are not only important as such but actually *more* important than decent planning, teamwork, and power.

This kind of misrepresentation is, I suggest, a crucial aspect of what the Guru, the Consultant, and the Entrepreneur are saying. It is a form of story-telling which is popularized in the media, in business texts, in autobiographies, and so on. Hansen (1996) concludes from his analysis of autobiographies of business people like Lee Iacocca and Donald Trump that they either do not understand or willfully misrepresent the nature of their own successes. Trump is an interesting case. In his autobiography, he writes that he dislikes structure and organization because they inhibit spontaneous decision-making; he adds that "one is to listen to your (*sic*) gut, no matter how good something sounds on paper" (cited in: Hansen, 1996: 41). Hansen himself adds:

"Structure and paperwork, planning, systematization and organization, are all things which Trump feels are unworthy of a business leader and hold him back. But if one takes a closer look at Trump's successes, this soon seems very doubtful indeed. He planned, financed and constructed huge projects such as hotels and casinos so perfectly that he usually stayed 'in time and on budget'. This shows that he was a brilliant planner, organizer and construction manager. But these are qualities that he never mentions in his self-portrait where he much prefers to see himself as spontaneous and irrationally intuitive." (ibid.)

In other words, successful strategists may be inclined to offer *wrong* theoretical interpretations of their own successes. Does this kind of criticism assume that their might be a *right* theoretical interpretation of strategic success? Well, if we are to believe people ranging from Law, Hansen to Porter, *the origins of success in business may be much closer to Machiavellistic or Hobbesian calculation than is generally suggested in post-economic strategic discourse*. These authors think it is extremely difficult to think of strategy without calculation both in organization studies and in strategic studies as such.

Calculation, Law (1994: 266) argues, presupposes intention, instrumentality, and discretion. Without these, there is no need for calculation. Is it possible to conceive of strategic selves or of organization without intention, instrumentality, and discretion? More particularly, can we construct strategic stories that would have nothing to do with goals, instruments, and individual agency? Imagine what kind of stories would have to be told to practitioners: stories without intentions, stories without means-end schemes, stories without the free will. Such stories would be genuinely *non-strategic*. And why would strategists want to listen to non-strategic stories? The only two reasons I can imagine is, first, that such stories alleviate the managerial soul, and second, that they do, after all, not really escape from economy, calculation, and technology. Mintzberg's popular texts on strategy illustrate both points, but it will take some space to prove this.

Mintzberg's holism

Mintzberg has repeatedly argued that crafting is a better metaphor to describe *successful* or *effective* strategies than planning (e.g. Mintzberg, 1987). The craftsman is described as a committed, dedicated and experienced person who senses rather than analyses, who blends thinking and doing, who has "tacit" knowledge of the materials to be used, and who has gained supreme mastery of detail and yet never forgets about the 'big picture' needed to harmonize actions. The craftsman assumes that there is not one best way to do things and is therefore willing to experiment, meanwhile understanding that not every activity is deliberate and that there are many emergent and unpredictable aspects in crafting from which important lessons can be drawn.

How different is the planner's world! This person is orderly, sits in an office far away from the material world, is obsessed with rational control, believes in one best way, and therefore refuses to learn from whatever spontaneity might pop up. S/he prefers systematic analysis of hard facts (i.e. competitors, markets, strengths, and weaknesses) over intimacy and serious involvement. S/he carefully distinguishes between thinking and doing, even believes that doing is not his or her business. Mintzberg's point is not that organizations can fare without planners (although he is in places extremely negative about them), but that planning can be harmful when managers start to think that strategy and planning are identical. Strategy cannot be reduced to a planning exercise. Mintzberg argues that successful practitioners know this and that planning ideologues like Porter misrepresent how strategic processes are actually taking place. In other words, he believes that practitioners are or should be holists who are able to combine various perspectives on strategy rather than merely reduce it to one perspective. His work is therefore dedicated to a description of these perspectives or, as he prefers to call them, 'schools of strategy'. Such a description might help practitioners to gain a better, more intimate understanding of strategy.

The problem with the repeated emphasis on a 'total picture of strategy' is that the term under scrutiny, 'strategy', has so many meanings that it becomes virtually

meaningless. Strategy is, among other things, planned, unique, composed out of sub-strategies, programmatic, personal, tactical, visionary, cognitive, emergent, patterned, political, crafted, collective, and, in conformity with holism, all this at one and the same time.

But if we accept such a holistic interpretation, then what exactly is it what practitioners know or need to know about strategy? Where can we find it? To which *reality* does it refer? Is strategy merely a (holistic) *way of thinking*? And if so, in what sense can this way of thinking be simultaneously unique and programmatic, or personal and collective? Or is 'strategy' perhaps a *word* we use to delude ourselves into thinking that the things we are doing are really important, no matter what we are doing? (Whittington, 1993) Or, does it perhaps refer to a (delusory?) *norm* used to distinguish strategic activities from non-strategic activities? (DuGay, 1996: 128) Even worse, is it a norm we use to tell those who are able to think strategically from those who apparently are not? (Law, 1994: 265)

Such questions make clear that strategy can be a word, a way of thinking, or a norm all of which generate certain cognitive, political, and normative effects. Mintzberg, being a holist, would no doubt accept this. But does a word exist in the same way as, say, a pattern or plan? Does a way of thinking exist in the same way as politics? The difficulty is that Mintzberg's holism hinders a clear insight into the ontological status of strategy. This becomes apparent when we look at the word 'exist', which plays a very peculiar role in Mintzberg's texts like when he, for example, argues that "some strategic schools exist more than others" or that the "whole elephant [i.e. a holistic perspective on strategy] ... can exist, not on these pieces of papers, but only in your mind's eye" (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998: 350). How should we understand the expression "to exist more than ..."? How are we to understand the claim that the whole elephant exists only in the mind's eye? Mintzberg and his colleagues argue that the whole beast "may be in the mysterious reaches of the human mind", and that it is hence impossible to "show" the reader the elephant. Yet, they may help the reader to find it so that he may eventually catch a glimpse of it. This is exactly the kind of soul-engineering that has become so crucial in fashionable management thinking. It is full of anti-technological sentiments and passionate pleas for more sensible form of empiricism.

However, other utopian elements than technology and distrust of the senses still have a firm grip on Mintzberg's work. It is still preoccupied with depth, with what lies underneath, with what remains hidden as a dangerous, incomprehensible and complicated beast which we must look in the eye, if only for the briefest of moments, just to escape from it. A sense of the near-inevitability of danger and risk, a peculiar combination of adventure and gloominess, pervades Mintzberg's work, something which it shares with other strategic discourses. Think here of the grim and Hobbesian assumptions about our species in micro-economic discourses I discussed above. It is as if an undercurrent of pessimism functions as a tributary to a wild flow of utopian cheerfulness.

Admittedly, the problems of organizations and society sometimes seem to be overwhelming, but this merely serves to hammer home the message that change is inevitable and, once it is on its way, irreversible. What we see in Mintzberg's texts is an author who is at pains to show that things can change while simultaneously arguing that the imminent change will be irreversible. This is, as I have noticed in the previous chapter, a crucial utopian element in many management texts. They try to reconcile the

painful and sometimes violent reversibility of the past with the irreversibility of the future (see also: Lilley, 1995: 4).

So, paradox and ambivalence prevail. Take, once more, as a telling example, Mintzberg's musings on "the whole beast of strategy". He argues that it exists, but apparently only in the managerial mind. I have no problem with this profoundly anti-realist position (which reminds one of Simon's suggestion that decision-making processes are in the head) and I honestly think that there is some wisdom in it. But what would practitioners think of such wisdom? Would they not regard it as academic trifle? Would they accept this anti-realistic position as a starting point of their activities? That is, would they be happy to know that organizational strategy is nothing but the organizing of mental processes? Should they perhaps infer from this that the organization itself is merely a mental process? Are companies like Shell or General Electric merely ways of organizing such processes?

Well, it is a brilliant perspective and perhaps even one that might appeal to scholars who have been inspired by postmodernism, but it is also, I think, *totally unacceptable for practitioners who live and act as if they are in a real world*. This is why Mintzberg (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998: 373) is compelled to simultaneously phrase anti-realistic utterances ("The whole elephant exists only in the mind.") and realistic utterances ("The real beast called strategy formation ... really lives its life.") He simultaneously puts holism into perspective by arguing that it is merely a flawed theory and claims that it is the only way to come to grips with a reality beyond theory.

Chia (1996: 195-199) has pointed out that the same ontological problems are rife in Mintzberg's well-known theory on decision-making (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mintzberg and Waters, 1990). He (1996: 197) argues that Mintzberg and Waters do not make clear what decisions are, although they provide us with many, sometimes contradictory propositions:

- decisions sometimes do not exist
- they have to be traced to someone's mind
- they are often temporally remote from the point of formal expression
- they emerge inadvertently
- the environment sometimes 'decides'
- they emerge as an unfolding process rather than as a series of discrete points
- the relation between decision and action is very tenuous

What is the ontological status of the decisions Mintzberg and Waters have in mind? Do decisions exist or don't they exist? Mintzberg and Waters claim that decision-making is a difficult research object and this should come as no surprise when you take into consideration that the object sometimes seems to exist and sometimes does not seem to exist, as if decision-making is as a little bit like quantum physics. Nonetheless, Mintzberg and Waters's target seems to be clear enough. The seven propositions I just listed should cast doubt on traditional decision-making theory which assumes that contemplation, commitment and intention precedes action. However, Chia thinks that Mintzberg and Waters are not really able nor willing to abandon this (modernistic) idea of action caused by a decision. The following passage is crucial:

"Given that an action was taken, and that broad support preceded it, we must find out when and where consensus emerged – for that must be the real point of decision." (1990: 4)

Chia concludes, rightly I think, that this passage still assumes that action is preceded by intention or commitment. This is, however, in conformity with traditional decision-making theory; indeed, the idea of decision preceding action, or, to formulate it differently, of decision's ontological priority over action may form its very essence. But why, Chia asks, should decision necessarily precede action? What if we learn to think of decision as an "explanatory principle" which is knocked together afterwards in order to explain the would-be rationality of our actions? After all, the idea that action occurs without thinking, calculation, or deliberation is not a very pleasant one.

This may be the very reason why many theorists on decision-making, including Mintzberg and Waters, 'imagine' the cause (decision) after the effect (action) has occurred (Chia, 1996: 198). Chia's point is not that Mintzberg and Waters do not see the force of this kind of reasoning, but that they avoid a painful choice: Either you remain faithful to traditional theory and argue that decisions exist before action or you leave traditional theory and argue that decisions do not exist before action. Only if you are willing to make such a straightforward choice, you do not have to gerrymander with ontology. Besides, you will have something to debate about.

Mintzberg runs, I suggest, into the same problems with his ideas about strategy which also oscillate between a rather straightforward realistic ontology on the one hand and the belief that you should refrain from any ontological claim whatsoever. The cause of this indecision might be that Mintzberg tries to address both an audience of practitioners and an audience of academics. So, neo-rationalist academics such as Donaldson, who has criticized Mintzberg on various occasions, are told that scientific theories are always wrong and really nothing more than a heap of words and images. That is, we do not know what goes on in reality and should become pragmatists or constructionists who willfully refrain from ontological claims.

Such a bold position would, however, not be acceptable to an audience of practitioners. Even though Mintzberg might be right in claiming that managerial work is not scientific at all, most (not all) practitioners do have a clear preference for hard-boiled empirical science over, say, palmistry, divination, or allegedly postmodern claims such as 'Decisions do not exist', or 'Strategies can be thought of without calculation'. That is, *for most practitioners it is simply not useful to know that decisions or strategies do not exist*. Mintzberg, therefore, *cannot* address the audience of practitioners with bold anti-realistic statements. This is why he often refers to empirical research or sticks to the belief that there must be somewhere a real point of the decision.

These problems also shed light on the split in RBP I discussed above. A fundamental ambivalence inevitably haunts fashionable discourses on strategy because they mix an anti-representationalist (and fashionable) discourse that primarily addresses intellectuals or perhaps also 'intelligent' academics on the one hand and a representationalist (and utopian) discourse that primarily addresses practitioners on the other. In the first discourse, the existence of strategy and decision-making is put into doubt or even flatly denied; in the second discourse, strategy and decision-making are assumed to exist in real organizations. When synthesizing all he has said, Mintzberg needs

to conjure up strange propositions such as "Decisions sometimes do and sometimes do not exist."

The following quotation from *Strategy Safari* (1998: 345) illustrates this ambivalence perfectly:

"Donaldson's criticism [which is that Mintzberg's theory of holistic, strategic configurations are conceptually and empirically flawed and offer no guidelines to practitioners] is based on the one criterion of accuracy, as if theories are true or not. But all theories are false: they are just words or pictures on pieces of paper. Reality is always more complex. (The world may not be flat, for example, but neither is it round. It bulges at the equator, and has all kinds of bumps, called mountains.) So usefulness becomes a key criterion, especially for practicing managers. (The flat earth theory is particular useful for building airport runways in Holland.)"

The level of the discussion here is, to say the least, not very impressive. Donaldson's suggestion that configuration theories offer no help for practitioners (1996) is simply countered by pragmatically restating the importance of usefulness as an all-important criterion for theory building. But this is exactly Donaldson's point: Mintzberg's holism is not useful for practitioners. What is useful in Donaldson's view (1996: 127) is a simple framework on which to map experiences and which yields prescriptive advice. Mintzberg differs with Donaldson in that he thinks that other theoretical constructs, for example, holistic configurations or typologies, might be useful. The idea not to seriously engage with Donaldson's criticism, however, does not rest on a willingness to convince the reader that holistic configuration is more useful than, say, a simple framework that yields prescriptive advice. But on what does it rest?

It must, I suggest, rest on the assumption that practitioners who are expected to buy *Strategy Safari* should not be bothered too much with tedious questions about the relationship between theory and reality. Instead, the readers of the book are offered rhetorical foolishness with respect to this matter. All theories are false, says Mintzberg, and managers cannot but choose from among flawed theories, including Mintzberg's own holistic approach. The only point to take into consideration then is the usefulness of the approach and Mintzberg apparently thinks that being comprehensive (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998: 373) is more useful than the kind of analytical framework building suggested by Donaldson.

But is this to say that he really does not want to say anything about theoretical truth and falsehood? Would not even Mintzberg consider, for example, the claim that the earth is not flat to be nothing less than true? Well, when he engages in a dialogue with practitioners he claims that this theory is not only useful but also true; when he engages, however, in a dialogue with fellow academics he is not so sure at all and can perhaps only point to the theory's usefulness. So, the truth cannot possibly unite practitioners and academics, because they share fundamentally different realities, but usefulness might. But what is useful and what is not? Is a flat earth theory, as Mintzberg suggests, useful for building airport runways in Holland? I am not so sure. Perhaps the empirical observation that Holland is flat might be useful, but even here I am not quite so certain as Mintzberg.

My point is that the discussion between academics like Donaldson and Mintzberg on the

issue of usefulness brings the strategy discourse firmly back under the regimen of economy, technology, and calculation. In this discourse, fashionable and utopian elements enter into a very strained relationship. The move away from ontological realism or the attempted escape from economy and calculation does not prevent that the discourse on strategy is very much about usefulness and strategic success. A basic question is still whether theories are useful and usefulness is a term inexorably connected with the notion of strategic success. So, what practitioners are urged to do by people like Donaldson and Mintzberg is to regard their contributions in terms of usefulness and here, no doubt, a lot of calculation is needed. The ultimate relevance or irrelevance of a particular theory is thus determined by the question whether it helps the practitioner to achieve strategic success. The Great Utopian Twist that would allow us to abandon economy, calculation, and technology may thus not be so great after all.

Ontological gestures

Can theories of strategy escape from the ambivalence that haunts Mintzberg's work? Can they address problems related to strategy in such a way that they do not have to speak with a forked tongue? Can they escape ontological gerrymandering?

Right from the outset, strategic studies has been dominated by the wish to explain strategic success. And offering an explanation is, in line with what science dictates, nothing else than a construction of a causal chain. As we saw above, Porter (1991: 99) has described the differences in strategic perspectives not as conflicts but as theories "positioned at different points" in the causal chain that might be constructed in order to explain strategic success. Any strategic theory, Porter adds, must ask itself how far back in the chain it will go. I disagree with Porter. We may also, in a more fashionable vein, abandon the idea to construct causal chains to explain strategic success. The reason is not that I have a better or more realistic alternative, but the reason is that plunging yourself in the depths of causal rationalization leads to a lot of ontological insecurity.

Take, for example, a car-driver who makes a mistake and causes a fatal accident. How are we to explain the accident? Perhaps the driver decided at a particular point in time to take a risk and to neglect the overtaking prohibition that applied on the place of the accident. (A police officer would be happy with such an explanation.) But would such a point in time also be the point of a decision? If so, the question why he made the fatal decision becomes inevitable? Perhaps he decided that he could not be too late for an appointment with a customer. (A cultural critic or a business leader might be happy with this explanation albeit for entirely different reasons.) But why did he make the decision not to be too late? Because he was told by his boss that the appointment was with a very important customer. (This would make the organizational scholar happy.) But why did he believe ... and so on. Causal chains are *fantasies* that were constructed after the event by scientists.

Strategic success has been (causally) explained in many different ways. From the early years of strategic studies, when organizational success was not so much a focus of interest as the success of industries or society as a whole, to the self-reflective approaches argued for by Stubbart and others, all have tried to claim their part of the causal chain that explains success. Mintzberg's holistic approach is unique in the sense that it rests on the acceptance that everything might be conjured up in order to explain strategic success.

Could we dispense with causality in strategic studies and hence with calculation and economy? I am not sure whether talk about strategy would remain possible under

such circumstances, but the idea is interesting because it saves us a lot of ontological trouble. We may give up, for example, the notion that decisions ontologically precedes action. Chia (1996) has argued that we may learn much from a perspective that equates decision and action. That is, an action is a decision, a decision is an action and one is not caused by the other. The point is that both action and decision focus our attention on parts of reality. By means of our actions and decisions (the word 'decision' being derived from: *'caedere'*: cutting, chopping, etc.) we 'cut' a part out of reality and then think this part constitutes the 'real' reality, which is merely to say that we make it more important than anything else. So, decision and action may be "ontological gestures" we make in order to create certain realities at the expense of other realities or of people who believe in them. Holistic approaches such as Mintzberg's refuse to make such a gesture, which is why they are so indecisive. Holists, after all, do not wish to cut reality into pieces.

A strategic decision is thus, if anything, a way to create realities and to exclude other realities. Whatever we may think of this insight, it beautifully applies not only to the way in which strategic decision-makers in organizations create their own realities, but also to the way in which those who have contributed to strategic studies have created their own object of study.

Concluding remarks

Strategic discourses have difficulty to come to grips with reality. That is, they all seem to postulate their very own version of it. Some focus on branches of industry, others on individual strategists or general economics. What unites all these versions, however, is the typically utopian tendency to depict the real world as a grim and bad place from which we somehow need to escape. It might thus be argued that a deep cultural pessimism about the world pervades strategic studies. Hobbes is the specter that haunts the field, even in most of its 'post-economic' domains. Nowhere the question seems to pop up whether relentless opportunism indeed holds sway among business strategists or whether markets are indeed so merciless as is generally assumed. The validity of the Hobbesian perspective is assumed rather than argued for. The same can be argued with respect to another typically utopian element in strategic studies: the underlying utilitarianism that was inherited from the neoclassical perspective. Morality is a matter of numbers: the majority dictates what is good even if it is at the expense of a minority. Moral behavior is thus calculating behavior. An ironic conclusion would be that flesh-and-blood strategists in organizations are somehow depicted as calculating monsters in the literature they are supposed to read.

These rather grim assumptions about reality were borrowed from the more economic discourses on strategy. They play an important role not only in the pragmatic but also in the post-economic approaches that I have discussed in this chapter. It is not surprising then that all these approaches are pervaded by utopian understandings that are supposed to help the practitioner to escape from what is supposed to be a grim reality. Matters, however, are confusing since none of these approaches seem to share the same utopian understandings.

Binary utopias, for example, assume that an overall, consistent, and well understood strategy and planning process will distance the practitioner from the harsh Hobbesian world. SWOT-models have been discussed as examples of techniques that

help practitioners to encounter widespread inconsistency, indecisiveness, self-centeredness, political strife, and so on. I have also discussed the dynamic or kinetic belief that the conceptualization of future action is enough to morally justify it. Moreover, I have hinted at the enmity against the actual world that pervades binary thinking.

Monopolistic utopias suggest that microcosms are available to practitioners who want to escape from mutually destructive competition. And again we see that an enmity against the actual world is in operation here. As Saul (1993: 368) writes about Porter and colleagues:

"Beneath the patina of their highly professional approach is a deep pessimism about the ability of civilization to determine its course. It follows that we must passively subject ourselves to market forces and reserve all our sophistication for reacting to these brutal 'natural' forces, rather than act to control them, even if the result of such passivity is the destruction of our society."

The actual world is given up, but a few privileged people may be able to construct, if only temporarily, a sort of *safe haven* where business can go on as usual. Although Porter's theory has become fashionable because of its commonsensical insight that people want to protect and enjoy the successes they have, it is clearly full of utopian tendencies. The actual world is not so much interesting as dangerous; non-economic factors are simply dismissed; and the focus is not so much on the individual practitioner of organization but on branches of industry.

The navel-gazing utopias that I associated with the resource-based perspective seem to share also some utopian characteristics. Again, it might be argued that they willfully try to blind the practitioner for the actual world which is assumed to be so complex that it escapes comprehension. It is better for the practitioner to focus on his or her firm. Moreover, they also share some kinetic obsessions. Its language is full of expressions such as 'dynamic capabilities', 'pathfinders', 'malleability', 'journeys', 'clockbuilders', etc. These terms which one would expect in utopian discourses will also figure predominantly in the fashions that are going to be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Even the post-economic conversion to the strategic self, albeit highly fashionable in itself, does not escape from utopian tendencies. I have, for example, hinted at the preoccupation with depth, at the gloominess that pervades much of the work carried out here, at forms of holistic and philosophical optimism as to practicing managers, at the ontological problems that are caused by linear causal thinking, and so on.

What I have learned from the discussion about these discourses on strategy is that the prospect of a more aesthetic and fashionable way of looking at strategy might be thwarted by the fact that the concept of strategy itself is full of utopian connotations and in this sense unfashionable. It is suggested that people in the real world should develop or act from something called a 'strategy' if they are to be successful; it suggests a norm which dictates how people in organizations should behave; it suggests that there is some sort of unity or consistency in what people in organizations are doing; it suggests that something called strategy is actually going on; it suggests that organizational life is about success, like sports or elections; and it inevitably suggests that cool, utilitarian and rational calculation will work the miracle. But is strategy what we actually see and feel when we visit organizations? Is it what we experience when we talk to business people? Is it such a

straightforward phenomenon? Is it something aesthetic?

Is strategy not a word whose function it is to lead us away from the here and now?

Notes

- 1 Opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses are typically defined in mechanistic or causal terms. In a recent textbook on strategic management (Stahl and Grigsby, 1997: 30, 32), the following definitions are provided: 1) "An opportunity is an issue or condition in the environment external to the firm that may help reach it goals." 2) "A threat is an issue or condition in the external environment that may prevent the firm from reaching it goals." 3) "A strength is a condition or issue internal to the organization that may lead to a customer benefit or a competitive advantage." 4) "A weakness is a condition or issue internal to the organization that may lead to negative customer value or a competitive disadvantage." With respect to (1) and (2), Stahl and Grigsby add that "very strong external opportunities or threats may even cause the firm to evolve its goals and strategies." And with respect to (3) and (4), it is argued that "internal strengths and weaknesses are the result of prior management decisions." This is a Cartesian-Newtonian world: firms have clear-cut boundaries, environments cause change in the organization, managerial decisions cause fitness or unfitness. There is no place for ambivalence and uncontrollability here.
- 2 Such pragmatic intentions notwithstanding, it should not be overlooked that RBP has strong roots in the economic theories about strategy discussed earlier in this chapter. Ironically, these theories were, as we have seen, often criticized for not being pragmatic at all. Mahoney (1992: 126) has summarized the links between the resource-based perspective and micro-economic approaches as follows: "The resource-based theory of the firm is intimately tied to [micro-economic] theories of the firm. The resource-based theory is linked to the behavioral theory of the firm, if superior heuristics lead to higher rents. The resource-based theory is linked to transaction costs because resource combinations are influenced by transaction costs considerations. The resource-based theory is linked to property rights since delineated property rights make resources valuable and as resources become more valuable, property rights become more precise. Finally, resource-based theory is linked to agency theory (...) because the resource deployment of the firm is influenced by agency costs." It might be added that much of RPB, especially the ideas developed in what is known as the static school, still remains heavily indebted to neoclassical equilibrium assumptions (see also: Foss, 1997b).
- 3 It is interesting to note that Mintzberg himself has been accused of 'systematic decontextualizing', especially in his famous books on organizational structure (Tsoukas, 1998). Mintzberg's narrative on structure starts with Mrs. Raku, a potter who starts all by herself and ends as the owner of a big company. Her organization is described by Mintzberg as perfectly reacting to economic circumstances. As Tsoukas points out, however, other circumstances are simply assumed away. We never read about such complexities as Mrs. Raku's background, about legislation with which she has to cope as a starting entrepreneur, about the country where she lives, etc. What we are expected to learn is that divisional structure follows machine bureaucracy and that machine bureaucracy follows simple structure, as if this type of process takes place in a social vacuum and as if it always happens in this way. The problem Tsoukas refers to has been described as "the problem of embeddedness": in much of the strategic approaches discussed so far, economic life is not submerged in the world of social relations; such relations are merely regarded as extra-theoretical (Porter, 1991) or as "epiphenomena of the market" (Granovetter, 1985: 482). Granovetter warns us for undersocialization as well as oversocialization because both assume that action and decision are carried out by atomized actors. This is a rather dubious assumption: "In the undersocialized account, atomization results from narrow utilitarian pursuit of self-interest; in the oversocialized one, from the fact that behavioral patterns have been internalized and ongoing social relations thus only have peripheral effects on behavior." (1985: 485) Oversocialized accounts tend, in other words, to be rather mechanical: "[O]nce we know the individual's social class or labor market sector, everything else in behavior is automatic ..." (1985: 486). Not surprisingly, Granovetter advocates a middle ground between under- and oversocialization.

3 Longing for leadership

Consider the following news report from the *New York Times*, somewhere in Spring 1992:

“Las Vegas, April 13. Former President Ronald Reagan was jostled but not harmed today when a man walked onto a stage where he was speaking and smashed an honorary crystal shrine, hitting him with his shards. After smashing the statue, which had just been given to Mr. Reagan by the National Association of Broadcasters, the man tried to speak in the microphone but was grabbed by Secret Service agents, who threw him to the ground and then took him away.” (*quoted in*: Lincoln, 1994: 131-132)

The mysterious man turned out to be Rick Paul Springer, a well-known antinuclear activist. The incident happened in Las Vegas, not very far from Nevada’s nuclear test sites. It was the result of Springer’s frustration and anger. He had laid plans to organize a mega-event in the desert of Nevada in order to enforce his and other people’s arguments against nuclear testing. What Springer had in mind was an event in the spirit of Woodstock or Live Aid. But on Friday, 10 April, a mere two thousand people gathered in the desert. Springer knew that next Monday in the Las Vegas Hilton, Ronald Reagan would be honored by the NBA for his “contributions to broadcasting and the American public” and that on the occasion the former president would be delivering a speech. For Springer the idea to call the antinuclear issue to attention on the annual meeting of the NBA, one of America’s biggest broadcasting companies, was extraordinarily seductive. He received a press card from a friend, worked up his courage and finally interrupted the former president’s speech, which was directed at some 3000 people who were enjoying a lavish banquet.

Reagan’s speech was, as Lincoln (1994: 135) calls it, a ‘rambling affair’ full of trivialities, jokes, personal outpourings and political propaganda in the name of God and family. In what he later called the “clearest, most meditative moment of my life” (*quoted in*: Lincoln, 1994: 136), Springer took the crystal statue which represented an eagle and smashed it to pieces. He then apologized to the former president, pushed him away in a rather gentle fashion and grabbed the microphone but before he was able to call attention to his worries he was dragged away by security officers, screaming that the very next day a another nuclear test was scheduled. Initially perplexed and surprised, Reagan very soon returned to his speech asking the crowd: “Is he a Democrat, by chance?”

The dialectics of leadership

Leadership is very much a matter of staging. That is, people create the stage on which some are and others are not allowed to perform as leaders. The staging of leadership is always an exclusionary activity. What matters here is merely the leader’s right to speak on a stage which has been created by and for a particular audience and not the contents of what is actually said. Springer was perceived to have no right to speak on the NBA-

banquet and therefore the audience refused to listen to him. A lavish banquet in Las Vegas Hilton is not deemed to be the proper place to talk nuclear issues. Note, however, that other stages might be created for those who once were excluded. Springer, for example, soon found different stages to express his concerns. The antinuclear activist was invited by several broadcasting companies to tell his story and in this sense he received the publicity he hoped for. Under different circumstances, that is, on different stages Springer was able to speak out. That the media allowed Springer to become a national figure very much outraged *Wall Street Journal* which in an editorial commented the following:

"What *would* be news would be if the producers of a show such as 'CBS This Morning' decided that giving a character like Richard Springer a place in the media spotlight wasn't smart or healthy or in the public interest. That wouldn't simply be news, of course. That would be a miracle." (cited in: Lincoln, 1994: 160).

Lincoln draws important conclusions from the Springer affaire. First, contemporary society offers many different stages from which authority can be exercised. In other words, different audiences apparently choose different authorities. Second, response may change over time, as might be the case when the audience addressed by the authority faces new circumstances. Third, it remains possible that some day a new audience will emerge that takes an interest in the case advanced by the authority or the former authority. In short, on different stages we witness games in which authority is both *constructed* and *corroded*. These games can become, Lincoln suggests, quite complicated.

The Springer affaire provides an interesting example of the complexities involved. The audience in Las Vegas Hilton chose one authority and ignored the other; indeed, Reagan's speech, while "foolish" according to some people, was respectfully received by his audience; Springer's integrity and hence authority was seriously put in question by *Wall Street Journal*; his action can itself be seen as corrosive in the sense that it interrupted the speech of the authority chosen by the audience; in his turn, Reagan's belittling remark on democrats undermined the authority of the activist; perhaps to his own surprise, Springer found later that he could address unheard of audiences; most significantly, Lincoln's very own narrative on the incident in Las Vegas is highly corrosive of Reagan's authority – he uses expressions such as "foolish" (1994: 136), "rambling" (1994: 135) or "predictable" (ibid.).

What we may learn from this is that leadership or authority is not a stable state. On the contrary, leadership constantly changes its nature, not only when it 'journeys' from stage to stage, but also on the stage itself since even the responses of the very same audience might change over time. All leaders will sooner or later arrive at a point when their audience – the very same audience which has carefully put them into a position of authority – will take away the ground from under their feet. In other words, their leadership is not only constantly constructed but also constantly corroded.

Lincoln's analysis of leadership is, I suggest, a nice example of fashionable theorizing in the sense that it refuses to engage with whatever it is that lies underneath. There is no reference to subconscious processes, to essential individual characteristics, or to hidden structures undermining the individual actors' agency. Lincoln's agenda is not so much to lay bare the hidden regions of Reagan or Springer's soul as to point to the sort of dialectics that is involved in leadership. His analysis is profoundly aesthetic in the sense

that it focuses on what the heroes and anti-heroes say or do and how their audiences respond to that.

Another example of such aesthetic kinds of analysis is provided by Saul (1993) who relates leadership to *stardom*, pointing out that in our society what the star actually says or thinks is much less important than the way it is staged. Indeed, he goes so far as to point out that saying or thinking something with even the faintest glimmer of seriousness is potentially very dangerous for a star. Nothing seems nowadays so detestable as a leader who thinks in public. Thinking, after all, entails that you are able to question yourself openly (Saul, 1993: 534). Skepticism and self-doubt are not characteristics we, the audience, expect our leaders to have. On the contrary, Saul points out that ...

“... [t]he public itself has been soothed to such an extent by scripted debates imbued with theoretically ‘right’ answers that it no longer seems to respond positively to arguments which create doubt. Real doubt creates real fear.” (ibid.)

Only a few political leaders have been able to engage in the kind of open-minded thinking that Saul has in mind and Saul is nostalgic enough to believe that they are from a lost generation: Willy Brandt (Germany), Olaf Palme (Sweden) or Den Uyl (The Netherlands). These were leaders who, to a certain extent at least, accepted that they did not know the answer to every question right away and thus allowed themselves some time for pondering and hesitation. In the 1980s these leaders were being replaced by people such as Reagan or Thatcher who came to realize that the inability to provide quick answers would be seen by the media or the masses as instances of poor leadership. Nowadays, people like Bill Clinton or Tony Blair are told by their *personality makers* that quick answers are more important than well-considered or truthful answers. Whatever personality remains of the postmodern political leader, reflection and consideration have no place in it. Paradoxically, this is what he or she is learning from his/her personality makers.

Saul shares Lincoln's insight that leadership is in no way a permanent affair. Both authors share the insight that construction and corrosion take place simultaneously. Saul (1993: 512) points out that “at the heart of the star's reputation there is always ... tragic weakness”. Indeed, nowadays audiences more or less expect leaders to run into trouble. The grandeur and strength which are related to stardom are continually compensated by tragic and corrosive stories about failure and weakness. Saul even goes so far as to suggest that it is not reflection and consideration that make the leader's personality trustworthy or credible, but that it is the likelihood that he or she will run into some sex scandal, fraud affair, drug problem or a different sort of problem – impotency, Alzheimer, and lechery are good candidates as well. Summarizing, it is the likelihood that the leader will not only be a star but also a feeble human being which makes him or her popular. Construction and corrosion presuppose each other.

I love these analyses of political leadership. They stick to the surface, they are robust and exempt from hypocrisy. The point I wish to make in this chapter is that discourses on business leadership generally fail to meet such standards. I will discuss several types of discourses in which business leadership is portrayed: media discourses, spiritual discourses, universalistic discourses, style discourses, contingency discourses, and culture

discourses. I will claim that discourses on business leadership often ignore the kind of dialectics Lincoln and Saul refer to. As a consequence, *leadership is oftentimes described in terms of isolation, permanency, and other elements which I believe to be utopian*. This is the thesis I intend to defend in this chapter.

Discourses of business leadership may be popular and in the narrow sense of the word fashionable, but they are still infested with rational-utopian tendencies. In the first two sections, I will discuss several different discourses and describe fashionable and utopian elements in them. In the final session, I will suggest that much of the problems in leadership relate to the utopian idea that strong leadership can somehow save us from the complexities of the world. I will use insights developed by Franz Kafka as an aesthetic means of evading such trust in strong leadership.

Honor and disgrace

Corrosive discourses

Corrosive discourse is defined by Lincoln (1994: 78) as "all those sorts of speech which are not only nonauthoritative, but downright antithetical to the construction of authority", because they have the "capacity to eat away at the claims and pretensions of discourses and speakers who try to arrogate authority for themselves." Lincoln includes rumor, jokes, nicknames, taunts, sarcasm, obscene gestures and "everything else that deflates puffery and degrades the exalted." (ibid.)

Many corrosive discourses are not staged in the way constructive discourses are. The latter discourses tend to be disseminated from lofty, central, highly visible places, whereas corrosive discourses generally come from nowhere and no one in particular. They can be heard in the "back alleys, servant's quarters, toilets, locker rooms, and other low places" (1994: 87) where the voice of the people is rumbling. It is a profoundly dystopian discourse which comes from no one in particular and is yet spoken by everyone. Few people dare to assume responsibility for this subversive discourse. Strongly corrosive texts on business or political leaders are sometimes anonymously published (e.g. Bing, 1992). On the rare occasion that somebody assumes responsibility for what has been said, it is generally an outsider, a fringe journalist or an academic who has never been able to express his or her worries on stages which seriously matter and who will, therefore, never speak with the voice of the people. Corrosive discourse often suffers from what Tom Sorell (1998: 17) has recently dubbed an "alienation problem": those who ought to be affected by what is said will very likely remain as deaf as the audience in the Las Vegas Hilton was for Rick Springer.

Of course, corrosive discourse is feared by authority (for obvious reasons) and by the followers of that authority who believe that without such authority a leadership crisis might ensue. Most Americans, for example, seem to have been embarrassed, initially at least, by the public humiliation of their leader Bill Clinton during the summer of 1998. The widespread sentiment seemed to be not that Bill Clinton has been done wrong and was to be pitied but that the reputation of the United States of America is dragged through the mire. What the leader has actually done, they believed, was much less important and dangerous than the persistent efforts to make public his moral shortcomings.

This seems to me the type of reaction that is typical of people who merely stick to

the leader because they feel that without leadership, even if it is bad leadership, everything in their country, community or organization would go haywire. A poor leader is, from this standpoint at least, always better than no leader. Yet, a paradoxical side-effect of this ideology is that the fear for bad or deficient leaders is reinvigorated. After all, the ideology has it that one cannot do without leaders. Bad leaders therefore deny a profoundly felt need on behalf of the followers. No wonder then that as soon as a particular leader is seen as having shortcomings that are beyond repair, corrosive discourse swiftly intensifies. That is, it becomes increasingly sordid and assumes an oftentimes very nasty *ad hominem* quality, which is partly one of the reasons why leadership bashing has become almost as fashionable as leadership veneration, not only in politics but also in business thinking as we will soon see. Although corrosive discourse very often has a bad name, its sordid quality also gives it a "piquant appeal" (Lincoln, 1994: 78).

Many authors on business leadership have been remarkably keen to expose the piquant details of the subjects they describe. Punch (1996: 232), for example, writes:

"In some leaders there is a ruthless element of domination that can lead both to sycophancy among employees and to sadistic and psychologically destructive vindictiveness. This can manifest itself in vitriolic corporate in-fighting, intrigue, factionalism, vendettas, and the placing of personal loyalty above managerial skills and competence."

He then goes on to quote Turner (1986: 762) who describes Harold Geneen as "unmitigated swine who regularly terrorized and humiliated his subordinates". Punch also points to many publications in *Business Week* with titles such as '*CEO Disease: Egotism Can Breed Corporate Disaster – and the Malady is Spreading*'. The corrosive discourses to which Punch is referring and in which he himself participates may fill people with awe when they come to think of the poor moral quality of business leaders who are described. Indeed, there is no room for doubt in an escalating corrosive discourse: the world and the people inhabiting it are constantly jeopardized by inveterate and mystic egotists who are the leaders of uncontrollable yet almighty corporations (Jackall, 1988; Saul, 1993; Korten, 1995).

No doubt, many things are wrong and there is an ethical argument to be made that the wrongs should be exposed and addressed. I would like to suggest, however, that this kind of corrosive discourse not only serves to morally question leadership or our trust in it, but that it also spawns a utopian desire for better leaders and better leadership. This is at least the response of many discourses to be discussed below. This is where leadership models enter the picture. This is where leadership biographers become hagiographers. Corrosive discourse can easily turn into constructive discourse and *vice versa*.

To see what I mean, take the example of Stanley Bing (1992: 24) who has – typically under a pseudonym – argued that contemporary business frenzy demands a certain craziness among leaders. That is, as a business leader you need "a debilitating range of character deficiencies which, while not at all useful in private life, *are uniquely suited to a successful business career*". Among the deficiencies that are truly needed in the world of business are, Bing suggests, rigidity of character since rigidity is a key characteristic of organization itself. The ability to see all sides of an issue will result in doubt and paralysis and is dangerous and debilitating within social groups that want to keep things going. Decisiveness is thus seriously impaired by open-mindedness. Other

deficiencies that are needed for survival are megalomania, the ability to become furious, and so on. The point is that in contemporary business, "the boss's craziness may be his best and only strategic defense." (Bing, 1992: 57)

Bing's text is an outstanding example of a corrosive discourse. After reading his text, not only business leaders but the business world in its entirety appear as something which we can look at in awe. However, Bing argues that managers and entrepreneurs should arm themselves against the irrationalities and crookedness of business life. Interestingly, he even quotes Kafka (Bing, 1992: 267) to hammer his point into his readership: "We too have weapons." Among those weapons are sanity, rationality and a few shining examples of leaders who were able to function as "a thread of meaning", as "a continuing rationale." (1992: 57)

Hence, in spite of all his doubts, Bing clearly refuses to abandon *the utopian idea that rational leaders are utterly important for business organizations* and can help to counteract daily madness. Without such men or women, he argues, sheer panic will result. Once again, we see how a description of a terrible world serves as a means to hammer home the utopian message. The world is bad, indeed, but we should not abandon all hope. The stronger the corrosive effects, the more confidence is put in individuals who can and will help us to cope with the awkward circumstances. Both constructive and corrosive discourse are mutually dependent. They generally describe leaders in unequivocal and one-dimensional terms: they are either downright good or downright evil. Compared to the more aesthetic discourses provided by Lincoln and Saul, there is very little room for ambivalence and doubt in most constructive and corrosive discourses. Apparently, *the temptation to either venerate or disgrace leaders is well-nigh irresistible*. In this chapter, I seek to circumvent this temptation by means of focusing on a more aesthetic type of discourse which challenges the idea, shared by both constructive and corrosive discourses, that leaders are important in the first place. However, before entering in these issues, I will provide some examples of constructive discourses.

Spiritual nonsense and media nonsense

In 1991, C. E. Watson published a best-selling book called *Managing with Integrity. Insights from America's CEO's*. Watson argues that although many business textbooks blatantly suggest that the purpose of business is to maximize profits, many corporations clearly are committed to higher purposes. This commitment should be reflected in the leader. Watson then goes on to quote some well-known business leaders who have proven themselves to be driven by higher purposes. Donald Hall of Hallmark is, according to Watson, a perfect example:

"Being able to manage people is not standing over them with a whip but being able to understand people who work for them and maximizing people's potential." (Hall, *quoted in*: Watson, 1991: 289-290; *also quoted in*: Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996: 99)

Or, consider John Hoyt Stookey of National Distillers, nowadays known as Quantum Chemical:

"One of the things ... that we mean by ethical behavior is that we will forgo profit in order to adhere to a standard of conduct. I believe that's a message a CEO needs to convey loud and clear to an organization and I find myself doing that." (Stookey,

quoted in: Watson, 1991: 186; also in: Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996: 101)

There are, of course, many more examples of constructive discourses. Generally, they emphasize the inspiring and spiritual aspects of leaders and leadership (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996). It is often argued that the single most important source of inspiration is the ethical stance that is taken by business leaders such as the much quoted and celebrated Anita Roddick of the Body Shop (Davies, 1991; Gaines, 1995). Even writers who are generally highly critical with respect to business and organization have venerated some business leaders while scorning others. For example, Lefebvre (1997: 143) has expressed Roddick's leadership style in terms of 'firmness', 'tenderness' and 'compassion' and describes the repeated attacks on the ethical reputation of the Body Shop as 'devious and slurring' (1997: 200). The same kind of respect can be found in DuGay (1996) or ten Bos (1997b), and they also tend to emphasize Mrs. Roddick's singularity and originality in an otherwise depressingly tedious *milieu*.

Very often the few examples of truly inspirational leaders in the world of business lead their admirers to lofty reflections on notions such as 'ethical leadership' or 'spiritual leadership'. For example, Blanchard and Peale (1988) have discussed ethical leadership in terms of such glorious and alliterating notions as 'purpose' (more precisely, a 'higher' purpose), 'pride' (high self-esteem), 'patience' (calmness and serenity are enabled by the leader's faith in the vision), 'persistence' (the art of never giving up) and 'perspective' (the capability to see what really matters in a given situation). The religious undertones in such texts are no coincidence. Indeed, spiritual leadership has recently become one of the hot issues in management consultancy and guru textbooks. In Holland, seminars on spiritual leadership have been organized by renowned consultancy firms such as Ernst & Young or KPMG, typically organizations which have previously excelled in providing not so very spiritual financial services.

Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) use many religious (predominant Indian and Western) sources in order to come to grips with what they think is spiritual leadership. They refer to Roland's (1988) work on cross-cultural psychology in which the 'individualized self', typical of North American societies, and the 'familial self' as we know it in India, China or Japan, are distinguished from the 'spiritual self'. Such a self understands the fundamental goal of all relationships and living to be "the gradual self-transformation toward finer and subtler qualities and refined aspects of power in the quest for self-realization." (Roland, 1988: 294, cited in: Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996: 59). Kanungo and Mendonca then go on to argue that "the spiritual self-identity is precisely what characterizes the inner psychological worldviews of the charismatic leaders" (ibid: 59.).

It is tempting to link such ideas with the Great Utopian Twist referred to in the previous chapter. Would business performance, whatever that may be, really be enhanced by leaders who reflect on the possibilities of spiritual self-transformation? The answer to this question, of course, depends on the perspective you take, that is, on what you mean by performance in the first place, but again we may suspect that there is a huge alienation problem involved. Kanungo and Mendonca (1996: 95) hope for the kind of leadership which regards the mundane world as "transitory or illusory" and which is therefore capable to develop "an emotional detachment from it". Instead, some higher, utopian, purpose is served, a purpose which is linked to a spiritual reality "which alone has permanence, is unchanging, and endures". Such a purpose may, needless to say, only be

achieved at a very high prize: considerable personal cost and sacrifice are inevitable on one's road to bliss.

One may, at first sight, wonder why managers would endorse this kind of what I suggest is a profoundly utopian leadership discourse or how they would be able to spiritually distance themselves from this mundane world without losing their jobs. This is exactly the kind of alienation problem Sorell (1998) has in mind. It is, however, easily taken care of in discourses on spiritual leadership and again the analogies with GUT are remarkable. More specifically, the gap of credibility that might be the result of reflections on spiritual leadership is easily closed in three steps:

- a. It is carefully pointed out that profitability in business may be mundane but not immoral or bad. Admittedly, it may not be the single most important end of business but it certainly is an important means to achieving those ends (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1998: 98). The effect of such claims is that they merely echo everyday concerns of business managers because only few of them think that profit maximization is the central goal of business (Cools, 1991; Whittington, 1993). By deliberately quoting texts with claims to the contrary, authors such as Kanungo and Mendonca hope to cast a psychological spell on their readership: the authors show that they know what is really worrying managers. In order words, they clearly relate to the self-experience of many managers.
- b. It is also carefully pointed out that the ideas brought to attention in discourses on spiritual leadership are not totally off the hook. Again, Kanungo and Mendonca provide a telling example. They explain that the missionary zeal of the charismatic and spiritual leader they have in mind "needs to be distinguished from that of the irrational, fanatical zealots who stop at nothing to thrust their views and ideals on followers." (1996: 59). They also make clear that their ideas about spiritual leadership are in line with common wisdom and with what well-respected management gurus themselves have said. The reader is, for example, assured that there "is nothing mythical or unreal about spiritual experiences" (1996: 89). The argument that sustains this claim is twofold. First, spiritual experiences are psychologically real in the sense that we all have experiences of beauty, of goodness, and sometimes even of truth. What seems to be outlandish is in fact rather common and down to earth. This is a well-known tactics in guru-textbooks. An emotional impulse is aroused which should lead the readers to infer that they themselves have had such experiences, perhaps unwittingly. Second, Abraham Maslow, one of the most venerated motivation gurus, has argued that spiritual experiences as such are crucially important as "a major part of one's self-actualization" (ibid.). This is perhaps an 'argument from false authority' (Richards, 1978) which assumes that Maslow knows what it is for us to experience beauty, goodness and truth. It is important for the actualization of self. Perhaps an artist or a real mystic would have argued that such experiences are important for the loss of self.
- c. The third step in order to bridge the credibility gap is to make sure that the proposed ideas have practical consequences. So, Kanungo and Mendonca (1996: 90-91) offer some clues as to how spiritual leadership might become manifest in terms of concrete, daily behavior. Such behavior includes prudence (described as "the objective assessment of the situation and the exercise of sound judgment"), justice (described as "the exercise of a sense of responsibility that balances, in a fair manner, the rights of all

the stakeholders”), fortitude (described as “the courage to take great risks for an ideal that is worthwhile”) and temperance (described as “the exercise of self-control [which] would lead one to avoid and resist the temptation to overindulge in hedonistic behaviors”). Needless to say that these concrete behavioral aspects are part and parcel of received managerial wisdom. The virtues of objectivity, responsibility, courage and self-control have been emphasized in (and outside) management theory since ever (Jacques, 1996). The only difference is that until just a few years ago no one would have dared to call such virtues ‘spiritual’.

The media also have their share in this nonsense. In december 1994, a new fashion magazine in the Netherlands called *Dutch* published an interview with Sumner M. Redstone, president of MTV and Paramount and 71 years old (Friedman, 1994). The “trendiest grandpa in the world” can be found on an engaging photo amidst hundreds of breathtaking models showing the latest creations of Parisian fashion designers. He smiles and makes a V-sign with his left hand. In a lengthy interview Redstone is portrayed as a brilliant man with a near to incredible sense of humor. Before the war he was educated at the elitist Latin School, a period in which he was thoroughly prepared for Harvard which, in comparison with the Latin School, turned out to be “a piece of cake”, as Redstone himself stresses. During the war he played a “decisive” role as cryptographer specializing in deciphering Japanese codes. After the war he takes up his education at Harvard again in order “to try to make the world a better place.” In 1947 he starts working for the San Francisco University as a teacher in Law and for the High Court as a secretary. At the age of 31 he joins the small entertainment business owned by his father.

Fifteen years later, Redstone is the president of the American union of cinema and theater owners. He is one of the few persons in this business who foresees the challenge that television poses to the entertainment industry. Immediately recognizing that cinema will inevitably lose the battle with television, he finds ways to withhold the pressure for a relative long time. For example, Redstone invested heavily in so-called Multiplex-theaters with outstanding picture- and sound-quality. Watching a movie in such a theater was, from the customer’s point of view, still much more exciting than watching it on a television screen. However, during the seventies, Redstone has no other choice than going with the current. Cable television and video films became increasingly popular. Redstone bought shares in companies like Paramount, Fox, Columbia and other important producers of movies. However, during the 1980s he sold a lot of these shares in order to create more financial scope and to buy out competing managers in companies where he chose to remain a shareholder. Many millions were involved during the transactions in this turbulent period. The most important result was that Redstone was able to increase his share in cable operator Votum from 10% to 83%. Redstone’s strategy soon turned out to be very successful. MTV, which belongs to Votum, was by the end of the 1980s the most popular broadcasting company in the world. This eventually allowed Redstone to buy Paramount, again a lucky choice since movies such as *Clear and Present Danger* and *Forrest Gump* became, somewhat unexpectedly, smashing cinema hits. Meanwhile Redstone became a teacher at Boston University. His specialization was law in entertainment industries.

Redstone is described by *Dutch* as a very successful business giant who has been able to become the president of one of the world’s most important cable companies by strategically manipulating shares and taking high risks. Apart from this, the man is also

able to enjoy 'the full life'. More or less the same story can be read about other business giants in the media. In 1995, *Time* and *Newsweek* published several articles on Disney-president Michael Eisner. The interest in Eisner was triggered by the 19 billion dollar takeover of Capital Cities/ABC, another cable and broadcasting company.

Generally, the tone in such stories is one of admiration and mystification. *Time*, for example, has speculated quite a lot about Eisner's private income and the numbers mentioned are mind-boggling. He is believed to have a private capital of half a billion dollars. Very few critical comments can be heard in these discourses, although Saul (1993) and Reich (1996), for example, have warned that Redstone and Eisner and others belong to a new species of capitalists who are no longer trading in oil, steel or railways, a shift of interest with unpredictable consequences. Rather than being interested in investments in the physical infrastructure of a country, the new capitalists are trading in images, information and ideas. Billions of people are influenced by such ideas. ABC, for example, is the biggest cable industry in India. This leads to disquieting questions: Politicians are held accountable to the people, but to whom are people like Redstone and Eisner accountable?

Such painful questions are, however, exceptions to the rule. Generally, business giants like Redstone and Eisner are portrayed as heroes from whom the readers of magazines such as *Dutch*, *Time* or *Newsweek* can learn how to achieve incredible successes. The veneration of business stars quite often reaches truly nonsensical proportions. This becomes evident if we superficially analyze what the preconditions of leadership success as they are portrayed in media discourses.

First and most important is the presence of a dominant mother. Under circumstances, a dominant father will also do, but a mother is to be preferred. Redstone explains that his mother was obsessed with education: "During piano lessons she put back the hands of the clock in order to have me exercise a little bit longer." (Friedman, 1994: 85; my translation) Eisner was also genetically predestined to become successful. His mother was "a world-class competitive woman" who believed in a very strict upbringing. To mention just one example, Eisner was not allowed to watch more television than one hour a day, provided that he had read two hours.

Second, a fighting mentality is also crucially important. Eisner claims that he has been influenced by Picasso's famous bullfighting paintings. His parents once bought such a painting and hang it on the wall of young Eisner's room. He now believes that this painting has shown him that you have to try to outperform others in any conceivable area. Redstone is cast in the same mold: "In every action I undertake, I want to be the best – that is what they taught me at Latin School. The drive to be a winner is what matters most. Once I achieved my goals, I immediately caught sight of other goals." (Friedman, 1994: 86; my translation.) Being a successful business man entails that you have the "passion for excellence" that also characterizes famous sportsmen. Otherwise the pain that you will have on your way to success will become unendurable.

Third, you must have had a near-death experience. In 1994 Eisner suffered from a heart disease. Nothing would have been more natural than leaving the stressful world of business, but this did not appeal to Eisner at all. Instead he followed a strict diet, started jogging and lost seven kilos. As a consequence he was able to strike harder than ever. After a skirmish with death, Eisner explains, you can do two things: either leisurely sailing to Capri and go easy there or working even harder in order to ensure that you are irreplaceable. You should not allow yourself to think that without you business will go on as usual.

Redstone also had a near-death experience. In 1979 he barely escaped the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston which had caught fire. Perhaps some luck was involved but perseverance and determination were much more important factors for his survival. With his burnt hand he clung to a ridge for several minutes and only hundred hours later, even after having had his badly injured hand operated upon, he was playing tennis again. It is all a matter of having the right mentality. Redstone even proffers us a piece of spiritual wisdom:

“After all, each of us will have to cope with at least one or two big catastrophes in our lives. In order to survive them, your mental make-up, your state of mind, is utterly important.” Friedman, 1994: 87; my translation)

Survival is, in business and outside business, a state of mind.

Fourth, optimism is also a feat of successful leaders and must also be seen as a state of mind. Even in very hostile circumstances you must be convinced that the tides will eventually turn to your advantage. When Redstone was holding on to the ridge, he was horrified by death but he also had “the deep-rooted conviction that his life should not end like this.” The successful leader firmly believes in a happy ending.

Fifth, both Redstone and Eisner are tough business men, but somehow they manage to combine this with a dash of social commitment. Redstone has no doubt that American society is ridden by crises and that there are too many poor and homeless people. He claims that something can be done about this:

“When the government would act more vigorously, they would notice that the rich in our country would endorse tax increases – provided that they know that the money is effectively used in order to combat poverty and increase welfare.” (ibid.).

Time describes Eisner not only as a merciless street fighter but also as somebody who adheres to family values, who truly cares for his personnel and who is a veritable children’s friend. Apparently, toughness in business does not rule out social benignity. It is, for example, interesting that under Eisner’s leadership, Disney became one of the companies who provided special benefits to gays and lesbians, which has led conservative and religious groupings in America to call for a boycott of the company (McIntosh, Leipziger, Jones & Coleman, 1998: 143).

Figure 1: Leadership qualities in two discourses

Spiritual discourse	Media discourse
purpose	strong discipline
pride	unrestricted ambition
patience	a passion for excellence
persistence	perseverance
sense of justice	toughness
prudence	social commitment
fortitude	experience of life
temperance	the willingness to take risk
vision	fighting spirit

The message of spiritual and media discourses is that leadership success is achievable provided that you are willing to develop certain personal and interpersonal qualities (see figure 1). It is interesting to note that both discourses, albeit constructively intended, can have unintended corrosive effects. For example, some of the leadership qualities stressed in the media discourse may be seen by some as macho or male chauvinist, while those stressed in the spiritual discourse may strike some as unrealistic or soft and feminine. That is, in these types of discourses, it is difficult to exercise any control on the effect of the words that are spoken. Consider, for example, what Theodore Levitt wrote long ago:

“[... the leader] whose only aim is personal aggrandizement and whose tactics are a vulgar combination of compulsive demagoguery and opportunistic cynicism is less dangerous than the social evangelist who, to borrow from Nietzsche, thinks of himself as ‘God’s ventriloquist’. There is nothing more corrupting than self-righteousness and nothing more intolerant than an ardent man who is convinced he is on the side of the angels.” (Levitt, 1958: 46)

This is not the kind of politically correct language we generally see in constructive discourses. It is clearly intended to undermine the idea of the business leader as a socially benign person, but it is also intended to provide an alternative constructive discourse. Yet, even this may have its unintentional side-effects. The unvarnished truth to which Levitt thinks he is pointing may in itself become disquieting for people who think that the alternatives offered by him are, to say the least, disenchanting. In other words, no matter what he intended, Levitt’s words may strike many contemporary manager or management student as corrosive. After all, most people do not want to be a disgraceful demagogue or cynic, but neither do they want to be an honorable social evangelist, let alone God’s ventriloquist.

Leadership science?

It is a truism that the closer one gets to a leader, the less one is inclined to see him or her as such. Although hitherto concealed characteristics of a leader may be unveiled by a closer look, they are generally not seen as aspects of what people think constitutes genuine leadership. The more we get to know about particular leaders, the more we get to know about their tragic weaknesses or, more precisely, about what undermines their leadership. In other words, *facts about leaders are generally corrosive*. This insight no doubt explains why so many leadership discourses have a distinct mystical, spiritual or heroic flavor. It is as if the object of research makes a hasty retreat once it is studied from a scientific perspective.

This may all be too simple to be true, but questions have been raised as to the very possibility of a leadership science. Many researchers have shed their light on leadership, but apparently their efforts have not led to indisputable ‘scientific’ insights into questions such as: What makes a good leader? Which characteristics does a leader have? What is best leadership practice? What is leadership success? How is the leader’s performance related to organizational performance?

Of course, one might argue that the presence of an indisputable body of knowledge is not necessarily a hallmark of good science. But the key problem with respect to leadership is that somehow researchers interested in the topic have never been able to agree on what might count as a sound methodology for investigating the subject. It is

true, there have been many different approaches over the past decades – the traits approach, the style approach, the contingency approach, the ‘new leadership approach’ are a few examples mentioned by Bryman (1996) – but each of these approaches are distinguished by their very own methodological presuppositions. As a result, there is hardly any agreement among researchers about what one is supposed to study when one is studying leadership.

Those who adhere to the traits approach, which became popular in the first years after World War II, have argued that one should try to determine *universal characteristics* of leaders. Such characteristics may be of a psychological and a physical nature. The underlying essentialism which is typical of the traits approach very soon led to disillusionment among researchers who found that leadership cannot be reduced to a few essential properties. Researchers have pointed out over and over again that there seem to be innumerable different kinds of leaders: some of them are visionaries, others are dull and mediocre; some are lazy, others are diligent; some are intelligent and others are quite stupid; some show a lot of empathy and others manage without this faculty, and so on and so on. Summarizing, the idea that there are essential leadership characteristics seems to be totally misguided.

Such an anti-essentialist stance is of course highly corrosive of what Andrew Huczynski (1993: 88) has called the ‘Great Man Theory of Leadership’. In Huczynski’s view this theory is one of the two great myths about leadership. (I will come to speak about the other myth in a few moments.) In face of research findings, this myth clearly does not have any scientific validity, but this is not to say that it has lost its appeal to practitioners or to the media. On the contrary, in spite of all research there is a renewed fascination for the traits approach which, however, appears under quite different headings: transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, visionary leadership, heroic leadership, and, for that matter, spiritual leadership.

Such a renewed interest is, I suggest, typical of what might happen to popular management ideas. Initially put forward as a conjecture by a group of researchers, such ideas may eventually catch the imagination of the Guru, the Consultant, or the Manager. While the majority of researchers (i.e. the non-gurus among them) may abandon such ideas as soon as conceptual weaknesses and lacking empirical evidence become too strong to ignore, the Guru or the Manager might still cling on to them for quite a long time. And even when such ideas finally disappear, the Guru, overwhelmed by nostalgia, can always recur to them and thus reinvent the wheel while refusing to admit it.

Meanwhile, researchers may pop up with something new. The style approach, for example. This approach became popular towards the end of the 1940s. It did not focus on personal traits of leaders but on *manifest behavior*, often suggesting that a high orientation towards people combined with a high task and structure-orientation was the best leadership style. But here again did problems with theory mount. What was particular fatal to the style approach was that it could not provide an adequate account of leadership behavior since this behavior is very often perceived and interpreted by people in terms of their own implicit theories about leadership. A researcher interviewing a group of employees about their leader’s behavior, might merely be ‘tapping’ their generalized ideas about leaders and leadership (Bryman, 1996: 279).

The contingency approach, which became popular during the 1960s, came to the rescue of the style approach and combined the best of two worlds by arguing that leadership characteristics (emphasized by the traits approach) and actual leadership

behavior (emphasized by the style approach) should be seen in the light of a particular *situation*. Some characteristics and behavioral aspects will suit particular circumstances better than others. The effectiveness of a leadership style is, in other words, determined by the situation. Although this approach had a strong intuitive appeal on practitioners, the concept of a 'situation' is very difficult to come to grips with.

After all, which elements make up a situation? Crisis, turbulence, relationship with employees, number of employees involved, competitors, personal characteristics or all these variables simultaneously? The difficulty is that the situation with which practitioners have to cope is generally so complex and diverse that it does not provide an unequivocal cue to what, in the light of this situation, would be best leadership practice. Needless to say that there have been many efforts to reduce situational complexity in order to make such unequivocal cues possible *and* plausible.

One of the most popular efforts is known as *Situational Leadership* (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), which argues that the single most important factor determining a situation is subordinate maturity. Such maturity is basically defined as the willingness and capability of a person to independently and autonomously carry out tasks. The concept of subordinate maturity should, as is repeatedly pointed out by Hersey and Blanchard, be linked to such tasks. Managers are not encouraged to see their employees as mature or immature in any general sense of the word but only with respect to particular tasks. In case of task immaturity the approach to be adopted is simply explaining what has to be done (instruction); in case of task maturity the approach to be adopted is more psychological and facilitating (coaching, motivating, delegating). The idea is seductively simple: the leader should provide the follower with what he or she does not have. If the follower lacks the knowledge to carry out a particular task, the leader should give him or her this knowledge by means of instruction; if self-confidence or motivation is lacking, the leader should resort to a coaching or motivational style of leadership.

Situational Leadership has been severely criticized but is still very popular among practitioners – there are even companies, Xerox for example, who have officially embraced it as part of their official leadership philosophy (Huczynski, 1993) – because it seems to offer the required unequivocal cues to best leadership practices. That the complexity of the situation is reduced to one aspect, does not seem to matter very much. Indeed, this may be one of its most distinctive appeals, as was argued by Bryman:

"[I]ts concentration on just one situational variable, and the absence of a research tradition deriving from it, render it of little utility for leadership researchers. Ironically, it may be the very simplicity of the model and the absence of negative evidence that has made it so popular within management circles." (Bryman, 1986: 149; cited in: Huczynski, 1993: 35)

Again, the ideas propounded by social researchers like Hersey and Blanchard turned out to be generally unacceptable for the majority of their colleagues, but as gurus they carry on selling them to practitioners as if nothing is wrong. And the practitioners, of course, buy such books as if nothing is wrong. But what exactly is wrong with Situational Leadership? It has been argued by some management theorists (e.g. Bryman, 1986 and 1996) that it denies situational complexity and that it is too deterministic (if situation X occurs, leadership style X is the most appropriate style!). It has also been pointed out that a leadership theory which assumes the existence of immature followers may easily become

a self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that followers who are conceptualized by their leaders as immature may in return behave in an immature way, as if to confirm the leader's perception of them (Grint, 1995). After all, followership is just like leadership a construct.

Should we infer from such critiques that there is nothing attractive in the model as far as social researchers are concerned? I am not so sure here. Hersey and Blanchard, for example, indicate that their research findings make clear that leaders in organizations do not always behave in the same way (ten Bos & van der Ham, 1994). In my opinion, this is a crucial move away from those ideas which suggest that leadership behavior is generally monolithic and consistent. In this sense it might be argued that Situational Leadership has a slightly corrosive effect with respect to the heroic or spiritual discourses on leadership. But there is even more that might strike the critical researcher as attractive. Hersey and Blanchard have also tried to reinvigorate an old tradition in thinking about leadership which goes back to people like Chester Barnard and Mary Parker Follett and which has gained a highly respectable status in much contemporary literature on leadership (Grint, 1997a; Hurst, 1995).

Although Situational Leadership claims that there are best leadership practices in particular situations, it also has an anti-essentialist flavor because it is not interested in personal traits of leaders. Moreover, it explicitly urges practitioners to see leadership as a construct in the mind of the follower. Leadership is not what the leader thinks of him- or herself, but what the follower perceives. This was long ago, in 1937 to be exact, also argued by Barnard:

"The followers make the leader [and] the latter may also affect and must guide the followers" (cited in: Grint, 1997a: 85).

Already in 1918, Parker Follett had much more to say on the same point::

"The leader guides the group and is at the same time guided by the group. (...) The skillful leader then does not rely on personal force; he controls his group not by dominating but by expressing it. He stimulates what is best in us; he unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but he never gets away from the current of which we and he are both an integral part. He is a leader who gives form to the inchoate energy in every man. The person who influences me most is not he who does great deeds but he who makes me feel I can do great deeds."
(cited in: Hurst, 1995: 19)

Parker Follett's concerns with employee development lie also at the heart of Situational Leadership. The leader is primarily supposed to develop employees. Precisely these ideas lie also at the heart of many allegedly "new" leadership paradigms (Clegg *et al.*, 1996). Grint (1995: 145), for example, claims that ...

"... we should shift the focus of our concern away from the 'character' or 'personality' of the leader and towards the mechanisms by which actions through which leaders are legitimated are undertaken by followers."

Bryman (1996: 284) argues for an "alternative perspective" which recognizes ...

“... the need for leadership to be viewed as a widely dispersed activity which is not necessarily lodged in formally designated leaders”.

All these ideas are, some minor differences notwithstanding, not in contradiction with the essential tenets of Situational Leadership. Dispersed leadership, Bryman claims, opens a perspective on followers who are perfectly able, both within teams and all by themselves, to lead themselves. The perspective of an employee who is able to lead him- or herself is, if anything, the gist of Situational Leadership. In Bryman's view, this perspective is useful because it counterbalances the 'heroic' literature on leadership which analyzes leadership in terms of charisma and visionary qualities and which is, as I argued above, in many respects a resumption of the essentialist tenets of the traits approach. My problem here can be formulated as follows: why is Situational Leadership not accepted as a serious partner in what appears to be a struggle against those 'heroic' approaches?

Highly fashionable management ideas such as Situational Leadership may become attractive or unattractive to different audiences for entirely different reasons. Practitioners and consultants may admire Situational Leadership because it provides them with pretty straightforward cues about how to behave in particular situations. Scientists or critical management theorists may scorn Situational Leadership because it is, among other things, poorly conceptualized and tested. On the other hand, I have tried to argue that in some important respects Situational Leadership departs from assumptions also criticized by these theorists. The only important difference between the two communities may be that consultants try to render these theoretical insights practically relevant, which is, one might argue, where things actually go wrong, at least as far as the critical researcher is concerned.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982), however, repeatedly point out that their practical model is 'imperfect' and that subordinate maturity should by no means be regarded as the only determinant in choosing the appropriate leadership style. In other words, the differences between popular models such as Situational Leadership on the one hand and 'serious' and academic ideas about leadership on the other may not be as big as is suggested by those who adhere to the latter. The vehemence with which popular ideas are scorned veils the fact that there is more common ground than meets the eye. Hersey and Blanchard know what Barnard, Parker Follett, Bryman, Grint and many others whom I did not discuss here know.

This brings us back to my suggestion in chapter one that as far as management theory is concerned the groups who started a debate on whatever it is that they tend to disagree about have often more in common than the vehemence of the debate itself suggests (see also: Lilley, 1997). To this I would like to add that the struggle for identity is intensified due to the insecure status of the topic under discussion. This is particularly clear in the discussions about leadership. The general feeling in this area is that we do not know more than Chester Barnard, Mary Parker Follett, or, to go a little bit further back in the years, Plato or Sun Tzu. It is significant, for example, that the subject has not been monopolized by a particular, say, a scientific community. Apart from the social researchers, journalists, and gurus I have discussed so far, novelists, philosophers and many others have shown interest in leadership. This may, by the way, also explain why the gurus and academics are so vehemently opposed to each other. They are all immersed in fierce territorial struggle which will not, for the time being, easily calm down and make place for a stable body of

knowledge. Barnard's unsure feelings regarding his own musings about leadership qualities speaks volumes:

"Though in a general way I am confident that my meaning is understood, greater precision of meaning seems quite impossible, at least without extended space, and is not needed here. Indeed, a significant fact to emphasize is that neither in science nor in practical affairs has there yet been attained a degree of understanding of these qualities ..." (Barnard, 1997: 103-104)

Yet in spite of all self-reflective doubts, there seems to be widespread agreement that leadership matters. The idea that the leader is important for organizational performance has been identified by Huczynski (1993: 87) as the second great myth about leadership. In what follows, I will focus on the fashionable concept of 'cultural leadership', one which is used by many gurus to underscore the importance of leader(ship). I intend to explore the distinctive aspects of literature on cultural leadership and I will also argue that this literature is pervaded with utopian elements.

Founders, brainwashers and clockbuilders

While it is widely acknowledged that progress in our knowledge of leadership is unrealistic, there seems to be equally widespread agreement that leaders do make a difference. The assumption of leader importance is truly distinctive of most leadership discourses. No wonder, of course, if the leader would not make a difference, why bother writing about him or her in the first place? The profusion of leadership literature is explained by Huczynski in a rather straightforward way:

"The myth of leader importance developed because those who occupied leadership roles often felt frustrated and ineffectual. Hence they tended to be attracted to those management ideas which reinforced their own views as to how they would *like* to see themselves. Some writers had identified the leader as the linchpin in the organization claiming that survival of the organization was dependent on leader behavior." (Huczynski, 1993: 88)

Huczynski points to gurus such as McGregor (1960) and Likert (1961) who have helped to spread the belief in the myth of leader importance because they understood that practitioners needed such a myth. This understanding has survived throughout the years. Since the early 1980s the myth of leader importance became even more powerful because it was related by several authors to the notion of organizational culture (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985; Trice and Beyer, 1990). Schein (1985: 317), for example, has claimed that "the unique and essential function of leadership is the manipulation of culture".

The idea of the leader as a *cultural* leader became so popular that there were only few, even among critical management theorists, who have dared to argue that the influence of management or leaders might be restricted and that organizational culture might emerge rather than be willfully initiated, maintained or changed (e.g. Nord, 1985; Gergen, 1992; Alvesson, 1993a; Kirkbridge, 1993; Willmott, 1993). Most authors, however, sidestep this issue and claim that managers and leaders have a responsibility with respect to organizational culture. The only significant differences of opinion seem to

relate to the role of the followers: to what extent is the follower able to exercise discretion with respect to the cultural messages provided by the leader? Those who propagate notions such as transformational or charismatic leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990) tend to downplay the possibility of discretion on behalf of the followers, whereas others enthusiastically speak about "*imaginative consumers* of leaders' visions and of manipulated cultural artefacts." (Bryman, 1996: 286).

But what about leaders who manage culture? What are they supposed to do? Trice and Beyer (1990) distinguish four roles that might be taken on by the cultural leader. First, the cultural leader is responsible for the *creation* of culture. This insight has spawned a massive amount of literature on the role of the founder of the organization. The more essential elements of organizational culture, such as basic assumptions, can be traced back to the founders of the organization. These founders are supposed to create culture in the sense that they are able to envisage what the organization should be, that they are able to instill the values and norms they deem to be necessary, and that they are able to convince others that their vision is right. Nostalgia is a key aspect in literature on founder-leadership. Founders, Schein (1985: 210) explains, infuse the organization with assumptions about "the nature of the world, the role the organizations play in the world, the nature of human nature and relationships, how truth is arrived at and how to manage space and time."

This is a language of hope and what is hoped for is a (utopian) world where meanings are or can be fixed and where authorities do not trade in ambiguities but in unequivocal meanings. Such pristine conditions can only be found during the organization's first years. In that period the founder can typically be seen as a leader who is relatively free to mold the organization as s/he likes because s/he does not have to face employees who cling to norms and values of an already existing organizational culture. In this view it is a "luxury" (Alvesson, 1993a: 82) not to have to work with people who adhere to particular traditions. Many utopian ingredients are present here: isolation, malleability, contempt for ambivalence, obsession with purity, etc. The model of the perfect organization in the future may be found in a sometimes not so distant past.

But what if this past is more distant, if the recollection of what happened in those pristine years faded away? One answer is to envisage the cultural leader as a person who *embodies* the culture of the organization. S/he sets an example for other people in the organization because s/he has the personal qualities (personal integrity, diligence and ingenuity) they admire him/her for. According to Trice and Beyer (1990), this type of cultural leader is especially respected by those people within the organization who are reluctant to change and like the culture as it is. They see their leader as a protector of what they value. Discourses which emphasize the role of the leader as somebody who embodies well-respected and cherished values often focus on a heroic act of the leader that has been stored in the collective memory of the followers. This memory then reinforces culture as it is. Such discourses also quite often stress the leader's 'character', which is, I suggest, another nostalgic aspect in them. In much guru literature, there is a strong desire for leaders from a seemingly obliterated past who display an honorable, strong and robust character. Jacques (1996) has shown that this 'discourse of character' as he names it has its origins in Federalist American society and is closely linked to the values of Protestant perfectionism. These values include self-knowledge, honesty, self-interest and self-control. This is not to suggest that the meanings conveyed by such a discourse of character were fixed once and for all – in fact Jacques (1996: 85-86) cogently

argues that there has been a shift from “a character of self-control” to a “character of service”. It is merely to state that the focus on leadership characteristics belongs to a long tradition of which many practitioners are unaware.

Thus when Stephen Covey argues that “[r]eal leadership power comes from an honorable character” (1990a: 101), we should not think this is an isolated statement. It belongs to a tradition in which leaders are seen as people who are embodying both societal and organizational values. Daft offers a good example of a discourse in which not only the character of a leader is stressed but also his willingness to embody cultural values:

“Ken Macke, CEO of Dayton Hudson, reinforces the corporation’s cultural value of no-hassle return policy. He went into a store that was not following the policy with enthusiasm, and said he would take the next complaint himself. The complaint came from a woman who had a seven-year old washing machine with a broken belt. She only wanted the belt replaced, but she hadn’t been able to get the message across. Macke gave her a new washing machine. Employees still tell that story, and handling of complaints in the store have improved sharply.” (Daft, 1989: 505-506).

The third type of cultural leader Trice and Beyer distinguish is the *integrator*. This is, it is argued, the type of leader who typically pursues harmony and unity, again two typically utopian elements. The integrator is well aware of the needs employees and others have. In much leadership discourses, there is a tendency to favor this type of leader. In particular, in the early 1980s, Japanese leaders came to be seen as shining examples of leaders who were able to “integrate” culture (Pascal and Athos, 1991). Their inclination to look for harmony and unity can even go so far that they refrain from making decisions. As we saw in the previous chapter, decision-making entails ‘cutting reality into pieces’, which is to say that it is profoundly des-integrative.

Much earlier, in an article with the revealing title ‘*Good managers don’t make policy decisions*’, Wrapp (1967) argued that good leaders hardly ever force through a decision. Instead, they “explore, combine, and integrate” ideas, opinions and beliefs. Discourses which stress the role of the integrating leader often have a spiritual or new age flavor, which is clear from the following passage written by an academic who became a guru:

“The new president, appointed after firing the second, was a kind and peace-loving man. He set out to create a team atmosphere that would bind the organization together. However, rather than encourage a situation where organizational members could explore and resolve differences in an open manner, he adopted a style of management that really required organizational members to put aside or repress their differences. The desire for harmony was communicated in a variety of ways, particularly through use of specific rituals. For example, at special meetings the staff became an Indian tribe. Each member was given an Indian name and a headband with a feather. The aim was to forge unity between inside and outside groups. During the ritual, the practice of levying a fifty-cent fine on anyone who mentioned the name of the rival insurance firm was introduced.” (Morgan, 1986: 122)

The final type of cultural leader *changes* organizational culture. S/he is the type of leader who is able to create a vision that stimulates people (Tichy and Devanna, 1986). Trice and Beyer argue that organizations who face a serious crisis can be desperately in need of

such 'transformational' leaders who "operate on the emotional and spiritual resources of the organization, on its values, commitment and aspirations" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). In this discourse there is also an emphasis on the ability of the leader to develop a vision in which s/he is willing to put in a lot of energy in order to make the vision come true. In spite of Trice and Beyer's remark that transformational leadership is especially useful in crisis situations, much literature typically ignores such situational aspects and claims that organizations are always in need of this type of leadership (Bryman, 1996).

The discourse on these four types of cultural leaders share the assumption that leaders should be *value-driven*. That is, they can only make a difference if they accept that people need to find meaning in life through their work. This, however, is only possible if work serves some worthwhile purpose (Gini and Sullivan, 1987; Badarocco & Ellsworth, 1989). Perhaps the most important defender of value-driven leadership has been Edgar Schein. He interpreted culture as the outcome of a learning process during which members of the organization share the same experiences and try to solve problems on the basis of an ongoing collaboration. Culture is

"... a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems of internal and external integration ..."
(Schein, 1985: 9).

According to Schein the founder plays a pivotal role in this learning process. Nowhere is this clearer than with respect to values which are, in Alvesson's words (1993a: 20) ...

"... the result of a historical process in which people gradually accept and internalize beliefs and values based on a leader's (often the founder's) 'vision' once it has been shown to be successful."

In other words, the core of each culture (i.e. the values and basic assumptions) is *acquired* and the founder-leader of the organization is the person who takes the lead in this learning process.

That this process of acquirement might have a violent dynamic of its own was well known to Schein himself (Cooke, 1999). In 1962, he published an article about brainwashing in which he purported to show that the methods used by the Chinese communists during the 1950s and early 1960s "are not so mysterious, not so different and not so awful, once we separate the awfulness of the Communist ideology and look simply at the methods" (cited in: Cooke, 1999: 95). These methods, Schein suggests, are not without implications for "a general theory of attitude change" (cited in: Cooke, 1999: 96). Such a theory would imply that "social support for attitudes have to be undermined and destroyed if change is to take place". Schein explicitly acknowledges the cruelty of methods which undermine and destroy the social support to which individuals might resort. Only when the patient has fright, Chairman Mao is reputed to have said, can he or she be treated. Cruelty and violence is, as we will see below, characteristic of utopian thinking, even though it is often erased from people's memory. This erasure of all too unpleasant memories has, Bill Cooke suggests, also taken place in the management discourse:

"[N]either cruelty nor coercion are recognized as present in (...) later managerial applications [of Schein's findings on brainwashing in China]. Here the assumption is benevolent, intent on the part of change agents who have an objectively correct understanding of the need for change and of who the subjects of the change are to be. The right of those controlling the process to generate guilt and anxiety is not questioned." (1999: 96-97)

Similar ideas about cultural leadership can be found in the best-selling book authored by Collins and Porras (1996), even though they do not, as we will soon see, link their ideas to communists in China but to the Founding Fathers. They prefer to speak about cultural leaders as 'architects' or 'clockbuilders'. Interestingly, they downplay the role of individual charisma, which is, they argue, never of overriding importance to organizational performance. What does make a difference in their view, however, is the extent to which leaders are rooted in the daily practicalities of their organization. According to Collins and Porras, the secret of successful organizations is not brilliant intuition or unequalled charisma, but "orientation towards the organization". Much more important than their putative charismatic or visionary qualities, is the ability of people such as Jack Welch or Lee Iacocca to understand and to fit in with "the underlying processes and fundamental dynamics embedded in the organization." (1996: 41). Collins and Porras's ideas come close to Trice and Beyer's insights about leaders who embody organizational culture. Perhaps it might be argued that Collins and Porras's ideas about organizational clockbuilders serve to corrode the other, more pronounced roles identified by Trice and Beyer:

"If you're involved in building in and managing a company, we're asking you to think less in terms of being a brilliant product visionary or seeking the personality characteristics of charismatic leadership, and to think more in terms of being an *organizational* visionary and building the characteristics of a visionary company." (ibid.)

Collins and Porras try to enhance the credibility of this advice by linking it to their view of the Founding Fathers who are described as 'organizational visionaries'. It is worthwhile to quote from their text at some length, because it perfectly illustrates the peculiar mix of nostalgia and alienation which typifies so much the discourse of cultural leadership:

"The critical question at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 was not 'Who should be president? Who should lead us? Who is the wisest among us? Who would be the best king?' No, the founders of the country concentrated on such questions as 'What *processes* can we create that will give us good presidents long after we're dead and gone? What type of enduring country do we want to build? On what principles? How should it operate? What guidelines and mechanisms should we construct that will give us the kind of country we envision.?' (1996: 42)

Such are the questions managers are supposed to ask themselves, just as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Adams once did. Referring to such national heroes appeals to widespread nostalgic and nationalistic feelings which Collins and Porras suppose are important for their audience. But there is also an alienating and manipulative aspect in

this reference. Average readers are probably baffled by the perspective of being able to act just like these great *men*. But they should not be. The dream to follow the footsteps of great men in American history can come true:

“Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Adams were not charismatic visionary leaders in the ‘it all depends on me’ mode. No, they were organizational visionaries. They created a constitution to which they and all future leaders would be subservient. They focused on building a country. They rejected the good-king model. They took an architectural approach. They were clockbuilders!” (ibid.)

The clock to be built is not a “cold, mechanistic, Newtonian or Darwinian clock”. That the authors distance themselves from Darwin serves to illustrate how well aware gurus are of the particular needs of their audience. In this case they clearly do not wish to snub certain religious feelings that are likely to be shared by parts of their audience. Much later in the text, Collins and Porras (1996: 149) use some evolutionary insights in order to clarify their ideas about organizational evolution, but again they carefully distinguish these ideas from Darwin’s evolution which is, after all, an “entirely *unconscious* process.” What the authors have in mind is an “evolutionary progress toward desired ends within the context of a core ideology – a process we call *purposeful* evolution.” In other words, the clock to be built is a clock with *spirit*. And building such a clock can be learned, even by the managers who are carefully reading the book they have in their hands:

“You don’t have to sit around waiting until you’re lucky enough to have a great idea. You don’t have to accept the false view that until your company has a charismatic visionary leader, it cannot become a visionary company. *There is no mysterious quality or elusive magic*. Indeed, once you learn the essentials, you – and all those around you – can just get down to the hard work of making your company a visionary company.” (1996: 42; emphasis mine)

Although the authors claim that there is no mysterious quality and elusive magic involved, the idea of the leader as a clockbuilder might very well be interpreted in the light of a broader religious and historical background. After all, in Western culture God himself has often been seen as “an Eternal Clockbuilder” and His creation was held to be a perfect clockwork (Mumford, 1963: 34; Karsten, 1998: 6). The clock Collins and Porras refer to should perhaps not be conceived as a cold and mechanical one, but such a restriction cannot conceal the fact that this particular metaphor involves utopian connotations of machine-like perfection. As Mumford (1963: 134) points out, in our culture the clock gradually came to be seen as “the most influential of machines, mechanically as well as socially; and by the middle of the eighteenth century it had become the most perfect ...”. Hence I suggest that Collins and Porras use the metaphor in order to lure their leadership with the promise of perfection. The godlike manager may not be charismatic, but as an organizational visionary he certainly makes a difference.

Do leaders actually make a difference?

It is clear that in the discourse on cultural leadership that leaders do make a difference. But one might ask how exactly a founder is capable to infuse the organization with values and norms? And, perhaps more interestingly, to what extent is s/he able to infuse the

organization with *his* or *her* values and norms?

Critical authors have pointed out that there are many problems with the notion of value-driven leadership. Some authors have contended that the values espoused by leaders are quite often contradictory. For example, how can social responsibility as a value go hand in hand with the demand to meet strict financial performance criteria? (Watson, 1994; Punch, 1998). In daily practice many managers sense that there is often a problem to reconcile both. The daily rut may easily undermine or even undo the moral positions held by the organizational top, which is another example of the alienation problem I referred to earlier. The creation of a gap between top executives (who take a high moral ground) and their subordinates (who have to cope with messy practicalities) may also belong to a deliberate strategy which aims to shift the blame for corporate misdemeanor to lower echelons.

Other critics have cogently argued that practices such as value-driven leadership, empowerment, or re-education fatally undermine employee autonomy. Willmott (1998), for example, speaks about the "colonization" of employees' values and norms. The purpose of such practice is ...

"... to enlist the corporation of employees by appealing to, and reasserting, the primacy of values such as 'honesty', 'trust', and 'integrity'. But it also seeks to harness and instrumentalize these values in the service of corporate performance improvement. (...) To the extent that colonization occurs, the employee's commitment to certain values (...) is appropriated to increase commitment to the 'competitive aspirations' of the employer." (Willmott, 1998: 85)

The colonization process described by Willmott is, by the way, perfectly illustrated by Collins and Porras (1996). In discussing the practical implications of their idea that visionary companies need "tight ideologies", they argue ...

"... that companies seeking an 'empowered' or decentralized work environment should first and foremost impose a tight ideology, screen and indoctrinate people into that ideology, *eject the viruses*, and give those who remain the tremendous sense of responsibility that come with membership in an elite organization." (1996: 138-139; my emphasis)

As we already saw with the example of Schein, this kind of totalitarian language is not at all uncommon in guru discourses. Suffices to say that the representation of employees who do not unconditionally wish to sing the company's tune as *viruses* is surely not what one would expect from managers who are, in an earlier passage of Collins and Porras's book, encouraged to see people like Jefferson and Madison as shining examples.

The arguments about the 'colonization' of employee morality are important, but they still assume that leadership is crucial for "setting the 'moral' tone for the company" (Punch, 1996: 233). Surprisingly, this is what many critics have in common with the defenders of cultural or value-driven leadership. At least to a certain extent both parties seem to ignore or downplay employee discretion (Clegg, 1994; ten Bos, 1997). As Alvesson (1993a) pointed out, members of an organization take with them their own educational, religious or social background.

The individual member of the organization is not a *tabula rasa* passively waiting

for some cultural and social inscription. S/he carries his or her own history. And it is, *inter alia*, this history that might make the founder or leader's influence on people's values and norms rather weak. Infusing people with the right values and norms is not an easy, one-directional process. This is merely to say that the leader or founder may not be such a powerful cultural determinant. Those who are in doubt about this should wonder why so many leaders in actual organizations complain about the problems they have with the implementation of a corporate vision created in the boardroom.

That leaders may not be such powerful cultural determinants is also evident if one considers more material and aesthetic matters. Alvesson (1993a) has wondered, for example, whether a founder who created a technologically advanced company creates, by the same token, a 'technical culture'. He suggests that a technical culture is not so much a matter of the founder's influence as that it is a matter of "creating a certain kind of company whose work and the social practices associated with it affect culture (1993a: 86). There is every reason to think that the 'materiality' of the organization in combination with the educational and social backgrounds of employees might be seen as even more powerful cultural determinants than founder influence. This is merely to imply that it seems very difficult to specify exactly the extent to which founders have an impact on organizational culture. At face value, the idea that they exert influence may strike many as attractive or as intuitively appealing. There is very often a kind of 'naturalness' about such ideas. The appeal of naturalness is also stimulated by dashes of nostalgia which often characterize the constructive leadership discourses in which they are discussed. The nostalgic flavor of the idea that founders influence culture may, as we have seen, seduce the consumer of such an idea to ignore other, perhaps less enchanting aspects. The very perspective that leaders can make a difference with respect to culture might very well alienate the consumer of this idea from more sobering insights about other cultural determinants (materiality, background, historical determinants, etc.).

There is also another sense in which this alienation works. Alvesson (1993a) points out that founders are assumed to be influential during the fresh first years of the company. In those years, he argues, the company may well resemble what Mintzberg (1979, 1983) sees as a simple structure. The founder/entrepreneur is the cornerstone of such a simple structure. While it should not be ruled out on beforehand that such a founder-entrepreneur might have a "clear-cut influence on norms and values" of the employees, Alvesson (1993a: 85) insists that their accommodating attitude might not be so much a matter of culture as "a matter of more direct control, aimed at the behavioral and output levels." Dancing to the founder's tune might simply be obligatory because otherwise one might run into serious trouble.

Alvesson thus puts into question the well-known image of the leader, founder, clockbuilder or entrepreneur who infuses the organization with values. This image, which undoubtedly contributes to the persisting mythologies that are constructed around leadership, ignores that values, norms, and basic assumptions which prevail in organizations *might have many more sources*. Values and norms stem from the social environment people are familiar with, from the hierarchical level on which they operate, from their educational backgrounds and, *perhaps to a certain extent*, from the leaders who run the organization.

The upshot of this discussion about cultural leadership may be that the notion of 'leadership' should itself be abandoned. Alvesson's strictures indicate that we may have better concepts than leadership which may help us explain the behavior of people in

organizations. Tieleman (1997), for example, has pointed out that leadership is a redundant concept in order to explain the arrangements of organization and society. Instead, he advocates a 'normative professionalism' which is supposed to render organizations more sensible with respect to their behavior. The wish to jettison the notion of leadership altogether is also evident in Kerr and Jermier (1978). They argue that pronounced leadership is not only a rarity in many organizations but also that this state of affairs does *not* undermine the sense of direction which people in organizations apparently need. Skills, experience, knowledge on behalf of subordinates very often reduce the need for pronounced leadership. And even if these attributes are lacking, organizations can always resort to standardization and bureaucratization in order to make leadership redundant.

Leadership which has always existed

In the remainder of this chapter, I will try to indicate what the implications are of this corrosive idea that organizations invent their own leadership substitutes. I will do this by exploring what I think are less utopian and more fashionable or aesthetic discourses on the subject. The story that unfolds begins with Franz Kafka's short story entitled "*The Chinese Wall*" (Kafka, 1981). It perfectly illustrates how corrosive discourses might come into being.

The Chinese narrator of the story wonders why he, just like so many other men living in the south of China, has always abided by the emperor's order to build a wall in the far north. Of course, it is clear that the Chinese people have to protect themselves against the violent people from the north, but being a southerner he hardly believes that these people can threaten him or other people from his village or region. Even when the northern barbarians would plan to attack the village, they would not reach it: "[T]he country is so vast that they would not come very far and would lose their way in the vacant air." (my translation).

Thus, the question remains why people in the south always think of the wall in the far north. Why do people obey the emperor's order? Why are they doing this in the remote southern areas where one cannot even be sure whether the emperor is still alive? After all, one should not forget that Peking is a mere speck in China and that the imperial palaces may even be less. The emperor as a concept, the narrator explains, is big enough, but the emperor as a person might after all be a humble human being who sleeps, yawns and has occasionally a good stretch, "just like so many of us". Why then would we obey this particular human being? The narrator reasons that "leadership has always existed" and the same amounts for the decision to build the wall. It were not the barbarians from the northern countries who caused the Chinese people to build the wall and neither was it the Chinese emperor who insisted on building it. No, "we, who have built the wall, know better and keep silent." The narrator is at pains to explain that this is not to say that the people in the south are disloyal to the emperor. The problem is that this loyalty somehow does not benefit the emperor. Why should this be the case? The answer is enigmatic: "Peking itself is much stranger to the people than life in the hereafter." This is not to be understood, the narrator adds, as a lack of imagination on behalf of his people. No, his people are desperately willing to release whoever happens to be the emperor from the darkness of his palaces. They want to sense his presence. They crave for this presence.

Brilliant paradox. On the one hand, people can act as if the emperor is non-existent; on the other hand they long to see him. People often want leaders to disappear from their lives, because they sense they are able to cope with the exigencies of life all by themselves. But this is not to say that they can do without leadership. It is merely to suggest that *leadership might be disconnected from the actual individual who is a leader*. This insight might help to explain why the traits approach discussed earlier in this chapter proves so unsatisfactory: leaders have many different properties, but leadership hardly ever changes. The wish to build the Chinese wall is not based in the emperor's wish. We do not need a leader to explain what people wish and how they act. In a sense the wish to build this wall has always existed and, as Kafka points out, the same can be told about leadership. For the villagers, the emperor is merely a concept and not a living being.

Kafka's story sheds light on the suggestion that leadership should only be located in the follower. The emperor "as a concept" is in the mind of the villagers; the emperor as a human being is utterly irrelevant and lives in the darkness of imperial palaces, provided that he exists at all. In other words, Kafka's parable shows that leadership is a construction in the mind of followers. This was exactly my starting point in this chapter, but only now can we begin grasp its full corrosive impact. Leadership is a figment if we want to locate it in persons who are claimed to be leaders. The correlation between leader and leadership can be captured by the following formula: *Leadership always precedes the leader*. The latter is a consequence of the former. Leadership can do very well without leaders, but leaders cannot do without leadership. This is, I suggest, the rather sobering essence of Kafka's ideas. What are we to make out of it?

What Kafka might have had in mind is what many years later Fromm (1976) would describe as 'anonymous authority'. Fromm describes this authority as an invisible kind of authority which ought to be sharply distinguished from the public authority demanded by the powers that be. Under conditions of anonymous authority nobody is demanding anything of the individual. In this context, 'nobody' means no fellow human being, no law, no ethical rule. Yet 'nobody' is able to cast a spell on us. We all have, Fromm argues, the proclivity to conform ourselves to others. But if 'nobody' exert authority on us, what is it that makes us willing to become conformists? At face value, the answer Fromm is providing is as mystifying as Kafka's ideas about leadership. He suggests that 'It' makes that we are willing to conform. What or who is 'It'? 'It' is the benefit we hope to gain from our actions; 'it' is economic necessity; 'it' is the public opinion; in short, 'it' is what people think and feel and do. The laws that reign in the realm of 'It' are invisible. And who, Fromm asks, dares to attack what is invisible? The answer is disenchanting: Nobody.

Fromm's ideas are well known among critical thinkers and researchers. In sociology expressions such as 'the organization man' (Whyte Jr.) or 'the cheerful robot' (Wright Mills) have been coined in order to express similar ideas. These ideas have also found expression in existentialist philosophy. Heidegger (1979), for example, used the notion '*das Man*', a neologism which might be rather loosely be translated as 'anybody' or 'they'. Heidegger explains that '*das Man*' undermines the individual's sense for responsibility because he or she might always recur to it. Wherever, '*das Man*' is, you do not have to explain yourself or to feel guilty about a particular act. You will always have the possibility to explain that, all things considered, everybody would have acted in the way you did or that everybody would at least agree with you on this. The problem is that 'all people' and 'everybody' are ultimately 'nobody'. Nobody is doing something and nobody is able to choose.

In a similar vein Sartre (1960: 306-377) has argued that relationships between people oftentimes have a "serial" character. Serial relationships are not predicated on solidarity or fellowship, let alone on face-to-face encounters but on copying what others would do who are in similar circumstances. We build a wall because everybody is building a wall. Each morning we get stuck in a traffic-jam simply because all other get stuck in it. In supermarkets we buy the things others buy and on television we watch the same programs as other people do. This is not to say that our individual experiences during these activities are similar or the same. Yet our uniqueness is somehow under pressure because our lives assume a statistical quality as soon as we get stuck in a traffic-jam or enter a supermarket. The Kafkaesque consequence is that "I am no longer at the center of my action, but doing just what everybody else is doing; the center of my act is elsewhere, outside me, in other people" (Johnston, 1990: 74). It resides perhaps in what Heidegger called 'das Man' or in what Fromm called 'It'.

The leadership which has always been there is based on the idea that the individual cannot be the center of his or her own action. It is the kind of leadership which undermines people's very authenticity. The Chinese built the wall because the emperor told them to do so and they continued doing the job because they did what they always had done. The power of leadership which has always been there is based on the 'emperor as a concept', in 'das Man', in the 'serial' relationships in which people engage. The crucial question which is at the mind of the individual who resigns in the power of this kind of leadership does not relate to the moral choices he or she has to make but to the question of how to be in step with the others. As Kafka's narrator insightfully explains: "The pangs of conscience are much less worse than pangs in your leg." (Kafka, 1981: 889; my translation). To keep pace with the others is the essence of leadership that has always been there. People have developed many techniques that allow them to keep pace with the others. They read the same newspapers, they buy the same clothes, they follow the same fashions. And there is, of course self-help literature. Johnston (1990: 74-75) lists some interesting titles that might help you and me to keep pace: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *How to Speak Effectively*, *Conquer Fear*, *Increase Your Income*, *Develop Self-Confidence*, *'Sell' Yourself and Your Ideas*, *Improve Your Memory*, *Increase Your Ability to Handle People*, *Win More Friends*, *Improve Your Personality*, and, of course, *Prepare for Leadership*.

The point of leadership which has always been there is that the center of people's action is located outside themselves, not so much so in a charismatic leader who happens to be in the neighborhood, but in the culture to which they belong. This culture is a substitute for leaders. It is interesting for managers and their gurus because it seems to provide a much more stable ground on which people can work together. The pronounced leader is disappearing because he or she could not warrant stable work relationships. The discourse about him or her may, in line with the dialectic principle I discussed in the first paragraphs of this chapter, very soon become corrosive. Culture is a plausible alternative. It provides the organization with the kind of leadership which has always been there.

Concluding remarks

What I have tried to defend in this chapter is the view that leadership is a process that is going on between people rather than a state of permanency and isolation that can best be

studied by entering into the leader's mind. Many discourses on the subject often fail to acknowledge the social dynamics or dialectics of leadership. One of the reasons for this is that both constructive and corrosive discourses on leadership somehow seem to assume that leadership is crucially important in organizations. This is why leaders are expected to have outstanding qualities: they should be visionaries, clockbuilders, missionaries, architects, founders, integrators, and so on. Indeed, they should have all the wonderful qualities you would expect to find in utopian settings. However, in case of leadership failure, the very same leaders who were once admired for having such outstanding qualities may easily become the object of slander and humiliation. Disappointment may play an important role here, but the real problem is that those who have incredibly high expectations of leaders are generally the very same people as those who start to corrode the position of the leader once that he or she proves not to be the wonderful person they want him/her to be. Those who construct leadership are always prone to corroding it.

In spite of the basic agreement that leaders and leadership do matter, there is none whatsoever as to how the subject should be treated. It is even worse: there is no agreement as to what the subject is. As was the case with strategy, most people seem to feel that leadership matters, but there is no consensus as to why this might be the case. Neither is there any consensus as to the meaning of leaders and leadership in and for particular organizations. As a consequence, the audiences to which discourses on leaders and leadership are addressed are, sometimes unintentionally, encouraged both to fear leaders and to fear their absence. That is, they have to cope with contradictory and nonsensical advice. Sometimes detachment from daily affairs, to mention just one example, is encouraged as is the case in spiritual discourses on leadership; at other times it is stressed that spirituality is not to entail that profit making is somehow to be abhorred. Some people are cynical enough to argue that there is no alienation at all since profit making is in itself spiritual enough.

My objectives in this chapter were quite subversive (or, if you like, corrosive) since I even challenged the one idea about which most people seem to be in agreement, that is, the idea that leaders or leadership is important. More precisely, I have tried to pave the way for an understanding that our (utopian) fascination with leadership in organizations simply overlooks the fact that for an explanation of what is going on them, the concept itself might be totally redundant. Certainly, organizations may be in need of good negotiators, chairmen, or even management professionals (see, however, chapter seven), but are they in need of visionaries and missionaries? I am not sure, but I would like to point out that organizations themselves have many means to make leadership redundant. Culture, bureaucracy, and standardization are all more or less efficient ways organizations use to provide direction. In the next chapter, I will discuss culture to see how this works.

One final remark: I do not think that leaders are uninteresting. There is no doubt that we are all fascinated by them. Indeed, I have discussed some fashionable accounts (stemming from a wild variety of sources from both in and outside organizational theory) that serve to underscore my own fascination for them. Leaders are often colorful, dramatic, tragic, bright, dull, intelligent, stupid, depressing, moral, amoral, cheerful, and sometimes perhaps even uplifting. But do these aesthetic and human-all-too-human qualities make them important for organizational or societal affairs?

The accounts I have used, from Kafka to Hersey and Blanchard, all challenge the utopian assumption that leaders do make a difference in organizations or in our society.

Hence, is it possible that we are not fascinated by the wonderful qualities leaders may have? Or by the miracles they perform? Is it possible that we are merely fascinated by our fascination for them? Is it possible that we are hypnotizing ourselves with respect to leaders?

Indeed, is it possible that we are hypnotized by their irrelevance?

4 Culture and Domestication

Sometimes fashion seems to offer its followers certain idyllic qualities. The fashion of culture which became so popular in management circles during the early 1980s and which is even now far from silenced is a perfect case in point. For those who were among the first to herald its importance, organizational culture seemed to offer a perspective which would allow practitioners and theorists to evade dull and rationalist mainstream discourses on organization and management. With a cultural discourse available to managers and academics, it would no longer be necessary to indulge in arid and pointless debates on structure, finance and strategy. The cultural discourse would provide a possibility to engage with lofty yet mundane items such as norms, values, ethics, emotion, commitment, feelings, loyalty and so on. As such it seemed to promise a genuine alternative for the hard-boiled rationalist approaches which pervaded management thinking until then.

The excitement triggered by the quickly spreading cultural discourse did not only affect the Guru and the Consultant who came to believe that “re-enchantment of corporate life” (Parker, 1998: 75) was possible, but also academics who pointed out that the cultural lens would bring the suppressed emotional side of organization to the top of the agenda (Frost et al., 1985), something which many of them experienced as a badly needed liberation from the prevailing instrumentalist and narrow-minded approaches of organization.

The Japanese inspiration

Added to these allegedly liberating effects of cultural discourse became a distinct exotic flavor. *Japanese* management practices became the shining examples for Western managers whose practices seemed to have become obsolete in face of the economic stagnation that held sway in the West (Pascal and Athos, 1981; Peters and Waterman, 1982). As is usual with anything that is fashionable or exotic, these Japanese practices could not but be received with considerable ambivalence. The Japanese, after all, used to be and are still described as copycats who are profoundly unethical and, even more importantly, profoundly uncreative. In an interview with management journalist Rowan Gibson (1997), Lester Thurow, one of the better known contemporary gurus, argues that Japanese companies deserve our admiration for having introduced a highly innovative kind of *process* technology, but that they should frowned upon because of their devastatingly poor *product* technology. The latter could never really flourish due to what Thurow describes as the typically Japanese disregard of creative processes.

Thurow, of course, had the advantage of hindsight. He knew that even the Japanese economy had started to falter during the 1990s and such knowledge was for obvious reasons not available to people who contributed to the cultural discourse during the early 1980s. People like Richard Pascal or Tom Peters more or less unconditionally believed that the Japanese somehow had to offer a new original Western practitioners could take advantage of. Nevertheless, they pointed out over and over again that many excellent companies in the United States had already endorsed the new practices. What seems to be strange and novel, was in fact rather familiar. The ambivalent response

triggered by the sudden interest in Japanese management practices is beautifully captured by Hillel Schwartz:

“Today the Eastern barbarians – monkeys, automata, copycats – seemed poised to transcend the original. However Eurocentric, Atlantocentric, and racist the belief that the West is the original, that believe lies at the root of Western ambivalence toward the Japanese as amoral if masterful thieves and as an ancient, noble people who make other feel inadequate.” (1996: 330)

What worsened the ambivalence with which Japanese practices were received was that the gurus of excellence seem to have made their own selection of apparently favorable Japanese habits. The much praised organizational consensus and harmony which is rather straightforwardly attributed by them to Japanese management practices seems to be a fictional allurements for Western managers. Bax (1991), for example, has pointed out that lifetime employment in Japan is not as widespread as is often suggested in popular literature on Japanese management practices. A mere 30% percent of the working population seems to enjoy the benefits of this good. Bax also points out that Japanese workers go on strike as frequently as European workers, which suggests that many Japanese organizations are not the utopian, that is, harmonious and apolitical places Peters and Waterman describe.

Summarizing, the discourses about Japanese management practices are clearly intended to please a Western audience rather than to provide an accurate description of what is going on in Japanese organizations. This entails that the challenge for the Guru is to downplay Japanese managerial habits which would be disapproved of by the average practitioner in the West. This turned out to be a monumental task since differences between Japanese and Western management styles can be profound. White and Trevor (1983; also discussed by Bax, 1991) have pointed out that the differences between Japanese managers and their subordinates are not nearly as big as those between their British counterparts. Japanese managers do not regard their subordinates as antagonists who should be coerced to comply with preset rules, norms and values. They neither discuss employee matters with the air of superiority which White and Trevor argue was typical for many British managers. They talk about egalitarian Japanese managers who wear overalls, eat with their subordinates, and, very importantly, do not earn nearly as much as their Western counterparts. The suspicion that empirical or statistical facts are manipulated is therefore quite strong.

Fashion and utopia in the cultural discourse

But who cares? The cultural discourse has become popular not so much because of its interest in truth as because its more beguiling features, one of which is the idea to build organizations as communities, or, as Parker (1998: 76) puts it, as “engineered affectual solidarities”. If one was to believe the leading gurus of the early 1980s, the answer to the Japanese challenge and the economic crisis in the West should be sought in the creation of special forms of ‘togetherness’ which ordinary, blood-less bureaucracies apparently could not provide for. *Rather than taking the idea of organizational culture as a fashionable vehicle for understanding the more aesthetic, material, or unmanageable aspects of organizations* (Alvesson, 1993a; Gagliardi, 1996), *it became a means of realizing and managing special forms of utopian togetherness*. So, one again, we see how utopianism seeps

into fashion, thus undoing its aesthetic perspective.

In this chapter, I want to explore the contours of cultural utopianism. First, I will critically discuss the normative approach at the heart of which lies the (distinctly utopian) idea that culture can be engineered and managed. In the second section, I will consider the more descriptive approaches in the cultural discourse. More particularly, I will argue that while enchantment, embellishment, and seduction play pivotal roles here, the sparkle of utopianism and rationalism is far from being extinguished. More particularly, the section is about the rather prosaic use of metaphors in the literature on organizational culture. The subject is important for two reasons: a) Metaphors seem to play a singularly important role in discussing complex phenomena such as cultures; b) it has indeed been argued that the expression 'culture' is itself metaphorical. In the third and final section, I will use the metaphors of 'process' and 'domestication' as a means of expressing my own ambivalent feelings about utopian efforts to create special forms of togetherness. Process is a metaphor used to emphasize that we do not live in an isolated world; domestication, on the other hand, is a metaphor used to emphasize that we need some form of isolation if we are to make sense of whom we are and of what we are doing.

Engineering tyrannical idylls

The idea that cultural 'items' such as trust, loyalty, commitment, and solidarity are important in effective organizations is by no means new. Nor was it in the early 1980s. It is well known that Fayol and Taylor already noticed the importance of these aspects. The focus of Classical and Scientific Management, however, was still on rules and regulations. People within organizations should be rendered docile in the sense that they abide, in the name of loyalty and solidarity, by the rules without any grumble (Clegg, 1990).

The norms and values endorsed by highly regulative bureaucracies are not primarily self-respect, integrity, empathy, autonomy, conscience, or individual responsibility, but docility, duty, and discipline (Bauman, 1989). The latter set of moral virtues does not emphasize the moral quality of a particular act but rather its technology. The question for the subordinate in a bureaucracy is not whether he or she can morally approve of the action, but whether it was in conformity with specific rules laid down by the organizational authorities. Being moral is being obedient and rule-abiding (ten Bos, 1997: 998).

For a long time the only interesting feature of what later came to be known as organizational culture was that it could help managers to render people obedient and rule-abiding. Culture could help to prevent subordinates from criticizing the rules imposed upon them by the higher-ups within the organization. Culture as rule and regulation was a means to persuade and coerce laborers to give up their freedom of choice, assuming that there was such a good in the first place (Ladd, 1970). Abiding by rules and regulations became the cultural norm in bureaucracies.

This perspective on culture was abandoned in the early 1980s. The so-called 'cultural turn' that took place in these years was assumed to have been caused by the sobering awareness that rules and regulations have serious limitations in times of economic decline. People came to understand that organizations were not able to adequately deal with the challenges of a rapid changing environment if they would solely trust regulative measures. Organizational culture became more than merely a side-effect

of rules and regulations. In order to cope with the new exigencies, the problem of culture had to be explicitly addressed or, to put it differently, managers should consider it as a *strategic* issue.

The all-important assumption in the booming literature on organizational culture (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1985) was that it might be seen as a power regulator. In this sense, the goal of rendering employees docile did not change at all. The tactics of achieving this goals, however did. The manipulation of meanings and symbols rather than the formulation of rules and regulations was now used in order to attain domination over the workforce. More particularly, corporate culture might be used "as a way in which management instills favorable definitions in the mind of the employees" (Alvesson, 1993a: 44). New to this way of thinking was not only a certain degree of sophistication in the efforts to make employees docile, but also the idea that the Manager was now supposed to be able to mold organizational culture according to convenience. Organizational culture became a relatively straightforward phenomenon which can be used as a handy management tool.

Is culture manageable?

Alvesson (1993a: 31), however, has warned against what he sees as oversimplification:

"(Organizational culture) does not necessarily serve narrow pragmatic interests. Making things look clear-cut and simple may mislead. Practitioners might benefit much more from the pro-managerial and pragmatic organizational culture literature if it stopped focusing on how to manage and control culture and instead discussed other phenomena which managers might, with luck and skill, be able to manage and control – for example, workplace spirit and behavioral norms. Learning to think 'culturally' about organizational reality might inspire enlightened managerial action rather than unrealistic programs for cultural change."

Although the efforts to engineer culture have become rather sophisticated in comparison with the regulative measures propounded by Taylor or Fayol, this has not led to a full acceptance of culture as an essentially complex phenomenon. On the contrary, the Manager is encouraged by the Guru and the Consultant to embrace rather inchoate concepts of culture in the sense that such concepts always focus upon particular sub-aspects of culture. For example, culture is much more than the norms and values which are to be instilled on the employee's mind. It might even be argued that overlooking this complexity is, from the Manager's point of view, a political (and utopian) necessity by means of which they can cover up the essential *unmanageability* of many organizational events. For the Guru and the Consultant, this cover-up has become a stone-hard marketing necessity.

Imagine what might have happened if culture would be treated in its full complexity. Would not the Manager simply argue that such a complex rendering of cultural phenomena would not get him or her anywhere? Complexity often seems to contradict the requirements of the practitioner who is eager to acquire simple tools not only in order to make his or her work easier but also in order to be more persuasive in strategic debates within the organization. In management thinking, simplicity is very often a more precious political commodity than mind-boggling complexity. The tragedy, at least from the Manager' point of view, is that the simple and inchoate concepts used to

come to grips with culture might very well be one of the most important reasons why the successes of organizational efforts to bring about cultural change are, to say the least, ambivalent (Bax, 1991). They suggest the manageability of organizational culture, but among social researchers there is widespread agreement that culture is, to quote one of them, at best "*somewhat* manageable" (Hofstede, 1991: 199).

Special forms of togetherness

One of the simplest and perhaps most delusive ideas about organizational culture stems from Peters and Waterman (1982) who have developed the idea of "strong" organizational cultures. They claimed to have found evidence of a direct relationship between the quality of the organization's culture and the level of its performance. From this allegedly scientific finding, they then derive, in a way which is characteristic of much that is fashionable in management thinking, a normative perspective on culture. Laggards, it is argued, can only find redemption if they are willing to develop a strong culture:

"Without exception, the dominance and coherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies. Moreover, the stronger the culture and the more it was directed to the marketplace, the less need was there for policy manuals, organization charts, or detailed procedures and rules. In these companies people way down the line know what they are supposed to do in most situations because the handful of guiding values is crystal clear." (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 75-76)

Exit bureaucracy, enter norms and value. At least, that seems to be the idea of the *normative* approach which became, in the wake of Peters and Waterman, highly influential. The idea is that strong cultures are characterized by the agreement of people working for the organization about the importance of certain values. Consensus about what would count as the most important values indicate the presence of a strong culture; disagreement indicates a weak culture.

The Manager is encouraged in this literature to develop a strong culture which can, I suggest, best be seen as a special form of organizational togetherness. People should sense that they are in the same boat, that they belong to the same whole, and that they are not standing alone as isolated individuals. That is, a fundamental continuity between them and others is postulated. If you belong to a strong culture, you know that you are surrounded by loving and caring people who are glad when you are glad and who feel compassion when you have failed. These are the kind of people who are, as Senge (1990: 301) has it, as committed to your self-actualization as you yourself are. Only organizations where people treat each other with *agape* will survive. Put differently, only organizations where *loneliness* is impossible will save the day.

In spite of such 'soft' elements, culture remains fully subservient to the demands of instrumental rationality. Compassion, love, and agape are supposed to enhance long-term profitability. Reviewing authors like Trice and Beyer (1985), Baker (1980), Kanter (1983), and many others, Alvesson (1993a: 28) concludes ...

"... that culture in this literature is instrumental in relation to the formal goals of the organization and to the management objectives or tasks associated with these goals

(i.e. external and internal effectiveness). It is assumed to exist because it works. Of course, changed circumstances can make a culture dysfunctional – calling for planned, intentional change – but the approach assumes that culture is or can be ‘good’ for some worthwhile purpose.”

In the end, a strong culture is one that allows managers to attain strategic goals. That is why the adjective ‘strong’ is often equated with ‘good’, ‘effective’, ‘efficient’, or ‘flexible’. In figure 1, I have, using material from Peters and Waterman (1982), Hofstede (1991) and Alvesson (1993a), listed some more ingredients of ‘strong’ cultures and juxtaposed them to what might be seen, at least from the normative perspective discussed here, as ‘weak’ cultures. .

Figure 1: ‘Strong’ and ‘weak’ cultures

‘Strong’ cultures

homogeneity

- * hardly any fragmentation into subcultures
- * differences between formal and informal are blurred

transparency

- * the flow of communication is unproblematic; everybody understands each other; people speak the same language; no political strife
- * meaning is ‘monolithic’

consensus

- * everybody agrees about values, norms and goals
- * strong commitment to quality
- * commitment and loyalty can be taken for granted
- * an emphasis on collectiveness (‘we’)
- * a sense for the uniqueness of the organization

predictability

- * what people do is highly predictable; behavior is determined by common values, norms, etc.
- * harmony and concord
- * employees can be trusted because they share the prevailing norms and values

‘Weak’ cultures

heterogeneity

- * a multitude of subcultures
- * huge gap between the formal and informal is deliberately maintained

ambiguity

- * the flow of communication is constantly interrupted; due to political strife people do not speak the same language
- * meaning is unclear; there is widespread confusion

conflict

- * values, norms, and goals are subject to criticism
- * no commitment to quality
- * commitment and loyalty have to be gained
- * a poor sense of collectiveness: everybody primarily serves his/her own interest
- * the organization looks like many others

unpredictability

- * what people do is essentially unpredictable; behavior is determined by rules, regulations, hierarchy; the seeds of conflict are always there
- * harmony is the guiding principle but chaos reigns
- * employees can only be trusted if they are subjected to rules and regulations

Leadership

- * outward orientation
- * action orientation; control after the event
- * innovative
- * error tolerance
- * transformational

Management

- * inward orientation
 - * control before the event
 - * conservative
 - * fear of errors
 - * transactional
-

Managers are encouraged by people like Peters and Waterman to create 'strong' cultures, that is to say, special forms of togetherness which allow them to attain the economic goals they have formulated. Reading the ingredients listed in the left column of figure 1, one gets the impression that the one best way to economical or strategic success is to *become one strong-big-happy family keen on taking only concerted actions*.

One may also wish to follow Parker (1998) who has described the ideas underlying the normative perspective in terms of "a utopian orgunity", which is premised on the belief that organizations can become *communities* in which people have developed affective ties to each other and to the collective they are a member of. Parker (1998: 79) points out that organizations do not necessarily need such affective ties in order to operate. I can become a member of an oil-company and do my work while simultaneously feeling opposed to its very existence. It is well-nigh impossible, Parker argues, to become or to remain a member of a community if you feel opposed to it. Of course, you may occasionally feel discontented with your membership of a particular community, but this only threatens your membership if you start to dislike or even abhor whatever the community stands for. For example, you may remain a member of the catholic community even though you dislike the present Pope or am in disagreement with some of the Church's doctrines. It will, however, be difficult to remain a member if you give up your belief in Christ or if you start to have serious worries about the idea that the Pope replaces Christ on this earth. O.K., in a legal sense you may remain a member of the Church, for example, because you want to keep up appearances, but in such a case you are not a member of the catholic community but a member of a catholic organization. Membership is then fully defined by such questions as whether you have your name registered in the files. It has, Parker points out, become an "empirical issue".

Criticizing the idyllic tyranny

The advocates of strong organizational cultures believe, it might be argued, that membership of the organization is much more than a legal or an empirical issue. More precisely, widespread affiliation with the organization transmogrifies it into something which is not only an organization but also a community. People in such a community should see this affiliation as an essential part of their identity, as something which makes the distinction between public work and the private untenable, and hence as something which you cannot lay off as soon as you travel home from your work. Your membership of the community travels with you, wherever you go and wherever you are. The problem with such a utopian view of the community is, first, that it overestimates the capacity of work organizations to establish unidirectional forms of affiliation and second, that it seems to ignore that people have already constructed other forms of identity when entering the organization. Of course, people do develop affective relationships with those with whom they work, but they clearly do not in the exclusive way suggested by the

Guru. As Parker (1998: 87) puts it,

“... work related senses of community are never going to be exclusive, are never going to obliterate other senses of community, of identity. After all, it is hardly likely that a Ford identity would somehow obliterate a gay sexuality, a Kashmiri ethnicity or a fondness for one's children or Stoke City FC. In modern societies, organizations cannot be total institutions that mould their residents from birth ... The ‘purity’ of communion definitionally necessary for the orgunity would therefore be in permanent danger of contamination.”

As we will see later in this chapter, a more processual approach to organizational culture, one which would acknowledge the existence of cultural ‘contamination’, or as Alvesson (1993a) has it, ‘cultural traffic’ between what is inside and outside the organization, may be useful to counteract the utopian desire of purity and isolation that pervades the work of cultural gurus.

To recap, the idea of a ‘strong’ culture assumes that the organization can be a harmonious and unanimous whole where differences of opinion are ironed out as quickly as possible and where members see each other as belonging to the same ‘happy family’ where everybody knows what to do and can trust each other. This idea of the ‘strong and happy family’ comes close to what might be called an *idyllic tyranny* in which any serious dissent is kept at bay or, even worse, rigorously suppressed. From this perspective, the underlying vision of culture is essentially “totalizing and modernizing” (Jefcutt, 1993: 38) or even “totalitarian” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996: 107). Apart from such moral arguments, the idea that managers are in practice able to keep dissent at bay borders on the absurd, if only because concepts such as ‘human resource management’ or ‘customer orientation’ propagate values which may cause tension in daily practice. For example, values such as care for employees and customers ...

“... are selectively invoked to introduce and legitimize programs of customer care (...), in an effort to project the idea that the customer is *valued as a person*, and is not being ‘cared for’ simply as a means of retaining market share and increasing profitability. However, [the] notion of being civil to employees (...) meets its limits when employees are required to sustain a smile even when customers are deemed (...) to be unreasonable or even personally offensive.” (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996: 107)

In other words, the organization may retain custom in that way, but the ‘emotional labor’ (Hochschild, 1983; Fineman, 1993) that has to be done by employees cannot be seen as exemplifying concern for employee welfare. In other words, much of the values that prevail in ‘strong’ cultures may produce antagonistic effects in practice. The idea of a harmonious culture is, from this point of view, quite ludicrous.

Another essential drawback in literature on ‘strong’ cultures is that it ignores contingency. It is not difficult to conceive of situations in which concord and harmony should be abandoned, for example, in times of crisis. Many popular authors, particularly those who represented what came to be known as the ‘typology approach’ (Harrison, 1972; Handy, 1985; Deal and Kennedy, 1982) have indeed argued that different kind of cultures can be effective. But these different types of culture should invariably be

homogeneous, harmonious or consistent. In short, they should display at least many of the characteristics listed in the left column of figure 1. However, in certain circumstances some of the aspects which are inherent in 'weak' cultures might be called for as well. It is, for example, difficult to examine a successful organization in which any debate about prevailing norms and values is constantly blocked off.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the popularity of the cultural discourse on organizations can be seen as a consequence of the economic crisis during the early 1980s. This crisis led managers to believe that there was something wrong with the ingrained habit to merely look for structural solutions for problems that they faced. An emphasis on culture provided the right alternative. However, the concept of culture proved, like so many other fashionable ideas, to be too elusive for managers who were only used to rational and straightforward approaches that originated from their once profound interest in structure. A very clear-cut link between performance and culture had to be established, if not invented. The result was massive simplification and trivialization (Bax, 1991).

Again, we see that the volatility and complexity of fashion is undone by the utopian desire for rigidity, purity, and harmony. Authors on organizational culture had to argue that soft could be very hard. In this way the normative bias towards 'strong' organizational culture was born, which eventually led to an immense overestimation of what 'strong' cultures were capable of achieving. For practitioners, the *promesse de bonheur* of the cultural discourse did not only relate to economic achievement but also to the absence of political strife, disharmony and unwilling workers. Such utopian ideas, however, pertain to much more than organizational life as such. Deal and Kennedy (1982: 195), for example, have argued that 'strong' cultures create meaning for people in the sense that they "teach people how to behave ... *in the world at large*." (My emphasis.) At this point, however, the discourse on culture deteriorates in downright propaganda, generally but not always linked to the political right (e.g. Keat, 1991; Legge, 1995; Cooke, 1999).

The prosaic use of metaphors

Research carried out during the 1970s and 1980s indicated that there were as many organizational cultures as there were organizations. Rather than merely urging the Manager to engineer strong cultures, many gurus and researchers also felt the need not to sidestep this bewildering variety of cultures and to classify it by means of *typologies* or *metaphors*. Underlying was the idea that some cultures resembled each other more than others and that they might be brought together under one heading. Furthermore, it was believed that this kind of classificatory job would enhance the Manager's diagnostic skills. To engineer or re-engineer culture, it is always good to know what is good and bad about the present situation.

So, even here, in what might be called the descriptive approach, a lot of normative engineering is still assumed. All too often, describing culture merely serves the practical goal of re-engineering it. Although ornament, embellishment, enchantment, imagination, aesthetics, and fantasy pervade much descriptions of organizational culture, all these fashionable aspects serve the higher purpose of changing it for the better. And as we will see in this section, they simultaneously serve the purpose of the researching academics in

understanding what organizational culture is really about. In the end, there might be no fundamental opposition between what practitioners and academics demand from theory. So, an old dream, a dream which has been in the mind of all those who took an interest in organizations since ever, may finally come true: the typology or metaphor approach captures the mind of practitioner and theorist alike. The cleavage between academia and organizational life might be bridged.

This prospect is, if anything, the allurement of the work of Gareth Morgan. In his early work, he (1980: 607) contends, fully in line with his earlier thoughts on organizational paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), that metaphors can be used as a "foundation of inquiry" into organizations. As such metaphors are especially interesting from an academic point of view. Later, however, Morgan claims that his work, especially his *Images of Organization*, is about the practical implications of what he claims is "a multi-sided view of organizations":

"My concern is to show how we *use* the creative insights generated by metaphor to create new ways of understanding organizations." (1986: 345)

To make the metaphor approach practically relevant, Morgan thus gives up the idea of 'paradigm incommensurability' which once lied at the heart of his work with Burrell. He now simply jettisons this idea without providing any argument whatsoever (Burrell, 1996b). As we will soon see, Morgan assumes rather than argues that metaphors can be used to "cross images" (1986: 346). Related to this is the promise that metaphors can be used to break through ingrained ways of thinking both in the world of practitioners and in the world of academics. Indeed, one of these breakthroughs is actually learning to think of organizations as cultures. No wonder that 'culture' appears as a metaphor itself in Morgan's book. I will return to this idea later in this section. Now, I will critically address the idea that metaphors should be useful at all.

Why using metaphors?

Morgan argues that breaking through ingrained habits of thinking is necessary because "many organizational problems rest in our ways of thinking" (1986: 335). The assumption here is that there is a very close link between the way people think and the way they act. Practice is, as Morgan (1986: 336) maintains, never "theory-free, for it is always guided by an image of what one is trying to do". The way people think, have images, and use metaphors, determines how they do things. Thus if the organization does not prove to be effective or efficient, a change of thinking is called for. For example, if a manager notices that his or her organization is in deep trouble, a change in his or her way of viewing the organization might provide a solution. A switch from the 'organization-as-a-machine-metaphor' to the 'organization-as-a-culture-metaphor' might highlight certain aspects that would be overlooked if the manager were to stick to his or her preferred metaphor. If managers are willing to use metaphors, or more precisely, if they are willing to switch from metaphor to metaphor, they are, Morgan contends, rewarded with "crucial insights" (1986: 337). So metaphors provides a means of 'reading' the organization.

Since the appearance of *Images of Organization*, metaphors have become fashionable in organizational theory (Gergen, 1992; Alvesson, 1993a and 1993b; Burrell, 1996a and 1996b; Putnam, Philips and Chapman, 1996). It seems that the book has kept its promise of reconciling both the interests of practitioners and those of academics. Part

of its popularity can no doubt be explained by the fact that some gurus, Deal and Kennedy (1982) for example, already took an interest in typologies as a way of describing organizations. Morgan's texts merely seem to make this approach more sophisticated. He clearly dispenses with the nice yet simplifying matrices to be found in the work of people such as Handy (1985), Harrison (1972), Kets de Vries (1997), Deal and Kennedy (1982). In fact, he seems to offer an instrument that seems to go far beyond the limitations of four-by-four models we usually encounter in management handbooks. Morgan's approach seems to take into account what many people feel is the real-life complexity of organization. One can only capture this complexity if one is willing to use an in principle endless list of metaphors to describe it. But why *metaphors*? Why a literary concept which at face value seems to be so alien to standard managerial discourse?

The inevitability of metaphors

Well, one should begin with observing that there are reasons to doubt whether even such a discourse can manage without metaphors or other tropes. Admittedly, standard managerial discourse has been heavily influenced by rationalist and/or empirical philosophy both of which have a deep-rooted suspicion against natural language and the metaphors used in it. Natural language is, of course, the language we all seem to speak when we are not concerned about scientific or philosophical matters. According to rationalist philosophers such a language is bedeviling. Its users are prone to mistakes and misconceptions. Descartes, who is arguably one of the founders of the rational tradition, has always complained how language undermined the quality of his research and philosophical meditations:

"For although I am thinking about these matters within myself, silently and without speaking, nonetheless the actual words bring me up short, and I am almost tricked by ordinary ways of talking. (...) [I]f I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves (...) Yet do I see more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men." (Descartes, 1986: 21)

Since then, language has often been considered as a hindrance rather than an aid to philosophical investigation (Copi, 1981). The belief that the use of natural language undermines our access to reality was widespread, not only among philosophers. Metaphors play a pivotal role in this language and have often been seen as the cause of many philosophical problems. Researchers and philosophers have argued that we should somehow try to achieve a literal rather than a metaphorical explanation of what is going on. Such literal explanations are examples of 'object language' or 'factual language' which is supposed to 'mirror' reality. Many philosophers, the positivists perhaps the most important among them, have regarded this language as the pinnacle of science.

Imagine, however, what it would be like to make use of a language without metaphors. Worse still, imagine what it would be like not to be able to use metaphors such as 'opening', 'selecting', 'cutting', 'pasting', etc. to express what is going on in the computer that I am using right now. In such a scenario, I would have to master a 'machine language', something which can only be achieved if I know exactly what is happening inside the computer. However, like so many other people, I simply do not know what is happening inside the computer (or, for that matter, inside my car-engine,

inside my stereo equipment, inside my brain, or even inside the organization I am working for). And this is the reason why I am desperately in need of metaphors. Perhaps, such metaphors are, as radical positivists would have it, illusory because they do not describe what is *really* happening. But, as Daniel Dennett (1991: 312) insists, we are in need of those “benign illusions” if we are to “have any appreciation of what is happening inside” in the first place.

Dennett’s point might easily be misunderstood. It seems to be based on a distinction between lay people who do not know exactly what is going on in a computer and experts who do know, suggesting that the former are in need of metaphors whereas the latter are not. However, even experts cannot escape metaphors. Even experts have to resort to metaphors if they are to appreciate what is going on. Dennett is very well aware of this. Reviewing his book on consciousness, he explains that his crusade against the (Cartesian) opinion that our mind is a kind of theater where the ‘I’ is seated and passively looking at a flow of images (called thoughts, ideas, visions, feelings, etc.) was not meant to replace a metaphorical and false theory with a *non*metaphorical and true theory:

“All I have done, really, is to replace one family of metaphors and images with another, trading in the Theater, the Witness, the Central Meaner, the Figment, for Software, Virtual Machines, Multiple Drafts, a Pandemonium of Homunculi. It’s just a war of metaphors, you say – but metaphors are not ‘just’ metaphors; metaphors are the tools of thought. No one can think of consciousness without them, so it is important to equip yourself with the best set of tools available.” (1991: 455)

So, the expert needs his/her metaphors just as much as the layman. The only difference between them might be that they tend to choose for different metaphors with different cognitive functions and ways of understanding the world. Metaphors in this sense express specific kinds of vision. Most of us do not need to understand what is going on in a computer in order to use it, but some people do and they will, therefore, construct different ‘tools of thought’ which allow them to ‘enter into the machine’. But even these experts do not speak a universal and literal speech that denotes a “timeless reality” (Berlin, 1981: 98). Nor is it possible to reduce all modes of expression to such a universal language simply because it does not exist.

The positivist reshaping of language into one which is beyond metaphor is, therefore, doomed to failure. The highest we can aspire to, one might argue, is to gain a sympathetic rather than an analytical understanding of what others mean when they use metaphors. Such an understanding amounts to what philosophers of all ages have described in terms such as ‘empathetic insight’, ‘intuitive sympathy’, ‘extra-logical resonance’, ‘fantasy’, ‘imagination’, etc. Discussing ideas of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, Berlin has offered us a fine description of the kind of knowledge that is required to understand people who do not use our own metaphors and have developed different ‘tools of thought’.

“[Vico] uncovered a sense of knowing which is basic to all humane studies: the sense in which I know what it is to be poor, to fight for a cause, to belong to a nation, to join or abandon a church or a party, to feel nostalgia, terror, the omnipresence of a god, to understand a gesture, a work of art, a joke, a man’s character, that one is transformed or lying to oneself. (Berlin, 1981: 116)

This sense of knowing, Berlin adds, is not at all like factual knowledge or procedural knowledge. Knowing that Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March or knowing how to ride a bicycle is not the kind of knowledge Vico had in mind. The Italian philosopher stressed the importance of a knowing which is ...

“... founded on *memory* or *imagination*” and which is “*not analyzable* except in terms of itself”. It is the capacity to see, for example, history not as “a collection of factual beads strung on a chronicler’s string (or of ‘ideas’, arguments, works of art), but as a possible world, a society which could have had such characteristics whether it had precisely these or not ...” (Berlin, 1981: 116-117; emphasis mine)

Metaphors are thus linguistic instruments as well as tools of thought that people *must* use in order to express their vision of the world. Understanding metaphors is not a matter of analysis but rather a matter of feeling ‘sympathy’ for those who are using them (Zwicky, 1992: 326). There is a ‘principle of benevolence’ involved: if I am refusing to respond with integrity to what another person is saying, I simply will not understand him or her. His or her metaphors will become meaningless to me. Similarly, I may fail to appreciate a particular piece of music, perhaps because I am, as Zwicky (1992: 320) calls it, “tone-deaf”. Note that my failure to appreciate the piece of music has nothing to do with a lack of rationality. It is not at all like a failure to be persuaded by a piece of sound reasoning. On the contrary, my failure to appreciate the piece of music – or a joke, a novel, a historical narrative, a painting of Francis Bacon, and, indeed, any metaphor – is a consequence of *my lack of taste* (Cohen, 1983; *quoted in*: Zwicky, 1992: 321). The willingness to understand metaphors used in the discourses of other people is in essence a matter of taste.

Morgan revisited

This brings me back to Gareth Morgan. He argued that metaphors can be used as *analytical* devices that might be used to gain creative insights and new ways of understanding organizations. Unfortunately, he does not relate the use of metaphors to the sort of knowing Vico was already talking about. In Morgan’s view, understanding metaphors may help the manager to get a more accurate picture of organizational reality. Apparently, there are rational, objective, and analytical arguments for the use of metaphors. But what would Morgan think of the claim that his book on images of organization simply helps managers to develop *a different kind of taste* for organization? The metaphor approach may have become so fashionable both among organizational researchers and practitioners not because it helped them to get a better picture of reality but because it made them realize, on a more or less conscious level, that *sticking to one dominant view of organizations is simply bad taste*.

One should keep in mind, however, that the interest for metaphor in organizational studies is generally not triggered by the same sort of knowing that Vico and Zwicky have in mind. First, metaphors are often subjugated to *procedural* ways of knowing (‘knowing how to’). This is exemplified by Morgan (1986: 334) when he insists that “the insights of all the metaphors *can* be used prescriptively”. In other words, a particular metaphor shows us “a way of managing and designing the organization in accordance with a particular image”. Seeing the organization as a machine suggests a mechanistic approach and seeing organization as a culture “shows us how we can manage

meaning". The point is that "each mode of understanding suggests a mode of action." Potential worries of practitioners who want to know what to *do* are thus easily dealt with.

Second, metaphors are subjugated to *factual* ways of knowing ('knowing that'). In order to encounter charges of extreme subjectivism, Morgan refuses to abandon the assumption of an objective reality existing somewhere out there. The trouble is that "we *engage* objective realities subjectively" (1986: 382). We put ourselves into what we see and in such a way "that it actually influences what we see" (*ibid.*). Such remarks are fully in line with philosophical traditions that go back as far as Kant. Although Morgan insists that we can never gain absolute certainty about organizational reality and that we may only achieve an 'intuitive reading' of organizational reality, he clearly suggests that a better picture of reality can be had. How? The answer lies in the following passage:

"When we look at our world with our two eyes we get a different view from that gained by using each eye independently. Each eye sees the same reality in a different way, and when working together, the two combine to produce yet another way. Try it and see. I believe that the same process occurs when we learn to interpret through different metaphors. The process of framing and reframing itself produces a qualitatively different kind of understanding that parallels the quality of binocular vision." (Morgan, 1986: 340)

As Burrell (1996b: 652) points out, Morgan does not explain how metaphors can be processed "by the equivalents of the visual region of the brain". It is simply assumed that the different metaphors described in the book are compatible and can "be synthesized into a superior binocular vision". In other words, there is an ontological and an epistemological assumption which locates Morgan in a positivistic and analytical tradition: organizations are somewhere out there and we can get a better picture of them if we are willing to acknowledge the partial nature of our understandings. Metaphors can be used to gain a "systematic understanding" of the world.

It is revealing that Morgan himself often uses the metaphor of vision. Metaphors allow us to *see* organizations from a particular angle. Combining several metaphors might enhance our *vision* of reality. Although he argues that a serious understanding of organization should recognize its inherent ambivalent nature, he intends to provide a method of systematic analysis which might allow us, at least to a certain extent, to see through what seems to be obscure. Zwicky (1992: 38, 48, 114) has convincingly argued that '*seeing*' is a dominant metaphor in the analytical tradition. Analysis stands for clarity, transparency, luster. Analysis is what allows us to see the world. Morgan clearly believes this to be true.

Rather than acknowledging the aesthetic and lyrical aspects of metaphors, Morgan makes a case for their usefulness as analytical tools. To put it rather cryptically, *he tries to deliver us more than good taste* and that is the problem with his otherwise brilliant text. In other words, he wants to be more than merely fashionable. Although he acknowledges the importance of intuition and imagination, faculties of the mind already stressed by Vico, he clearly is not willing to abandon various rationalist assumptions about organizations. Although Morgan makes mention of Vico as a source of inspiration, he seems to have forgotten that, according to the Italian philosopher, people have been lyrical rather than analytical or rational beings from way back. In words of Berlin (1981: 98) they "sang before they spoke" and "spoke in verse before they spoke in prose". The point is not

whether this has actually been the case. The point is that such a perspective on human history is enchanting, playful, and uplifting.

Culture as metaphor

No doubt, organizational scholars such as Morgan are allured and seduced by the lyrical perspective of the metaphor approach. Yet they refuse to fully adopt such a perspective. The result is that metaphors are estranged from lyrical understandings and subjugated to factual and procedural ones. This explains why organizational scholars have devoted much attention to the question how metaphors work. They have wanted to rationally reconstruct the way metaphors operate rather than gain an imaginative understanding of what people mean when they use them (Zwicky, 1992: 152). A fine example of such a rationalist reconstruction is provided Alvesson:

“A metaphor is created when a term is carried over from one system or level of meaning to another, thereby illuminating some central aspects of the latter (and shadowing other aspects). A metaphor allows an object to be perceived and understood from another object.” (Alvesson, 1993a: 9; Alvesson, 1993b: 116)

It is easy to relate this insight to the central topic of this chapter. The expression ‘organizational culture’ can be seen as one which combines terms stemming from two different systems of meaning. ‘Organization’ is a term which refers to a particular system of meaning in which expressions like ‘rationality’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘masculinity’, and, ‘efficiency’ play a crucial role. ‘Culture’ is a term which refers to a totally different system of meaning. It is related to agriculture, that is, to “the idea of cultivation, the process of tilling and developing land” (Morgan, 1986: 112). If both terms collide, a metaphorical effect is created. It is precisely this metaphorical effect that allows managers and researchers alike to see organization *as* culture.

This in turn may serve as an eye-opener for specific aspects of social developments such as differences between organizational cultures, the creation of norms and values, ways of organizing, adherence to rites, etc. Organizations should therefore not be equated with cultures. They might be seen *as* cultures in more or less the same way as they might be seen as clouds (Gergen, 1992), organisms (Morgan, 1986) or a box of colliding particles (Foucault, 1985). The view that organizations can be seen *as* cultures is then carefully distinguished from the view that organizations *have* a culture (Smircich, 1983). The latter view is typical for the ‘strong culture’ literature discussed earlier. The idea is that if organizations do not have a strong culture they should change what they have in such a way that managerial goals can be attained. If, however, one sees organization *as* a culture, the focus is less on narrow practical short-term interests and more on “expressive, ideational and symbolic” aspects (Smircich, 1983: 348). In words of Alvesson (1993a: 14):

“The social world is seen not as objective, tangible, and measurable but as constructed by people and reproduced by the networks of symbols and meanings that unite people and make shared action possible.”

Alvesson himself has raised important objections to this view. He not only wonders what practitioners may find interesting in treating celebrations, stories, myths, salaries, perks, organizational charts, the director’s car, dress, etc. as symbols, but also that unabashed

and unbridled symbolism may distract from what is really important in organizations, the “social and material conditions” (1993a: 66) in which both managers and employees are entangled. Interestingly, Alvesson does not advocate the kind of imaginary understanding that people like Vico had in mind. The underlying problem with the culture metaphor, he argues, is that it is used in a very broad sense: all items and all events can be seen as (symbolic) manifestations of culture. Therefore, the metaphor should be structured to a greater extent if it is to engender useful insights. In other words, the ‘root metaphor’ should be refined with some ‘organizing metaphors’. Organizations might be seen *as* cultures, but cultures in turn might be seen *as* games, glue, sacred cows, etc.

The idea that organizing metaphors can be utilized to refine root metaphors clearly takes us far away from the lyrical and imaginary realm where I wish to locate metaphors in the first place. It is hoped that analytical insights can be gained by means of the deliberate use and rejection of certain metaphors. There is no singing, dreaming, and poetry involved here, let alone an effort to come to an imaginative grasp of the social and material conditions Alvesson refers to. Yet, the very idea of a metaphor may help to persuade researchers and practitioners that they are moving away from straightforward rational approaches. This is clear when one looks at some of the organizing metaphors discussed by Alvesson (1993a: 16-24). The language that is evoked by them has, in spite of some clear limitations, a distinct intuitive appeal:

1. *Culture as onion*. This metaphor highlights the different ‘layers’ of organizational culture. In the heart of the onion lie the taken for granted assumptions and at the surface, there are rites, procedures, and other traits that are directly perceivable. The metaphor is interesting, it is argued, because it shows that surface aspects of culture might be caused by underlying, more opaque aspects (see chapter one for a critique of this viewpoint). The onion metaphor, however, does not provide insight in what culture does to people.
2. *Culture as clan*. This metaphor stresses that organizational cultures create groups of people who share a particular understanding of the world. Shared social knowledge can be used as a powerful means of control. It is especially prevalent in textbooks that stress the importance of strong cultures. Integration of personal and organizational goals is crucial. Dissent is disapproved of. The metaphor, however, negates that in real organizations dissent is very often part of the game.
3. *Culture as compass*. Organizational cultures do have a direction-pointing capacity. Values can serve to guide people’s behavior. If somebody has the wrong values, he or she is following a defect compass. In much literature the importance of a ‘core mission’, or, more broadly, a corporate ‘ideology’ or ‘philosophy’ is emphasized. These are important means of correcting the defects of the compass.
4. *Culture as climate*. People can sense organizations. When one enters an organization, one senses an atmosphere which may be warm or cold, innovative or conservative, easy-going or stressful. Viewing cultures as climates emphasizes that cultures may not be clear-cut. Emotion and empathy are the tools needed for a profound understanding of culture. However, if one sticks to this metaphor, discussions about organizational culture will inevitably be vague and abstract.

5. *Culture as psychic prison.* Morgan (1986: 200) has discussed how members of an organization “can become trapped by favored ways of thinking” and “unconscious processes”. Whereas the clan metaphor stresses that people belonging to a particular culture develop the same way of seeing the world, it might also be argued that they develop the same way of not seeing and that they are therefore not disposed to undertake action, even when it is called for. The subconscious is the abode of much of these ‘blindnesses’. As such the metaphor shows that cultural aspects are often firmly fixed in the more hidden recesses of the human mind. On the other hand, culture is also an overt and public affair. Moreover, this metaphor may cause concerns about narrow-minded practitioners that might be tempted “to control the uncontrollable” (Morgan, 1986: 231).
6. *Culture as soap drama.* This metaphor highlights that members of an organization are often actors in a somewhat sordid drama in which people manipulate, scheme, lie and blackmail. Cultures are “emotional jungles” (Alvesson, 1993a: 24) in which contradictory interests constantly come to the fore. No matter how careful one is, getting involved in political games seems sometimes to be inescapable because everybody does it. Cynicism, callousness, and indifference prevail in these dog-eat-dog cultures.

There are, needless to say, many more metaphors for culture than those described in figure 6. Think of games, jungles, isolated islands, umbrellas, ideology, management toy, clouds, magnets, holograms, and holy cows. Alvesson (1993a: 25-26) points out that such metaphors for culture can be organized along several dimensions such as cognition versus emotion, free will versus determination, pro-management versus anti-management, etc. He also makes a *useful* distinction between an agnostic, a functionalist and a dysfunctionalist position. The agnostic position takes it that cultural manifestations “can exist without fulfilling a positive function”; the functionalist position argues that cultural manifestations “serve the interest of the status quo and the ruling elite”; and, finally, the dysfunctionalist position claims that culture is rooted in the subconscious and therefore necessarily escapes managerial control. The onion and climate metaphors take an agnostic position; the clan metaphor takes a functionalist position, and the psychic prison and soap metaphors take a dysfunctionalist position.

Again, such distinctions nicely illustrate how metaphors are used for analytical purposes. No lyrical or imaginative understandings (in Vico’s sense) are aimed at. On the contrary, it might be argued that it is the inherent lyrical aspect that makes a metaphor unreliable. Of course, metaphors are very attractive and appeal to fantasy, but it is exactly this “seductive nature” which makes them dangerous. Although Alvesson (1993a: 130) suggests metaphors are useful because they can support “more reflective forms of reasoning and analysis”, he also emphatically warns for their inaccuracy, subjectivity, slipperiness, ambivalence, etc. We may not even know what a particular speaker or writer means when he or she uses a metaphor. The “rather distinct image” that is conveyed by metaphors such as ‘culture as psychic prison’ or ‘culture as clan’ can bring about “a misleading certainty” of what they really stand for “in the case of different authors” (1993a: 127).

To recapitulate, from a rationalist point of view metaphors are not to be trusted. In fact, their aesthetic and enchanting features are dangerous. They can, therefore, be

only very imperfect instruments for our understanding of organizational reality. Yet, this disadvantage is outweighed by the promise of more creative insights. Therefore, metaphors are, albeit reluctantly, welcomed as instruments for analysis.

The lyrical perspective advocated by Vico and Zwicky takes a different position. It claims that the goal of metaphors is not to mirror truth but to enchant and seduce. It appeals to taste, not to reason. This does not make the metaphor dangerous or imperfect. On the contrary, it is the metaphor's very reason for being. Moreover, the lyrical perspective also claims that even hard-boiled rationalists cannot escape the power of metaphor. This was perfectly illustrated by Daniel Dennett. There is a lot of enchantment and seduction in even the most rationalist discourses. This is the very reason why such seemingly contradictory discourses – metaphorical and rationalist – can be aligned without too many difficulties. The price for this alignment is always *the subordination of poetic wisdom to prosaic analysis*. Objectivity is still the ideal, not eloquence, not aesthetics, not what philosophers once used to call 'the imagination of the mind'. (Linstead, 1993)

Process and domestication

What I did not discuss so far is the tendency in the literature on organizational culture to make an absolute distinction between 'organization' and 'non-organization'. That is, culture is a metaphor used to describe organizations as "mini-societies" or as "cultural islands" (Alvesson, 1993a: 79). In such lofty places, 'we' live together; 'they' not only do not belong to us, but they also do not seriously affect 'us'. As I argued above, such distinction between 'us' and 'them', or between 'organization' and 'non-organization' are difficult to maintain. People in organizations derive identities not only from their work for the organization but also from what has happened and still happens outside the organization. Moreover, they may also identify against people within the organization itself (workers against managers, female against male, non-bureaucrats against bureaucrats, etc.). In other words, the lines between us and them do not neatly follow organizational boundaries.

The problem is that in much cultural discourse organizations are not treated as open and ever-changing systems. The 'external' environment is still viewed as non-cultural; that is, it is still preferably be described in terms of technology, economy, or of markets. The 'internal' environment, or more precisely, the 'culture of the organization', is still viewed as discrete, stable, and hence objectively analyzable. As a consequence, culture is seen as what Chia (1996: 33), following Norman Whitehead, describes as an 'ideally isolated system' which can be described in apparently concrete terms such as norms, values, or beliefs. All this assumes a "logic of isolation" in which "the world is organized in terms of clear separate fields which must not be allowed to infect each other" (Cooper and Burrell, 1989: 1; also quoted in: Chia, 1996: 34). One such separation is of course the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' environment. Such distinctions make it that 'direct and open cultural flows are seldom considered' in the discourse on culture (Alvesson, 1993a: 79) and indeed in discourse on organization in general.¹ In fact, such distinctions which underlie the very idea of an *organizational* culture are, if we are to believe people like Alvesson, Chia, Cooper and Burrell, no longer tenable.

It should be noted, however, that some of this is articulated by some management gurus as well. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998) have argued that many

discourses on strategy have only interpreted the environment in terms of market forces and therefore have missed the cultural and political impact of the environment on strategic decision making processes. Hofstede (1980, 1991) has claimed that organizational culture has its roots in national cultures. A branch of Canon in Great-Britain, he claims, will undoubtedly display different cultural features than one in Germany, let alone one in Japan.

The overall point in these texts is that the environment of business is cultural as well. Indeed, it might be argued that this environment is impregnated with cultural features that are typical of a broader enterprise cult in which a new kind of realism is postulated. The urge to be professional and efficient, to contempt virtues such as solidarity, the emphasis on no-nonsense, or the very preoccupation with organizing are but a few aspects of this cult. Managerial or business culture has permeated Western culture. The obsession with organizing is a case in point. Everybody seems "crazy for organization" (Smircich, 1985: 56). People manage their lives in an "organizational society" (Presthus, 1978) in the sense that people are *expected* to *organize* whatever they do. Diaries dictate what the day will bring, be it work or leisure. In sum, the flow between organizational culture and the culture of the environment has become a two-way street. Organizations are no cultural islands with their own unique culture.

A processual view

Yet, this is, the few exceptions notwithstanding, very often what seems to be presupposed in most textbooks on organizational culture. The adherents of the 'strong culture' theory, for example, contend that an organization *should* be unique if it is to survive the ongoing battle with the competition. Unique cultures are key success factors because they are so difficult to imitate. The implication is clearly that culture is something which should be made impenetrable for other organizations, most notably, competitors. Note that this also implies that cultures are to be treated as fairly rigid phenomena that can only be changed by strong, indeed, very strong leadership (Schein, 1985).

What I will call, thereby following the anthropologist Eric Wolf, a 'processual approach' of culture casts doubt on the idea of isolated and relatively stable cultures. Wolf (1982: 387) agrees that human aggregates, be it a state, a nation, a tribe, an organization, or a company, is "animated by its special spirit or culture" but this is only a part of the story and relatively small one as well. Although Wolf, being an anthropologist, did not write about organizational cultures, much of his ideas about the concept of culture are interesting in the present context as well. He argues that ...

"... the concept of a fixed, unitary, and bounded culture must give way to a sense of the fluidity and permeability of cultural sets. In the rough-and-tumble of social interaction, groups are known to exploit the ambiguities of inherited forms, to impart new evaluations or valences to them, to borrow forms more expressive of their interests, and to create wholly new forms to answer new circumstances. Furthermore, if we think of such interaction not as causative in its own terms but as responsive to larger economic and political forces, the explanation of cultural forms must take account of that larger context, that wider field of force. 'A culture' is thus better seen as a series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants." (Wolf, 1982: 387)

According to this processual view, cultures are by no means the stable entities they are often taken to be. On the contrary, they are continuing changing and evolving. The mode of change is not only determined by the culture itself, but also by the manifold links it has with other, not necessarily similar, cultures. It is interesting to note that Cooper and Burrell (1989) ascribe this processual view to Weber who is argued to have been primarily interested in the bureaucratic organization as a process which is taking place when people are trying to control their social and physical environments rather than as an organization that should be seen as a 'stable collection of things and goods'.

I do not know a popular text on organizational culture that would gleefully adopt such a processual approach. The difficulty is that it seems to downplay the role of managers or leaders when it comes to cultural change. If organizational culture is best seen as an open and unbounded system which continually interacts with "wider social fields" (Wolf, 1982: 76), then the role of managers in the shaping of organizational culture can only be a modest one. They are, after all, not able to deliberately influence what is happening in those wider social fields. The processual approach has been defended by academics (Cooper and Burrell, 1989; Alvesson, 1993a; ten Bos, 1995; Chia, 1996), but it is difficult to see how the approach can become acceptable to the Manager, the Guru and the Consultant. It seems for the Consultant who aspires to become a Guru quite self-undermining to tell the Manager that his or her role is fairly limited.

The processual approach, while attractive to academics, might be frightening to practitioners who *desire* that culture is something which can be controlled because it is believed to have an impact on organizational performance. Alvesson's defense of this approach, which is insightfully enforced by the use of expressions such as "cultural traffic" or "great versus local culture", will thus not very likely appeal to managers and consultants. He urges practitioners to accept a modest role when it comes to cultural change. This implies, for example, that they should focus on concrete, material circumstances with which working people have to cope rather than on broader, ideational issues such as values and norms.

I have misgivings as to the question whether practitioners are willing to shift their focus into the processual direction Alvesson is hoping for. Much of what they are willing to do with respect to culture is exactly a denial of everything the processual perspective stands for. They want stability and control. Of course, they also want, as will become clear in the next two chapters, constant change. But some 'things' – meanings, norms, values are important candidates – should be denied the possibility of change, because they threaten the special forms of togetherness to which they seem to aspire. Indeed, *the very idea of cultural management might be to bring these lofty 'things' to a standstill*. The paradox that haunts such efforts is that the present can only be changed if we *believe* that it can be replaced by a profoundly unchangeable future (Lilley, 1995).

In other words, there should be the promise of a world in which we are, finally, at home. The metaphor of '*domestication*' can be used to describe (organizational) culture as an process which aims at the stabilization of the world in order to build such a home. The processual approach argues that such efforts at domestication are dangerous, utopian, and totalitarian. I agree with this, but we should not underestimate the attractions of house-building. What I suggest is that we should somewhere in the Heraclitian storm find a Parmenidean place.

The eye of the storm

Cultural management assumes that that people who are constantly on the move are uncontrollable. Concerns with controllability have a long tradition in management thinking and can be traced back to the heyday of scientific management. Taylorism was based on the idea to restrict employee movement, both in the physical and mental sense of the word. According to its prescriptions employees were to be penned up in a small room or cell where all work is carried out under strict supervision of a department head. An alternative option was to chain employees to a fixed place on the assembly line.

It is important to realize that the desire to control the employee's body was also accompanied by a desire to control his or her mental or emotional being. Intelligence, diligence, character, and work attitude of every employee were issues in which management took great interest, because an understanding of these issues would allow them to unequivocally tie people to designated tasks. An economically motivated interest in task differentiation triggered an analogous interest in individual differentiation. Such concerns became soon associated with Taylorism:

"Taylor recognized that workers have sentiments, particularly those which dissuaded them from working to their utmost capacity, and it was this which contributed to differences in efficiency. He advocated the 'scientific' selection of the individual, in the belief that certain tasks would be more suited to certain types of individuals. As Taylor specified, 'one of the first requirements of a man who is fit to handle pig-iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type'. From Taylorism came the importance of differentiating individuals in work.' (Townley, 1994: 93)

Nowadays, the focus on non-bodily aspects overshadows the focus on the body. It is especially the mental realm where 'things' have to come to a standstill, where rest is called for, where unrestricted movement is regarded as dangerous. I understand this process to be a process of domestication and I will argue that *domestication can have negative and positive effects*.

Let us begin with the negatives ones. The most extreme form of domestication is killing. Implicitly, killing has often been viewed as a prerequisite for knowledge and everything that goes with it: control, power, civilization. So, if you want to know the age of a tree, you have to saw it down. If you want to know how whales multiply you can best catch and kill one in order to study its reproductive organs. If you have discovered a new species, you should send a dead specimen to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. The following defense of such practices is highly instructive:

"An alternative to collecting would have been to photograph and measure the bird, and the release it. (...) Another alternative would have been to keep the bird in captivity. I mention this only to demonstrate that we have carefully considered all the alternatives. In fact, bringing live birds from South America is strictly controlled by the US because of the risk of introducing viscerotropic velogenic Newcastle disease (USDA estimates that the introduction of this disease would cause 270 million dollars in damage to the poultry industry).

Finally, a specimen provides us with an immense amount of information that would not otherwise be available. Examination of the stomach provides information about

the dietary habits of the species. Frozen tissue samples provide scientists with the opportunity to examine genetic similarity between the individual and previously described species. (...) Examination of the gonads identifies the sex of the individual and reproductive condition (without this information sex and age of the bird would be unknown).

Thus, we feel the only way to document an undescribed species such as this is to obtain and preserve a specimen (or series of specimens). The question that you might well ask at this point is whether we need to document such species. Quite simply, if we are to preserve biotic diversity, it is absolutely essential that we have an accurate understanding of the numbers and diversity of the species that exist today. This information forms the foundation of theoretical advances in the design and management of biological reserves." (Scott Lanyon, *quoted in*: Zwicky, 1992: 273)

Killing is sometimes needed in order to design and manage biological reserves. To express how people design and manage organizations, 'killing' may perhaps strike someone as a rather drastic metaphor. 'Domestication' might be a more suitable one. It can be understood in three ways. In a strict sense, domestication is the process by means of which a person takes care that something will belong to the house (*domus*). In ordinary language, domestication stands for an array of techniques used to transform wild animals into domestic animals. I prefer, however, to use 'domestication' in a very broad sense: taming, calming down, civilizing, adjusting, and so on. These are exactly the things that (organizational) culture is supposed to do. It prevents us from roaming the forests (or markets) like wild beasts (or greedy nerds).

Following Tuan (1998), it might be suggested that culture itself can be seen as a kind of house:

- culture allows you to distinguish yourself from what belongs to a different culture or perhaps a non-culture
- culture allows you to protect yourself against what seems to be dangerous and threatening (emotions, nature, magic, environment, etc.)
- culture allows you to recognize other members of the very same house in which you are living (because they show similar domesticated behavior)

What is outside the house remains frightening and disturbing and is to be avoided at all costs, even though the house-dwellers know very well that such measures will not make the threat less real. That is, although the members of the culture (i.e. the house-dwellers) often wish to escape from what is unknown and dangerous, they have no option but to engage in some kind of relationship with it. They may decide to eliminate the danger (e.g. nature, emotions, femininity, empathy), but it is more likely that they will try to maim or dominate it. They may also decide to cover up the unknown and frightening. According to Tuan (1998: 6), *culture is basically a way of not seeing*, a luxury which only human beings can afford to display. Finally, they may decide to accept the danger as it is, without any restraint.

No matter what they do, the allegations directed at those who prefer to live in the house are well-known: lack of imagination, rigid, unnatural, suppressive, conservative, incapable of transgressing, and so on. These allegations, however, are typical of the mystic or the

Entrepreneur who both aspire to live in unity with the world or with the market and who feel contempt for those who prefer to live between the safe walls of their house. But, we need not necessarily believe in this maniacal mysticism. It may be wrong because it believes every house to be an iron cage. Houses, however, can also be constructed as fluttering dovescotes. How can this be done?

Starting point is an understanding of your own limitations. The point of constructing a dovescote is that you will not allow yourself to be tossed by the eternal flow of things and the fortunes and misfortunes that it may bring. You understand that you have to engage with other people with whom you may stand against the current. You may, in other words, accept your desire for some stability even though such stability may be delusive. Organizational culture, indeed every culture in the world, offers their members such delusions. Culture is after all a way of not seeing, a cover-up, a sometimes badly needed flight of the imagination. To allow yourself to be swept away by the flows of nature, or as the Guru has it, to ride the waves of change is, from this point of view, not so much mystic as desperate. On the other hand, this is not meant to suggest that the eradication or annihilation of nature within and outside yourself is called for. There is no need to construct an iron cage. A more sympathetic understanding of cultural management is possible: *it is intended to construct a house which will be the eye of the storm rather than a house (or a utopia) which intends to calm down the storm*. Domestication as I see it might be helpful to find a way of avoiding the equally dangerous alternatives of utopian domination and heroic mysticism.

Admittedly, domestication always runs the risk of rigidity, unnaturalness, artificiality, fear, boredom. It is difficult for organizations not to construct an iron cage. However, it is also difficult to see how the chaos on which managers are expected to thrive, at least according to one of the best-known gurus (Peters, 1988), is capable of engendering sensitivity, spirituality, spontaneity or a feel for art and aesthetics. Peters' ideas about a 'wild' and 'fearless' manager indicate an imbalance with nature. He promotes a kind of desperate heroism which, in the name of mystic unification with the endlessly flowing world, tramples the ordinary or the average underfoot. Peters encourages managers to adopt a desperate or, to quote Sloterdijk (1991), "catastrophile" managerial style which recognizes no limits, no rules, no laws.

My criticism of gurus like Peters suggests that ideas about the management of culture might be welcomed as a contribution to an improvement of working conditions provided that they do not encourage extreme forms of domestication or extreme forms of letting go. Again, the idea of domestication which is ventured here is not the same as domination or mysticism. Zwicky (1992: 242-260) describes the idea as follows:

- domestication is utilization and not exploitation or domination
- domestication implies a non-exploitative relationship with the environment
- domestication is not the colonization of nature: "... the natural order is still explicit – burnished, polished, like bands of agate in a rock". (1992: 254)
- domestication is an order "constructed by humans that gives access to another order without destroying it"
- the most fundamental domestic emotion is respect

Such ideas are, I suggest, clearly to be distinguished from those of gurus like Peters (1988) or Senge (1990). An ethical relationship between an organization and its environment is

assisted neither by the mind-numbing setting of rules and codes nor by torpedoing them. The kind of respect that is effectuated by domestication takes us far away from reckless mysticism and dull bureaucracies. The ideas put forward by Zwicky may help preventing managers to opt for both extremes. In what follows I hope to clearly distinguish what I have in mind from typically utopian efforts to stabilize whatever it is that is deemed to be uncontrollable.

The management of meaning

One important territory where cultural utopianism occurs is language. Since the early 1980s, business managers are, as we already saw in chapter two, increasingly expected to manage meaning because such management is believed to offer fresh opportunities for influencing people. Peters and Waterman (1982) have argued that 'strong cultures' are proficient in the management of meaning. The members of such cultures do not diverge on ethical or strategic matters. They agree about the goals of the organization, about performance criteria, or about what is right and what is wrong. Some would argue that cultural members are indoctrinated; others judge the process more favorably and talk about 'focus', 'alignment', or even 'identity formation'. In the light of my remarks on domestication, we may also wish to talk about the 'taming' of meaning.

Historically, the establishment of meaning has been a task so enormous that only few great men or women in science, politics, or religion have been thought capable of performing it. Now, managers are told to do it. The suspicion of utopian megalomania is therefore quite strong. Two ironic remarks are in place here:

- a. The idea that meaning can be established or tamed assumes that meaning as such is uncontrolled. We use definitions in order to fix the meaning of a word, an idea, a sentence. We hope to gain certainty if we define words. But which certainty do we have if we have defined, for example, an organization as "a 'system' which is functionally effective if it achieves explicit goals formally defined through rational decision-making"? (Clegg and Hardy, 1996: 2) What would we *fail* to know if we would not define the concept of organization in such a way?
- b. Dictionaries are efforts to fix meanings. The Paraguayan author Augusto Roa Bastos (1987) has described the dictionary as "a charnel house of empty words". Only if you firmly believe in the emptiness and meaninglessness of words, then you can fancy defining them, i.e. trying to fix their meaning once and for all. But before operating in this way you have to deny or annihilate the definitions and meaning already at hand. You have to believe that meaning is something which can be detached from the social and historical context. You have to forget what others say and have said, you have to rewrite history, and you have to convince your followers that they should forget the past. In other words, the garden of language has to be weeded out. Rampant growth is unacceptable. Dictionaries might be seen as weedkillers of our language. The suggestion is that the management of meaning has some analogy with compiling a dictionary. The exercise provides the compilers with considerable power, because fixing meanings is generally not intended to broaden the mental capacity of followers but to narrow it. As George Orwell was acutely aware, definitions undermine the mental flexibility of those who take them for granted (Willmott, 1993)

The ability to change the meaning of words² is based on the imperfection and openness of language. Leaders and managers who are keen on changing *and* fixing it have lost, I

would suggest, their innocence with respect to language. It is true, they know how to play with words. Everybody knows this. This is why language has always been a realm where playful fashion can hold sway. However, the capacity to play with words, to use figurative speech, to endlessly redefine and rewrite well-known narratives, to be eloquent, to experiment – all this has inspired the Guru, the Consultant and the Manager to start their very own game. The problem with their game is that the winner refuses to go on with it.

Stuckness

Leaving all irony behind, the management of culture has often been charged with nothing less than totalitarian tendencies. Peters and Waterman (1982) have provided the telling example of the Honda-employee who at the end of each long working day adjusts the position of the windscreen wipers of the cars produced that day. He does so not because he was told to but because he could not stand the thought of working for a company which produced imperfect items. For some people, such an employee is a frightening example of totalitarianism which is alienating people from what really matters to their lives. For gurus such as Peters and Waterman the Honda-employee is an example of what cultural management is capable of. Interestingly, they compare the employee's behavior with the aesthetic desire for quality described by Robert Pirsig in his famous book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

"But now we have with us some concepts that greatly alter the whole understanding of things. Quality is the Buddha. Quality is scientific reality. Quality is the goal of Art. It remains to work these concepts into a practical, down-to-the-earth context, and for this there is nothing more practical or down-to-earth than what I have been talking about all along – the repair of an old motorcycle." (Pirsig, 1982: 248)

It might be argued that Pirsig is invoked by Peters and Waterman in order to veil the nasty aspects of cultural management and that the Honda-employee is held in leash by a more or less totalitarian culture. However, the idea that somebody is tied down to certain criteria of performance is not intrinsically reprehensible. On the contrary, without the ability to be tied down it is difficult to see how someone might come to respect and appreciate the acts of others and their results. If anything, morality is based in the desire to be tied to the other and not in the desire to escape from him or her. The idea of a standstill or of being held in leash is not wrong or misguided as such. The power of domestication lies in a double recognition: on the one hand, you have to feel yourself at 'home' if you want to act to your own and to another person's satisfaction; on the other hand, you should always be aware that this home "respects the fluidity of the differences between the other and the same" (Parker, 1998: 89). Immobility is as fundamental to a human being as mobility.

In a world full of amorphous ambivalence where constant flux is paramount and rest anathema, we seem to be condemned to embrace the kind of desperation some gurus have in mind. One of them is Tom Peters (1988) who soon forgot the lessons about quality provided by Pirsig and wished to teach managers that an instinctive and furious contempt for bureaucracy is what is called for nowadays. Is Peters right? It seems difficult to survive in an ever-changing world without an unwillingness to become or remain engaged with something or with people. A loveless attitude towards whatever it is that ties

you down might be nothing less than a strategy of survival. In a turbulent and loveless world, it is taken for granted that things can occur which go against the very idea of togetherness or, perhaps better, against an extremely perverse attitude towards this idea. The following quotation illustrates what I have in mind:

"The self-proclaimed 'value-free objectivity of economic rationalism aligns easily with the elitist moral philosophy of market liberalism. Seldom has this been more starkly revealed than in a widely publicized staff memo written by Lawrence Summers in his capacity as chief economist of the World Bank. Summers argued that it is economically most efficient for the rich countries to dispose of their toxic wastes in poor countries, because poor people have both shorter life spans and less earning potential than wealthy people. In a subsequent commentary on the Summers memo, *The Economist* argued that it is a moral duty of the rich countries to export their pollution to poor countries because this provides people with economic opportunities of which they would otherwise be deprived." (Korten, 1995: 85)

In a world where even the most basic sense for togetherness is left unappreciated, each single act becomes inconsequential because you have already changed your place as soon as the consequences start to threaten you. That is, you run from place to place, from episode to episode (Bauman, 1997) and the only thing you may feel committed to is oblivion. Like a sportsman you wish to forget about failures and setbacks as quickly as possible. Forgetfulness, i.e. a single-minded focus on the future, is the ultimate resource for managers-cum-sportsmen. They have become the true escape artists of our time.

No matter how exaggerated or bizarre the story about the Honda-employee, there is something attractive about the refusal to be untied to anything. Pirsig (1982) has pointed out that quality is based on an aversion to distance. It presupposes a wish to be near to a thing (a windscreen wiper, an engine block) or a living being (customer, colleague, stakeholder). People often believe that being stuck is something they should fear, as if the house itself has become the enemy. But "stuckness" may very well be the most important condition for qualitatively acceptable movement which is not loveless escapism. As Pirsig (1982: 257) explains ...

"... [t]he fear of stuckness is needless because the longer you stay stuck the more you see the Quality-reality that gets you unstuck very time. What's *really* been getting you stuck is the running from the stuckness through the cars of your train of knowledge looking for a solution that is out in front of the train. Stuckness should not be avoided. It is the physic predecessor of all real understanding. An egoless acceptance of stuckness is a key to an understanding of all Quality, in mechanical work as well as in other endeavors."

Concluding remarks

To recap, to be stuck in a house is not reprehensible per se. Nor is movement in and around that house. Problems for people working in organizations may occur as soon as they wish to be on the move without a house or when you construct a house intending to exclude even the smallest opportunity to move. Or to put it in managerial discourse, the

desire for change may, taken to its extremes, lead to chaos and uncontrollability; the desire to rule out change at all costs entails rigidity. This poses serious, often ambivalent challenges to people in organizations. Working conditions in organizations may only be improved if organizations are able to meet the contradictory ends of domestication and mobility.

The management of culture is inspired by a fear of the latter and focuses on the former. In its extreme variants, it develops utopian theories about so-called strong cultures in which the management of meaning is particularly important. I have tried to endorse a much less rigid vision of cultural management in which the metaphors of process and domestication are key notions. The learning organization to which I will turn in the next chapter fears domestication, perhaps even to an irrational extent, and focuses on movement and flux. But even there we will see that it cannot manage without creating a space that functions as a buffer against the ongoing flux.

This once more suggests that the discussion about what organizational cultures should do is riddled with so much ambivalence and contradiction that one might wonder what one is talking about in the first place. If we take the idea of domestication seriously, as good utopians generally do, it will be difficult to talk about process; if, however, we take process seriously we will deny the possibility of domestication. The latter option may bring us closer to the truth, but the first option reminds me of the benign illusions Daniel Dennett suggests we are all in need of. That is, we may merely delude ourselves that there is a house, that there is a culture, that there is a special form of togetherness. But should we give up this illusion?

What should guide us in the choice between options that seem to be valuable for entirely different reasons? Can it be anything else than humor and taste?

Notes

- 1 So, my appreciation for Alvesson's work on organizational culture is rather ambivalent. While I have serious misgivings about his use of metaphors as an analytical instrument as well as about his reluctance to use metaphor, I am far more sympathetic to his defense of a more processual view on organizational culture. Indeed, I do not understand why this view did not persuade him to give up the thought that the analysis of organizational culture, either by means of metaphor or otherwise, can be useful or meaningful at all.
- 2 Here are some new meanings for old words (ten Bos, 1997b): autonomy = to agree with other members of the team; bosses = leaders, managers, friends; capitalism = democracy; colleagues = internal customers; commitment = doing what the boss tells you to do; culture = crucial device for the enhancement of performance; customers = creatures with needs and desires (among them are patients, citizens, passengers); democracy = inefficient decision-making style; dismissal = rationalization, reorganization, trimming down, cost cutting, etc.; entrepreneur = 1) artist; 2) honorary title for diligent employee; enemies = competitors; friends = 1) boss; 2) network; hard = soft; laborers = employees; leaders = the creators of culture; managers = entrepreneurs; market = jungle; quality = keeping a promise, abiding by the contract; people = 1) assets;

5 Weltfremdheit and escapism

A man is sitting in his room. We know him as Blaise Pascal. He thinks about the world which overwhelms him as a turbulent sea of noises that continually enter into his room. The hustle and bustle of street life in the 17th century is indeed incredible: people work, eat, sell, fight, and laugh in public places; animals growl, bark, grunt, neigh, and mow there; and even church bells chime relentlessly (Braudel, 1979). One can also discern the sounds of distant worlds that are explored by reckless and not so reckless adventurers. People boisterously merchandise products from overseas such as peppers, silk, or tobacco.

Pascal feels beset by the noises that never fade away and that come from everywhere. He bemoans the loss of silence, bends his head as a sign of acerbic discontent, and in a notebook he writes down the following cranky remark:

"All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only: he is incapable of staying quietly in his room." (*quoted in*: Auster, 1982: 76).

Pascal's remark is symptomatic of modernity's underlying discontent with respect to one of its own creations, i.e. the all-pervading mobilisation of the world. Whereas pre-modern societies were characterised, it could be argued, by the fatalistic idea that things will never turn out the way you have planned or thought, that there was, in other words, always a god or a demon or some other natural feat that will sooner or later thwart your plans, modernity radically relinquishes this modesty and argues that it is possible to escape from the "trough of unassailable passivity" (Sloterdijk, 1991:21). Pascal lives in an era which can be seen as a turning point in the sense that it no longer accepts motion or change that was not created by human agency. Modernity, Sloterdijk (1991: 22) points out, promulgates a "kinetic utopia" in which motion is the consequence of projects organised though not always controlled by human beings who think that making things turn out their way is the highest they can aspire to.

But as Pascal's remark makes very clear, modernity has regarded its very own kinetic utopia with considerable ambivalence. The glorifying of mobilisation, understood here as man-made motion, and its supportive technologies, has invited many philosophers, from Pascal to Sloterdijk, to vent their spleen about the nature of the kinetic utopia. It has been pointed out by them that while many things have been put into motion by our very own design, the course of humanity as such cannot be designed and even seems to be erratic (Mumford, 1962; Sloterdijk, 1991). More poignantly, we have got the ball rolling but somehow not in the way we have predicted. At closer inspection we may not have freed ourselves from pre-modern passivity after all. The very idea to free ourselves from this passivity may have been catastrophically wrong from the beginning.

In a sense *escapism* seems to be the guiding principle of modernity. The idea of *stuckness* to which I referred in the previous chapter as a precondition of quality in human life and decision-making, simply does not make sense to those who are enthralled by the ethics of kinetics. Such ethics is essentially based on the power of the modern subject to conceptualise, plan, design, or think about movement even before it has been put into

action (Sloterdijk, 1991: 31). What might be described as '*kinethics*' assumes that the conceived possibility of movement is already its moral justification. What counts in such an ethics is not the promise of better times or of better living, but plain man-made movement. Progress is not the substitution of one life-form by another, more perfect one; progress is movement in order to increase our capacity for further movement. The end of progress can never be the stability of perfection. In this sense, the *promesse de bonheur* of modern 'kinethics' is *perpetual escape* and not a better life. Kinethics denies the possibility of a resting place, a house, a room, an anchor, in short, stability. It denies Pascal's deepest desires because it urges the modern subject to go out into the world, to submerge into its perennial flux and to combat anything or anybody keen on bringing the flux to a standstill. And, in a peculiar orwellian twist, it has those who like Pascal preferred to stay where they are and had doubts as to the kinetic project accused of escapism and *unworldliness*.

I will use these ideas from Sloterdijk (1991; 1993) to analyse the idea of a learning organisation. The major thrust in this chapter is that the learning organisation can be related to a broader cultural and historical context in which it has become not only perfectly acceptable but also necessary to *distrust the obtrusiveness of the world*. This context is, I will argue, profoundly modern. Rather than relating the learning organisation to postmodernism, as has sometimes been done, I will situate it in the context of a typically modern grudge against the world. In this sense I will provide a postmodern critique of the learning organisation. The obsession with movement and change that inheres the learning organisation is essentially escapist and unworldly and should be counteracted by a postmodern appreciation of silence, stability, slowness as means to open up the world.

In the first section, postmodernism is identified as critical of the modern obsession with change and movement. Modern dynamics is identified as a 'kinetic utopia' which regards the world as obtrusive and which therefore embarks on a project of thinking it away. The learning organisation can be thought of as a particular embodiment of the kinetic utopia Sloterdijk has in mind. In the second session, the didactic assumptions made in the literature on learning organisations are discussed.

The notion of '*hegemonic disorganisation*' is introduced in order to describe the idea that relevant learning is merely allowed in places far away from organisational reality, that is, in places where only a few people, generally those 'who have the power to act'¹, have access. Examples of such places are boardrooms, nurseries, and other microcosmic places where the world is simulated. Such places are, it is suggested, kinetic utopias. Although people living in these utopias are cynical enough to dispense with the ideal of a perfect end-state, they have constructed their very own house which functions as a shelter against the hurry-scurry of the real world. This house should not be confused with the house I speculated above in the previous chapter. What I had in mind there is not the house of a few privileged people, but a kind of public housing. The section ends with a discussion of 'error tolerance'. It will be argued that the learning organisation develops a 'sly sort of sympathy' for failure.

Finally, in the final section, it will be concluded that as the learning organisation essentially refuses to accept the idea that the world can become a better place it will always have insurmountable problems with the notion of success. I will end with some remarks on the relationship between the concept of a learning organisation and

philosophical pragmatism. In spite of all my criticism, there is much that is attractive about the learning organisation.

The zestful road to the desert

If postmodernism is to be significant at all, it should, according to Sloterdijk (1991), not be related to notions such as mobilisation, turbulence, or dynamics, but rather to a certain appreciation of silence, stability, and slowness. In this sense Pascal's remark can be seen as a very early postmodern commentary on the human condition. This is not to say, however, that postmodernism as Sloterdijk sees it condemns movement as such. On the contrary, it advocates agility and flexibility of the mind and wishes to urge modern selves to escape from the "compulsive movements" which characterise modern dynamics and which are at times as asphyxiating as the closeness of premodernity. A postmodern self, in other words, develops an "*intelligent*" kind of movement and seeks to escape from the "mindless rigidity within supermobile structures". (Sloterdijk, 1991: 34)

Such rigidity is exemplified by many business managers, business organisations, or economists who call themselves in merely in order to be in action and to keep things and themselves running. They are all like car-drivers who sit still behind their steering wheels but who travel at a speed of 100mph, meanwhile ignoring the surrounding world or, perhaps better, merely knowing it 'by highway'. The modern self and his 'automobile' are metaphysical twins: the self cannot be thought of without being in motion.

It should be noted here that 'cars' and 'ways' are popular metaphors in business literature. For example, Rowan Gibson (1996: 8) argues that the winners of the 21st century will be those who are able to rebuild their organisations into something that comes close to a jeep, i.e. a four-wheel drive, all-terrain vehicle which is strong, fast, and flexible. Hamel and Prahalad (1994: 76, 270) argue that companies need to see themselves as an economic engine that allows to participate in the mad race towards the future. They (1994: 115, 117) also argue that companies need to develop a "strategic architecture" with which they can find their way to the future. The readers of their books are explicitly told that such a strategic architecture is not a detailed map that allows you to keep track in the cities but a surface map of motorways that will lead you to uncharted areas, to a *desert* where the four-wheel drive is most useful.

In order to be a worthy participant in this race towards an unknown future, the company has to "mobilise all its creative and intellectual energies". These energies are the "fuel" that is needed to survive. The winner of the race will be those who are able "to invent the world" rather than those who respond to it (Handy, *quoted in*: Gibson, 1996: 11, 25; *see also*: Handy, 1995). They are those who are able to develop "a deep sense for restlessness with the status quo" (Hamel, *quoted in*: Gibson, 1996: 89).

This hardly sounds like the intelligent movement Sloterdijk is calling for.² Business gurus and their disciples are the kind of modern 'kinethicists' Sloterdijk warns us against. We are urged to move on by the Guru and the Manager even if this entails that we may have to invent our own "anxiety and hauntedness" that will ultimately justify our desire to go on (Tuan, 1998: 168). In the upbeat jargon of the Guru, this is often referred to as the creation of a "sense of urgency" (e.g. Peters, 1988; Senge, 1990; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994) In other words, a deeply felt desire to be in a hurry is perhaps the pre-eminently kinethic virtue.

Neo-autohypnotism

Yet hurried people often do not get as far as the desert, where no obstacle lies around and where the world's obtrusiveness is hence reduced to minimal proportions. On the contrary, they often get stuck in traffic-jams, which Sloterdijk (1991: 38) suggests should be seen as postmodern interventions into modern dynamics. They coerce car-drivers to engage in the perhaps intelligent movement of stop-and-go. Even if car-drivers generally do not have the vaguest inkling as to the meaning of the strange word 'postmodernism', the traffic jam in which they get stuck no doubt causes them to ponder the possibility that widespread 'automobilisation' might eventually turn into general immobility. Stop-and-go thus creates new kinds of wisdom. Since car-driving is the "ritual heart of the kinetic world religion" (ibid.), traffic-jams can be seen as phenomena with a religious-historical impact: *modern action is substituted by postmodern passivity*.

Postmodernism can thus be conceived of as a search for an alternative kind of motion, one which refuses to understand the present world as something that people should try to get over with as quickly as possible. Hence, it condemns the kinetic training of people who are learning to constantly escape from the world in the name of promises that will always outshine the unsatisfactory present. One might think here, for example, of the ideas put forward by some management gurus about the need of managers to overcome depressing kinds of realism and to replace them with what are described as "stretched" ambitions and strategies (Senge, 1990: 150-153; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Postmodernism argues that this kind of dissatisfaction with reality is nihilistic in the sense that it does not engage with the present as it is and merely wishes to escape from it.

Of course, one might wonder whether a world without stretched ambitions, mind-boggling promises, or deliberate strategic misfits would be an interesting place to live in. Such musings, however, misapprehend, Sloterdijk (1991: 121) argues, the nature of the present which is not boredom, or as the Germans put it, 'Langeweile' (i.e. a long period), but a kinetic structure, a way of arriving in the world rather than escaping from it. The present is thought of as openness to the world, as an art of being born, as an acceptance of the way in which nature might come to the fore into our actions. It opposes the nervous, aggressive and panicking kind of escapism which is typical of modern dynamics and which reduces the world to a set of utilities that are to be recklessly consumed until the moment we die. Postmodernism in this sense urges us not to fly over the world with dizzying and entrepreneurial speed but to gleefully loiter away our time there.

To loiter away one's time is not exactly what is encouraged by the cosmopolitan ideology of contemporary business life. Passivity is morally wrong in the world of the entrepreneur. His life is placed under what Sloterdijk (1993: 45) describes as "the law of well-considered mania". This law identifies a post-critical attitude that replaces openness to the world with an obsession for the self described by Sloterdijk as "neo-autohypnotism". The idea is to replace the virtue of critical reflection with entrepreneurial virtues such as ambition, willpower and success. These words indicate a wistful acceptance of fatality: it is destiny itself – call it God if you like – which infuses the ambitious and strong-willed mind with new élan.

The desert principle

Perhaps it is interesting to point out here that in 1989 and 1990 I myself followed a considerable number of management courses with the engrossing title "New Élan", an initiative of the Dutch employers' federation in co-operation with AKZO, a huge

chemical company. I remember well that the very day when the Berlin wall came down my fellow students and I were in a monastery debating the strange intricacies of the marketing mix, blissfully unaware of the historical events in Germany.

It was later, when I heard of those events, that I understood that ambition, willpower and success are not only based in zest but also in stoic indifference. What happens in the world should not concern you anymore. This is exactly what makes the entrepreneurial élan so maniacal: self-realisation comes into being where vision and indifference meet each other (Sloterdijk, 1993: 46). In the creation of deliberate misfits between reality and levels of ambition, something which is described by management gurus such as Senge (1990) as 'personal mastery', the clarity of a particular vision and the darkness of a perhaps not so well-considered risk are merged into irresistible activity and (self)mobilisation.

The entrepreneurial self, as it comes to the fore in the texts of management gurus, has developed a dangerous passion for what is not (Sloterdijk, 1993: 53). This passion is of course a way of escaping the exigencies of an increasingly incomprehensible and unbearable world, thus allowing the entrepreneurial self to develop "structures of endurance" (or, in German, 'Aushaltstrukturen') which belong to a stoically mature life (1993: 57, 214). The escape to what is not, therefore, goes hand in hand with an acceptance and tolerance of what, from a less stoic point of view, is essentially unacceptable and intolerable. Escaping to what is not requires toughness and endurance. By voluntarily subjecting oneself to (athletic or ascetic) exercises ingrained with what I called new élan one comes to realise, not without a sign of relief, that the world is, against all odds, endurable. Only a denial of its obtrusiveness can help you to achieve this insight. No place seems to be better fit for such a denial than a desert.

Is it a coincidence that Senge (1990) opens his book about learning organisations with a Navajo sand painting? I am not sure, but the desert where this remarkable piece of art was created can be seen as a metaphorical place where the history of exertion and labour starts. Soul workers and athletes entered into the desert in order to labour the world away and to seek an undisturbed relationship with God. The desert is a minimised world where constant movement or nomadism is the only means of survival. There is no place here for temptations such as a permanent address or a Registry Office that would lure us into a life of stability.

The desert has thus allowed hermits and saints of all times to replace the triadic relationship God-world-man by a dyadic relationship God-man. In this unworldly drama, the contemporary entrepreneur might be seen as the self that allows, under the pretext of ambition and willpower, God or fatality to set the scene. There is nothing in a desert that might obstruct her liaison with divinity or fatality. Not even the metaphor: the desert is, Sloterdijk explains, a place of literalness in which managers, entrepreneurs and positivists feel very much at home.

Ours is a "poly-escapist" society. We have music, drugs, dance-halls, headphones, monasteries, happiness courses, kitsch, tourism, Prozac, and, as we will see later in this article, nurseries, scenario-planning and still many more techniques with which to reduce the world's obtrusive presence. At the heart of the desert-principle, as Sloterdijk calls it, lies a *psychological readiness to think away the world and its complexities*.

The quintessential modern idea is that the self can only be understood after it has been purified of the world's influence. Note that this purging procedure has often been carried out in the name of realism, which was, for example, the case with the Cartesian

doubt experiment. As Putnam (1990: 20) brilliantly remarked, this realism is "an impossible effort to view the world from Nowhere". The underlying idea is that the only way to cope with the world, to get to know it in a more or less trustworthy way, is to view the knowing self as an endogenous, self-sufficient whole which is neither dependent on the world nor capable of changing it. Stoic themes emerge: heroic control of the self goes hand in hand with the idea that utopian gestures to the world are illusory (Tuan, 1998: 73).

This, however, does not hold for utopian gestures to the self. As Kingwell (1996: 211) pointed out, if the will to change the world is illusory, if there is really no way of finding an alternative kinetic structure in our lives, then there is nothing left but self-change. Some follow leadership or happiness courses with new élan; others prefer to get a tattoo or piercing. The modern self runs from self-project to self-project, sometimes impatient with the world, but most of the time simply forgetting that the world is there in the first place. These self-projects are overshadowed by the "terror of completion" (Sloterdijk, 1993: 186): the modern self cannot accept anything which has not yet been completed. He or she runs from episode to episode (Bauman, 1995: 50), believes in happy-endism (Sloterdijk, 1993: 187; Burrell, 1996: 45) and bets on the basic redundancy of the world.

Hegemonic disorganization

At face value the idea of a learning organisation seems to be very attractive. It has even been dubbed 'postmodern' in order to distinguish it from modern bureaucracies. Look at how the great master of this area, Peter Senge (1990: 3), defines the learning organisation:

"Learning organisations [are] organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the result they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."

Nothing seems to be wrong with this. After all, which right-minded person would wish to argue against the idea that people should try to achieve the results they truly desire, or, for that matter, against innovation, expansion, freedom and creativity? Yet, I wish to explore some of the images which are oftentimes invoked in the literature on the learning organisation and which are, in my view, hopelessly wrong-minded. In what follows I wish to discuss images of gardens, nurseries, tabletop wargames and other microcosmic spaces which circle around the concept of the learning organisation. I also intend to add a few more images which I use in order to historically and culturally locate the concept.

Central to my criticism is that the learning organisation hinges on what I will call 'hegemonic disorganisation', which I define as the right of the higher-ups in the organisation to withdraw from its many realities. Hegemonic disorganisation provides those who have the power to act within the confines of a utopian microcosm where the will to move and change can be taken to its extreme. The price to be paid for this well nigh infinite flexibility is 'Weltfremdheit' and escapism. This section is organised around five propositions that simultaneously describe what is going on in the kinetic utopia of the learning organisation:

1. There are relevant and irrelevant learning processes in organisations and the relevant ones are a right reserved to the happy few.
2. The emphasised ways of learning – breaking limits, variation, innovation, etc. – are not the most natural ways of learning, neither for children nor for adults.
3. Learning and experiment are reserved to those who have access to a fictitious world, one that can be seen as a ‘microcosm’ filled with ‘mental models’; the deliberate creation of such a fictitious world is an important step towards hegemonic disorganisation.
4. The widespread criticism of centralisation and hierarchy in the literature about learning organisations does nowhere lead to the endorsement of democratisation initiatives; hierarchies are not jettisoned but changed, perhaps even, one might argue, intensified.
5. The notion of error tolerance is absolutely crucial to the learning organisation but is from both a moral and a pedagogic point of view, flawed.

Who is learning and who is not?

Many authors (Hoebeke, 1994; Weick and Westley, 1996) have remarked that the very idea that organisations can learn is a rather peculiar. Learning seems to be done by people, not by organisations. Apart from this rather obvious criticism, I wish to add from my personal experience that learning is oftentimes exactly what should be ruled out within the organisational process. I have been working as a warehouseman for more than four years in several companies and I can remember that one of my bosses once told me that I should give up the job since he believed I was too smart for it and smart people were in his view nothing less than a danger to organisational performance in the long run. The ingredients for an efficient contribution were rather straightforward: you should like the popular rock stations, you should be willing to babble endlessly and, most importantly, you should have a dim, inward-oriented look in your eyes. Needless to say that I felt sometimes as if I was one of Odysseus’s oarsmen: rowing as fast as possible with a lot of wax in my ears and with my eyes lowered to prevent me from hearing and seeing a world that could only distract me from my duty (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1987).

It should be remarked that Odysseus was not solely responsible for this situation. The oarsmen themselves did not wish to learn from the world. As soon as experimentation and variation in the daily rut became inevitable (for example due to illness, absenteeism, or the arrival of a new consultant), the oarsmen became discontented since they did not wish to grab the new learning opportunities and preferred to stick as closely as possible to the situation they were familiar with. It was felt that stupid, monotonous work is acceptable as long as the sense of community among the workers is left unimpaired. We sensed we were better off without job enrichment and similar initiatives.

Now one might wish to rejoin that I was working in something very remote from a learning organisation. However, the managers whom I came to know were quite often able to do the verbal repertoire which would later become the hallmark of Senge and others. They were talking about job enrichment, learning processes, quality impulses, cultural changes and so on. So, some affinity with the assumptions of the learning organisation was unmistakable. But more important than this is Odysseus’s understanding that learning is not everybody’s department, unless we are willing to talk about learning as an adaptation process by means of which workers learn to cope with the

circumstances they are facing. Such coping can vary from blind obedience to resignation. This kind of heteronomous learning is a matter of survival, not a matter of variation, change, movement, or even disorganisation.

What the advocates of the learning organisation have in mind, however, is an autonomous learning process which is largely the employees' very own creation. The idea is that only such an autonomous learning process enables the organisation to cope with environmental dynamics. This process is seriously undermined if the organisation is not able to develop openness among its members. That is, an expansive mood should take hold of the employee in the learning organisation, which is the reason why Senge stresses the importance of informal processes. As we have seen in the last chapter, he even goes so far as to proclaim that love is an essential element in learning organisations. But let there be no misunderstanding here. Love should not be seen here as the somewhat insecure emotion we often take it to be:

"In fact, the type of love that underlies openness, what the Greek called *agape*, has little to do with emotions. It has everything to do with intentions – commitment to serve one another, and willingness to be vulnerable in the context of that service. The best definition of love that underlies openness is the full and unconditional commitment to another's 'completion', to another being all that she or he can and wants to be." (Senge, 1990: 285)

Perhaps Senge has provided us here with one nice description of what a kinetic utopia might amount to. But is each member of the organisation entitled to *agape*? More particularly, are managers also fully committed to the completion of warehousemen, secretaries, and cleaning persons? How obsessed are they really with the completion of their fellow human beings? I am not so sure here. Let us not forget Odysseus's lesson that there are different kinds of learning processes.

Another promulgator of the learning organisation, Arie de Geus (1988), has taken these lessons to heart and made an unequivocal distinction between relevant and irrelevant learning processes, arguing that the only relevant learning process in an organisation is the learning process of those who are in charge. More precisely, the true goal of planning and learning processes in organisations is to change the microcosm, in other words, "the mental models of those who are in charge" (1988: 67). The idea is to create a "learning space" (Fulop and Rifkin, 1997: 59) in which relationships between members of the organisation can be locally orchestrated and in which there is enough room for disorganisation and autonomy to make the kind of flexible and agile learning processes possible that Senge has in mind. Only a few people have access to this learning space. That is, only a few people have the right to question accepted knowledge or hierarchical relations. Relevant learning is Odysseus's privilege. His oarsmen bow their heads and row.

Ignored aspects of learning

There have been economists, biologists and philosophers who would question the distinction De Geus is making between relevant and irrelevant learning processes in working organisations. For people like Adam Smith work was nothing else than an evil badly needed in our society in order to create welfare and prosperity. Once workers could be talked into doing this work as efficiently as possible, its harmful consequences might

be smoothed away, especially if workers would receive a fair pay for their activities.

This vision is totally at odds with the utopian ideas about work that are put forward by the defenders of the learning organisation. That there mind-numbing and debilitating tasks to be carried out in each organisation is anathema in this literature. Work is often portrayed as adventurous, wonderful, and challenging. And for this kind of work, special learning processes are necessary. But what should those who carry out the silly jobs learn? Perhaps they have to engage in the not so relevant learning processes. Part of what I have in mind here is what ethologists call 'habituation', that is to say, a way of learning that can be observed "over the entire phylogenetic scale, ... from one-celled organisms to man" (Estes, 1978: 245-246, cited in: Murphy, 1993: 65).

The idea is simple: if a moderate stimulus to which an organism initially responds is frequently repeated, the organism will sooner or later cease to respond. In Murphy's own words, "when an organism becomes habituated to its environment, it gradually ceases to respond to its environment" (ibid.). Learning not to respond might very well be the simplest form of learning. According to Murphy, habit and custom are "fundamental concepts for any adequate account for social institutions." I think Adam Smith would agree with this. Learning not to respond explains that labourers in working organisations are generally able to endure their monomaniac jobs. Habituation creates the structures of endurance Sloterdijk is talking about.

An important side-effect of these structures is that "our social and natural environments become invisible to us" (Murphy, 1993: 66). This invisibility is, one might add, a condition of possibility for efficiency. Efficiency is based on the ability of people to remain blind for contextual factors including the consequences of the acts that have been performed. Efficiency presumes the ability not to respond to the world. It is a moral state of mind that springs from indifference.

The advocates of the learning organisation argue over and over again that nothing is so natural for human beings as learning. This may be true, but the real issue here is not whether learning is natural or not but *which kind of learning does best explain organisational practices*. And here opinions seem to differ. In the kinetic utopia of the learning organisation it is stressed that people should continually be prepared to abandon habits and customs if they want to adjust to turbulence and flux in the environment. The oarsmen in the learning organisation, in other words, cannot afford the luxury of a habit or a custom. The idea of personal mastery discussed earlier is that individuals are constantly able to transgress the depressing limitations of life. Among such limitations are precisely such habits and customs. The idea is that individual transgressions allow the organisation as a whole to adapt better to the exigencies of the environment.

Habituation is by no means the only natural way of learning that is ignored in the literature of the learning organisation. What to think of imitation? Aristotle was already aware of its importance:

"Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation." (*quoted in*: Murphy, 1993: 69)

Admittedly, we need not accept an old Greek philosopher as an indisputable authority in learning matters, but even nowadays there seems to be widespread agreement that the best imitators can be found at the top of the phylogenetic ladder. Aping is crucially

important, especially for the apes we call humans (De Waal, 1996: 88). Adult specimen set the example and children copy it. Managers seem to be no exception to the rule. Harvard-research has indicated that most of them happily acknowledge that their best ideas were copied or stolen from competitors or previous employers (Bhide, 1994).

Yet imitation as a way of learning is grossly ignored in the texts on learning organisations. It is preferred to stress the unique, creative potential of human beings as well as the opportunity to learn and grow by means of experimentation (De Geus, 1997: 76). The humanistic tendencies underlying the kinetic utopia of the learning organisation are nicely expressed by a Japanese business manager who is approvingly quoted by Senge (1990: 139-140):

“Whether it is research and development, company management, or any other aspect of business, the active force is ‘people’. And people have their own will, their own mind, and their own way of thinking. If the employees themselves are not sufficiently motivated to challenge the goals of growth and technological development ... there will simply be no growth, no gain in productivity, and no technological development.”

This Japanese managers adds that once managers are willing to gain a new understanding of “the subconscious mind”, of “willpower” and of something which he describes as “action of the heart”, they will be able to “tap the human potential”. Tapping the human potential requires abandoning the idea that people are dull imitators. Managers henceforth appear as creators, artists and visionaries. Yes!

This is how you can get rid of the idea that imitation matters. Practitioners are enticed to abandon their own intuitions about learning and to start thinking they can become artists and geniuses themselves. Senge is by no means alone in his efforts to elevate the practitioner’s self-esteem. For example, Hamel and Prahalad’s (1994) famous but highly ambivalent recommendation to enthusiastically embrace the concept of ‘core competencies’ refers to a set of allegedly *inimitable* qualities and skills not very long ago deemed to be uniquely Japanese. This Japanese link is ironical here because the Japanese have generally not thought of as setting an example for Western managers.

On the contrary, as we saw in the previous chapter, there is a long and sordid tradition in the West to see the Japanese as “amoral if masterful thieves and as an ancient, noble people who make others feel inadequate” (Schwartz, 1996: 370). The racist assumption underlying this tradition is that the Japanese are apes, or, as the English in the 18th century would have it, ‘Japansees’ (Schwartz, 1996: 368). Physiologist and Nobel Prize winner Charles Richey contended in 1913, a year after he won his prize, that the Japanese were to be regarded as chimpanzees, “chattering intermediates between monkeys and human beings” (*ibid.*). This racist attitude is far from obsolete, although the language is less raw. Not very long ago, management guru Lester Thurow explained that the Japanese never invented something new but stole the inventions of other people (Gibson, 1996: 253). Thurow thinks that this is an inevitable consequence of the community spirit that is typical of the Japanese. Inventive minds, artists, and geniuses, he frivolously adds, tend to be queer customers and lousy team players. Would he agree with the suggestion that Senge and kindred spirits seducing managers to become poor team players?

The nursery as *imitatio mundi*

The idea that people, and especially children, learn by habituation and imitation does not befit the humanistic perspective of the learning organisation. It is, for example, interesting to note that Senge (1990: 314) tells us a lot about how children learn yet refuses to enter into the issue of imitation. On the contrary, he amply discusses the way in which children experiment with dolls and blocks, teaching themselves the principles behind matters that range from social interaction to mechanics and spatial geometry. Such experimental learning is purported to take place in the playroom which is described as a "microworld", or a "microcosmos of reality where it is safe to play". According to Senge (1990: 315), microworlds are "critical technology for implementing the disciplines of the learning organization".

Crucial is the idea that people learn best, that is, in a rate that is "truly astounding", from their very own experimentation and play. Senge stresses that the microworld allows children to learn "without ever being 'taught'". De Geus (1988: 67), on whom Senge relies quite strongly, also shows a firm scepticism with respect to the idea that teaching can be effective. He (1988: 67) points out that research has indicated that a mere 25% of the knowledge that is being transferred in traditional teaching situations is actually stored in the minds of the students. Apart from this, teaching requires authority and the planners in organisations who are supposed to 'teach' managers and board members do not, by definition, have such authority. As soon as the planner enters the boardroom he loses the authority he needs in order to get the knowledge transfer started.

In this sense, mamas and papas are *non grata* in the microcosmic nursery that we call the boardroom. Aping your mom and dad is ruled out there. You do not need any teaching. Instead, you rearrange your world in such a way that you can play and experiment in your very own microcosm. The desert-principle is evidently in operation here: you have cancelled the world and are all alone with God. This insight is a most important step towards the actualisation of the kinetic utopia in learning organisations.

The same educational laws pervade the playroom and the boardroom. Imitating moms, dads and other teachers is unacceptable in these microcosms. What is acceptable is the imitation of the world as such. In other words, the microcosm is an imitation of the world which allows those who are entitled to stay there to creatively experiment with "mental models". The microcosm or microworld is thus a room where children and top managers can always be on the move with so-called 'transitional objects', a process that is assumed to help them discovering principles and developing skills that will sooner or later be important in the real world or in what Senge (1990: 314) calls "*reality beyond play*". (The emphasis is mine.)

Earlier in his book Senge (1990: 8) claims that "[t]he discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny". Of course, there are many problems with the representationalist epistemology that is assumed here. It is suggested that the world can be pictured in what Dennett (1993: 32-33) has called the Cartesian Theatre. Dennett and other philosophers (e.g. Rorty, 1998) have put forward strong arguments against representationalism, but the point I would like to make here is that the intuitive appeal of such philosophically unsound ideas is very strong.

The idea is that just as the self is in charge of an inner space which can be thought of as a theatre full of pictures representing the outside world, so is the top manager in

charge of whatever happens in her room. S/he controls his/her own actions and ideas. This assumption renders credibility to the suggestion that tinkering with mental models is enough to bring about changes in reality beyond play. Moreover, it also makes plausible notions such as 'stretching ambitions', 'building creative tensions', or 'leverage'. The problem, however, is that a lever under a mental model representing reality differs very much from a lever under certain aspects of reality itself. A further problem is that it is by no means clear whether we are in charge of the constructions and representations we have from the outside world. Are they caused by the outside world or by our emotions? Do we really understand how such constructions and representation get a hold on us? Summarising, Senge's ideas about the functioning of the human mind is, to say the least, simplifying and he is wrong to suggest to his readership that we already know about the intricacies involved. (Griffin, Shaw, Stacey, 1998)

Yet these simplifications have far-reaching consequences for the literature on learning organisations. De Geus (1997: 79-83) writes a lot about games that simulate reality, something which he heartily recommends because he believes that for business organisations game-playing is the best way of learning. De Geus is astonished about organisations who refuse to play in the microworlds of mental models and decide to "experiment with reality itself". He argues that business people should be enabled to experiment without having to fear the consequences that reality has in store for them. And once more the image of a learning child is used to hammer home the message of free and autonomous learning. A young girl, De Geus argues, puts part of her reality in the doll she is playing with. She thinks the doll is her young brother or her girl-friend. She plays and experiments with the doll without having to fear the consequences. She may, for example, maim the doll or toss it away in way that her mother would never accept if the victim would be her little brother or girl-friend. According to De Geus, such experiments are ways of discovering that certain action may lead to injuries. This may be the case, but I think it difficult to imagine a parent that allowing, let alone encouraging, her or his kid to maim dolls, not even in the nursery. The idea that children are autonomously experimenting in their playrooms without any interference from the outside world is simply implausible.

Still, the defenders of the learning organisations have no problem extrapolating such images to organisational contexts. In companies such as Shell, people have their own "toys" (De Geus, 1997: 81), although it must be granted that dolls and dinky-toys have been replaced by computer models. The same is true in the army where people have developed complicated computer simulations (referred to by De Geus as "war toys", *ibid.*) which allow them to conceive of the hostilities before they actually take place. A key understanding of modernism, we have seen, is that once particular events can be conceived of as possible, it is going to be exceedingly difficult to prevent them from actually happening.

By the way, the predecessor of the simulation games that are so much in use nowadays was the notorious *Kriegspiel* in which the commanders in chief were generally happy to engage themselves. Who would have difficulties imagining them as toying with tin soldiers that stand or lay scattered in an artificial landscape of ten or fifteen square meters, meanwhile nipping from a decent glass of brandy? Schwartz (1996: 264) provides us a lively description of what might have happened to the participants' state of mind:

"Kriegspiels were simulations whose atmosphere of close personal combat, captain

versus captain, kept commanders psychologically distant from the deadliness of repeated rifles, Gatling Guns, Hotchkiss Revolving Cannon ... a technology that, ever compounded, itself made killing reiterable and impersonal."

I do not wish to suggest that De Geus or Senge's aversion of a reckless sort of "Rambo-management" (De Geus, 1997: 82) is unreasonable. But what I would like to ask at this point is whether the microworld, the nursery, the Kriegspiel or whatever other microcosm the elite calls into being, does not provide a more suitable breeding ground for Rambo-management, (or, in case of the little girl tossing away dolls, Ramba-management) than reality itself. Think again of the commanders-in-chief playing table top wargames with tin soldiers carefully positioned in papier-mâché landscapes. Will they behave like the little girl tossing around her doll? Will they come to understand "reality beyond play"? Will they realise that the tin soldiers carelessly pushed over with the little finger of the left hand represent a gruesome reality? Or will they receive a merely delusive understanding of what is happening on the battlefields? Will they not become totally insensitive to what is really going on? Schwartz (1996: 260) poses the question as follows: "*Is simulation a mode of insight or escape, recall or denial?*" (My emphasis.)

As I said earlier, De Geus relates the relevant learning processes within organisation to those who have the power to act. Hegemonic disorganisation allows top managers to play in the microcosm of the boardroom. It can be compared to Odysseus's right to experiment, while being tied to the mainmast and thus unable to work, with the sensual temptations of the Sirens. It can also be compared to the war chiefs playing their Kriegspiel. Outside this microcosm people have to row, to plod along, to fight and to die. Or, so it seems. Nowadays, technological sophistication has reached such unprecedented levels of aesthetic sophistication that the world itself seems to adjust to the simulation rather than vice versa. In other words, war itself has become a game which is being played by means of computer technology such as IFF-software – Identify Foe or Friend.

Klein (1998) has argued that people who keep on distancing themselves from the world by means of alienating technologies such as strategic planning, scenario thinking, or rational analysis will end as poor decision makers. The trouble is that such technologies lead to self-fulfilling prophecies: the longer you postpone your visit to reality, the more you will have to put your faith in the procedures and scenarios that have been created on your behalf. Klein opposes the idea that people are rather helpless in face of reality and therefore need to gather in the planning room in order to make sound decisions. In fact, many decision makers are not helpless at all. While it is true that they rarely make optimal decisions, they also rarely make catastrophic decisions. Perhaps this is not a result about which to boast, but neither should we boast about the results of planning and simulation. Klein's point is, of course, inspired by Herbert Simon. Particularly when they are experienced, people in organisations will generally, even under stressful conditions, make satisfactory decisions. It should be granted that people have rational limitations but this is not to say that we have to lock them in their playrooms. Not everybody is a potential Rambo or Ramba.

To recap, I have tried to cast doubt on the idea of a microcosm in which important men and women have decisive learning moments. There is an element of unworldliness in this idea since it helps to distance them from reality. Such distancing, it is argued, is necessary because errors made by people working at a high level in the

organisation generally have more disastrous consequences than errors made at lower levels. Thus comes the need into being of a world where errors will not have harsh consequences for the higher-ups in the organisation. The inhabitants of such a world are allowed to make errors and to look for "peak experiences" (Weick and Westley, 1996: 453). The hegemonic disorganisation which is their prerogative allows them to live a life without consequences. This life is, I suggest, fundamentally alien to those plodders who are not and who will never be in charge. They have to work in and with the organisation and they will imitate and adapt since these are the ways of learning that will generally have the least disastrous consequences for them. In the organised world of plodders peak experiences and other forms of what I am inclined to call 'erotic' experimentation will be kept at a minimal level.

Democracy and roses

Many right-minded people, even the sceptics among them, think that the learning organisation is a promising idea since it opens a perspective on democracy. After all, the kind of learning that is emphasised in the texts about learning organisations – experimenting, transgression, autonomy – requires, it is believed, nothing less than a subversion of hierarchy. The latter is often regarded as the most important obstacle for learning and democracy. What should we make about this claim? Is the idea of democracy futile or is it to be taken seriously?

It is important to note beforehand that democracy is very likely not something which would be unconditionally welcomed by all practitioners. One of the ideas of the learning space about which Fulop and Rifkin (1997: 57) tell us so much is that managers no longer have privileged access to something called the truth. This will inevitably engender feelings of anxiety since everything, including the manager's own knowledge and position, will eventually be called into question. As such the idea of a learning space, as it is propounded by Fulop and Rifkin, differs from Senge's microcosm in that the latter is, as we have seen, a means of reducing feelings of anxiety. Fulop and Rifkin (1997: 61) criticise Senge for paying no attention to negative emotions. I agree with this but would like to add that Senge has his ulterior motives.

Although he frequently criticises the fundamental problems with hierarchy, Senge does not want to subvert it. Nowhere does he make mention of democracy. Although he hopes people will openly communicate to each other and will not be afraid to tell each other what they think is the truth, he clearly does not escape from hierarchy. In a section called "*Overcoming 'the basic diseases of the hierarchy'*", Senge discusses experiences with the learning organisation in a well-known insurance company (Hanover) that has accepted the "dogma of vision, values, and mental models" (1990: 181).

Among the values propounded by the company are openness, which is defined as an antidote to the "disease of gamesplaying that dominated people's behavior in face-to-face meetings", and merit, which is defined as the ability to make decisions in the best interests of the organisation. Merit is an antidote to bureaucratic politics "where the name of the game is getting ahead by making an impression" (Senge, 1990: 182). Only if you have shown to be able to make decisions not so much in the interest of your boss but in the interest of the organisation, you will be able to get ahead. What we have here is, I suggest, a kind of transparent meritocracy with a hierarchy of its own kind. The new order is no longer determined by seniority, educational background or social position, as it apparently was in the traditional bureaucracy, but by performance.³

There are even sordid, anti-democratic elements in Senge's text which can be directly related to the kinetic utopia he is defending. His aversion from politics, negative emotions and other "counterproductive" tendencies are a case in point. For example, political decision making is his view counterproductive since it is a process "where factors other than the intrinsic merits of alternative courses of action weigh in making decisions – factors such as building one's own power base, or 'looking good', or 'pleasing the boss'" (1990: 60). Again, we see a tendency to optimise and idealise processes of decision making, something which can be achieved by eliminating unwelcome political and emotional aspects. The idea to simply dismiss real-life complexities as counterproductive is of course grist to the managerial mill. An over-arching vision will conveniently deal with such complexities (1990: 273-274). In other words, doubt, diversity and disagreement, hallmarks of democracies, will only be allowed within the context of a shared vision. In the microcosm you can only be a serious discussion partner if you subscribe to the vision.

Similar ideas are propounded by Hamel and Prahalad who have advocated what they see as a "democratisation of strategy", a process that in their view encourages employees in the organisation to see strategic issues as relevant for themselves (1994: 190). It is, however, doubtful whether the individual employee will ever have a say in the strategic process as Hamel and Prahalad understand it. In his interview with Gibson (1997: 91), Gary Hamel explains that he does not recommend a "one man, one vote" democracy but rather a democracy as we know it from the ancient Greeks, that is, a democracy based on what people can intellectually contribute to overall performance. Again, we see meritocracy looming large, perhaps not even in an old Greek style since the Greeks were not really concerned about dispersing strategic responsibilities. Hamel concludes his musings about democracy by arguing that the dispersion of strategic responsibilities should lead to "one vision that will hold the entire company in its grip". Pluralism and discussion are dangerous as ever.

De Geus (1997: 208) is more explicit than Senge about democracy in learning organisations. He quotes Popper who once argued that the essence of democracy is the ability to get rid of leaders without a crisis. This ability is, if we are to believe the famous Austrian philosopher, more important than suffrage. Like Hamel, De Geus underscores this. He is remarkably candid on the question of democracy in organisations and argues that in his working experience he hardly ever worried about the employee's claim to democracy (*ibid.*). In daily practice, De Geus tells us, only a very minimal version of democracy remains intact: if the employee disagrees with a management decision and is not able to overcome her problems with it, she is free to leave the company at any time.

Despite his candour on the issue of democracy, even De Geus is not able to escape ambivalence. He explicitly recommends, for example, an ethics of shared power, something which makes him a much more radical thinker than many kindred spirits. He even argues that learning can never take place in the entire organisation if only a few people can enjoy the privilege of learning (1997: 214). This is an important and sympathetic idea because it seems to point to what I would call non-hegemonic disorganisation, but it seems to be hopelessly irreconcilable with De Geus's remarks on relevant and irrelevant learning processes that I discussed. What should we make of this blatant contradiction?

Earlier in his text, De Geus speaks quite a lot about tolerance and as usual he is not at a loss for a compelling image. If you want to have the biggest and most beautiful

rose in the suburban neighbourhood where you are living, you need to regularly trim off its branches (1997: 162). More than three branches on a rose will undermine your efforts to get the most beautiful one. In other words, no outgrowth can be tolerated and everything needs to be tightly controlled. The problem with this gardening strategy is that the rose will become very vulnerable with respect to unpredictable calamities such as frost in springtime. It would be much less vulnerable if you would not have trimmed off nearly all its branches. De Geus infers from this that in the long term tolerance might be much better for the plant than tight control.

The idea of the gardener has been criticised in organisational literature (ten Bos and Willmott, 1999) because it evoked the idea of the weeding and trimming gardener who destroyed anything that did not fit in her ideal garden-image. De Geus apparently knows more about the secrets of gardening and argues that zero-tolerance can have nasty consequences as well. The idea of tolerance about which De Geus metaphorically speaks is perhaps to be understood as disorganisation. What are the implications of this idea for the notion of bureaucracy?

It is, of course, the tolerance of hegemony. The gardeners who work in their fenced-off garden – the umpteenth microcosm we encounter in this book – determine the extent to which outgrowth is permissible. It is nice to argue that nobody within an organisation should have too much power (1997: 213) but those who are in charge are in possession of the code with which to distribute it. Managers should no longer be willing to control anything that is happening within the organisation, but this does not open the way, as some people seem to think, to more democracy. Those who are in charge should provide a context in which it is permissible to sincerely tell employees that they should carry on, that they are allowed to make mistakes, that they are free to improvise – all as part of the learning process that managers have initiated. They remain in full control: the manager will sit by and watch what the learning employee is doing (De Geus, 1997: 213). Elsewhere, De Geus (1988: 173) argues that risk taking and improvising are important but that people in organisations should not expect to be allowed to act against overall organisational goals. Learning organisation are thus in need of people who want independence and yet accept effective control. The dream of democracy is shattered to pieces.

Summarising, the very idea of a democracy within business organisations could only originate in the microcosm to which those who are in charge have access. Democracy may in the end merely be another toy to play with, preferably in the boardroom where those who are in charge can throw it away as soon as real-life issues such as performance and production come into play. The idea of a democracy is delusory in the kinetic utopia of the learning organisation. The idea of hierarchy is not so much subverted as changed, and according to some believers, improved.

Error tolerance and catastrophe-didactic

Error tolerance has a long tradition. The catholic church has always been painfully aware that the sinful nature of human beings has been the primary source of its revenue. The mediaeval Church's leniency with respect to sinners was, as Vaneigem (1994: 85) remarks, truly "boundless because it simply absolved the offense, always repeated, by demanding payment for it." No wonder then that those who tried to live the perfect life, thereby following Christ's example, were regarded as heretics. Seekers of moral perfection were condemned, not only because they refused to enter the "markets of sin and penitence"

(1994: 87), but also because their style of living outshone that of the hopelessly secular Church of Rome. Vaneigem comments bitterly on this situation:

“Rather than direct its wrath at the avaricious, the dissolute, the drunkards, the torturers and the murderers, the Church reserved it for the ascetic, who felt no desire; the honest man, whose virtue required no ecclesiastical insurance; the ‘pure’ Waldensians and Cathars, who practiced their own remission of sins; the simple people who were ignorant of sin, and the supporters of the movement of the Free Spirit, who comforted them in the innocence of nature.” (1994: 85)

Much of this became part and parcel of psychoanalytic, penitential and other practices where the sinful nature of men was, as Foucault (1997: 82-83, 177-179) has pointed out, also considered as a source of power, knowledge and profitability. In the learning organisation too, this takes, as we have seen, the form of *openness*, a value that might best be defined, in line with Foucault, as an obligation to be as truthful as possible about one's nature and one's actions. The role of openness is as crucial in the learning organisation as it was in, say, the catholic or psychoanalytic cultures of confession. The same, of course, holds for the related value of error tolerance. Rather than being a postmodern characteristic of learning organisations, error tolerance seems to be inextricably interwoven with an age-old culture that can be related to the kinetic utopia discussed by Sloterdijk. This is what I intend to show in the remainder of this section.

The learning organisation has a problem for which the traditional bureaucracy already seems to have found the solution: uncertainty, unrest and anxiety amongst employees. Since the learning organisation has, as I have tried to argue, an obsession with movement and change, it will inevitably arouse such negative feelings. The question of how to calm down such feelings is thus crucially important. The bureaucracy has invented control, standardisation, hierarchy and other instruments that can steer these feelings into the right direction. Such instruments, however, are not unconditionally available to the learning organisation, because they would undermine the organisational capacity for change. This is one of the reasons why hierarchy is not simply dispensed with in the organisation but transformed. But something more is needed.

It is important to note right away that bureaucracies do not so much wish to reduce feelings of anxiety and uncertainty as to exploit them. Such feelings are, I suggest, not only interesting in order to render people obedient, but also because they have an impact on moral preferences of people. For example, actions which would be condemned at home are glossed over by pointing to rules or to one's boss. Fear of sanctions imposed by those who occupy a higher rank in the organisation renders the average employee docile and cautious. Organisations who feel that they should constantly change cannot do with docility and caution. Feelings of anxiety and uncertainty should therefore be reduced as much as possible in the learning organisation since they undermine the willingness to change. As we have seen the invention of microcosms or microworlds helps a lot to reduce fear and uncertainty. The notion of error tolerance is also crucial for this purpose. Besides, making mistakes in a microworld is better than making them in the real world.

It is assumed that people who are changing make errors. Sanctioning these errors would fatally undermine the capacity for change. The error therefore does not appear as something for which one should have fear or for which one should feel ashamed, but as a

learning moment. This idea is the gist of the pedagogic philosophy underlying the concept of the learning organisation and I hope to show that it is flawed. I also believe this philosophy to be at odds with the common understanding that it is morally respectable if a person wishes to avoid mistakes. Against this, the learning organisation proclaims that the wish to avoid mistakes is a vice. Like the catholic church, the learning organisation develops "a sly sort of sympathy" for the mistake as such. Senge approvingly quotes the chairman-general of Johnson & Johnson who is addressing one of his managers about a new product that proved to be a total failure:

" 'Are you the one who just cost us all that money?' Burke nodded. The general said, 'Well, I just want to congratulate you. If you are making mistakes, that means you are making decisions and taking risks. And we won't grow unless you take risks.'"
(1990: 300)

The wish not to make mistakes is veiled here by action-orientation and initiative. Admittedly, there are mistakes and mistakes in the sense that some can be treated with more leniency and tolerance than others. A situation where each initiative is nipped in the bud due to fear of sanctions that follow the inevitable mistake is also very uncomfortable. But I sometimes suspect that tolerance towards the person who makes the mistake is conflated with tolerance towards the mistake itself. The following passage from Senge's book is crucial and should also be related to my earlier comments on the idea of stretching or leveraging ambitions:

"Mastery of creative tension transforms the way one views 'failure'. Failure is, simply, a shortfall, evidence of the gap between vision and current reality. Failure is an opportunity for learning – about inaccurate pictures of current reality, about strategies that didn't work as expected, about the clarity of vision. Failures are not about our unworthiness or powerlessness. Ed Land, founder and president of Polaroid for decades and inventor of instant photography, had one plaque on his wall. It read: A mistake is an event, the full benefit of which has not yet been turned to your advantage." (1990: 154)

Senge's vision on error tolerance is radical. He clearly does not restrict this kind of tolerance to relative insignificant cases of negligence. He tells a story of a Japanese captain on a DC8 whose mistakes *nearly* caused a catastrophe on the airport of San Francisco in 1968. During a hearing organised later the man plainly admitted that he "fucked up" (Senge, 1990: 301). Senge suggests that the openness of the captain about his mistakes made it acceptable that he was allowed to continue his career. And why not? Learning organisations, after all, "practice forgiveness", because they know that "making the mistake is punishment enough" (ibid.).

The learning organisation develops a kind of 'sorry culture' where mistake and failure hardly ever have personal consequences. They are seen as episodes full of great learning opportunities. I use the word episode here more or less in the same way as Bauman (1995: 49, 91): an isolated event without consequences for the past or the future. Failure is viewed as an event which later allows all those concerned to act as if it did not really happen. That is, if a person makes a mistake, this event contains no information whatsoever as to the mistakes s/he made and will make. It is simply assumed

that people learn from failure, but forgiving and forgetting are probably much cheaper alternatives than actually controlling the effects of such learning moments. Senge simply points out that the Japanese pilot did not make mistakes anymore in his further career. The one mistake he made proved to be a unique event. Doesn't this prove that Senge is right? I am not so sure.

A few lines ago I wrote that a "sly sort of sympathy" for mistakes is pervading the learning organisation. I took the expression from Sloterdijk (1991: 89) who believes that kinetic cynicism lurks behind this lenient attitude towards mistakes. He speaks of "catastrophe-didactic" in which it is assumed, first, that people do not learn if they do not make mistakes and, second, that there is a relation of correspondence between the seriousness of the mistake and its didactic potential. We learn more from serious mistakes than from relative innocent ones. In a splendid passage Sloterdijk points out that the consequences of this catastrophe-didactic became clear to him in 1979 when the nuclear reactor in Harrisburg held the western world (and perhaps even more parts of it) in its ominous grip. At the times there was, at least in Europe, a "sly sort of sympathy" for the explosive potential in the reactor, as if the deadly radiation not only was to be interpreted from the physicist's point of view, but also from the cultural critic's. Some people immediately grasped the attractiveness of the idea that a critical message deserved to be elicited from the deadly powers inside the reactor. What better medium for this message than a real catastrophe? Sloterdijk infers from this that ...

"... the choice in favour of the explosion was according to its underlying logic nothing else than a pedagogic hypothesis concerning the didactic and mentality-changing power of a catastrophe that would actually happen ... Whoever puts all his hopes in learning by catastrophe, expects the explosion to bring light in the darkness of our minds." (1991: 89, 100)

In some sections of management theory the catastrophe is increasingly seen as a rather sympathetic phenomenon which seduces people (who survived it) to exclaim: "This should never happen again!" The problem is, of course, that you are only able to exclaim this after the event. But this does not make the catastrophe unacceptable, neither within mobilised modern society nor within its kinetic utopias. Constant change that is the hallmark of modern society in general and learning organisations in particular assumes, as I argued earlier, a willingness to question and change accepted knowledge and received wisdom. But why would we want to change our knowledge and wisdom if everything is going well? Why should you grope for unknown solutions if the existent ones prove to be fine?

Well, you should accept on beforehand that all knowledge and wisdom will sooner or later, in the light of new circumstances, become obsolete. In order to bring about serious change, in other words, you must be willing to have your knowledge and wisdom, so to speak, dashed against the rocks whenever this is called for (and it nearly always is). Nothing, however, seems to be more suitable for groundbreaking change than a full-blooded catastrophe that, under particular circumstances, might even be induced. Afterwards, you should be able to perversely enjoy the disastrous events by pointing out to your friends or employees that you foresaw the problems and were, apart from some minor details, right all along.

The idea that a catastrophe might change attitudes and mentalities is widely regarded as intuitively acceptable. In the autobiographies of renowned business people or in interviews with them we nearly always encounter passages in which a more or less personal catastrophe is being described at length. The message in these passages is that the simple mortal who is the reader will not go far in the world if she is spared some kind of catastrophe. Indeed, it is the catastrophe that makes you truly distinctive:

"Another maverick asset that current management structures do little to instil is the experience of failure. Welch was first noticed at General Electric in the 1960s because he ran a plastics plant that blew up. As a young entrepreneur, Richard Branson spent a night in a police cell after smuggling records into Britain from France. Rupert Murdoch nearly went bust on several occasions at the beginnings of the 1990s." (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996: 194)

The learning organisation adopts the catastrophe as a constructive experiment which therefore should be treated with leniency and tolerance. After all, learning is ruled out without failure. And nothing seems to be more true than the old adage '*errare humanum est*'. As the catholic Church already came to believe long ago, people who do not make mistakes are otherworldly, superhuman, and therefore extremely dangerous for the powers that be. This is why people like Jack Welch keep insisting that employees without mistakes will be sacked. Perfection is to be sanctioned.

But is the didactic potential of catastrophe and failure as high as is believed by the defenders of the learning organisation? Sloterdijk suggests that the pedagogic assumptions underlying the catastrophe-didactic may very well be overly optimistic. This becomes clear as soon as we ask ourselves under which circumstances such a didactic will prove to be efficient. It is difficult to simultaneously meet the following three criteria for learning by catastrophe:

1. *Only few people should be involved with the failure or catastrophe.* Multitude and complexity scatter personal responsibilities. The problem is that important decisions, including those which prove to have disastrous consequences, are rarely made by a few persons, let alone by an individual. The involvement of many people with, say, a political decision – advisors, officials, employees, managers, politicians, and so on – makes it difficult to put responsibilities on a precise location. If outsiders are not able to clearly lay the blame for a catastrophe on a particular person or on a small, clearly circumscribed group, they will be condemned to practise forgiveness. Those who are responsible will think twice before admitting that they are to blame. It is even worse, they will very likely not even understand that they are to blame. When everybody forgives you, you will likely end up forgiving yourself. See what Maurice Punch (1996: 211-212) writes on what in Holland became known as the RSV-affair: "Almost a whole generation of politicians appeared before [a public inquiry] and it looked as if somewhere along the line just about all the big names contributed somehow to the debacle ... And perhaps that was the key to the scandal. Everyone was involved; there was no one murderer who killed the company, so everyone had to be absolved from final blame. Too much political face was at stake to make heads roll and therefore, all the players lined up for their penitential performance before the cameras. But having satisfied Calvinistic decorum, they went back to politics – and turned to business as usual."

2. *People may not have succumbed to error fatalism.* People do not really learn from mistakes if they think that failure is simply inevitable in the great march towards the perfect and happy organisation. Although the learning organisation, being a kinetic utopia, does not believe in perfection and happiness, it tends to view failure exactly in this way. It is a by-product of otherwise indisputable progress. This insight causes the leniency towards failure and catastrophe. Ultimately, failure disappears as such and will be seen as a necessary step towards something better, a step to be proud of but not a step from which to learn. Learning implies, as the old Greeks knew, *humility*. And such humility is painfully absent in interviews and autobiographies of entrepreneurs who boast about catastrophes they have caused as if they are proud of their blunders. For those, however, who did not have the privilege of causing a catastrophe and may have been seriously touched by the small mistakes they may have made, in short, for all those who were not allowed to enjoy the luxury of hegemonic disorganisation in which failure is nothing else than an inconsequential event – failure remains a threat that should be avoided. As long as they have not yet been contaminated by gleeful fatalists who merely indulge in failure because they know they can survive it, success or non-failure will prove to be much more decisive learning moments in the lives of many people.
3. *The catastrophe should stretch out to a personal realm.* Two propositions to start with: a) if you are not personally affected by the catastrophe, you will unlikely learn from it; b) if you are unable to point to a person who is closely related to whatever may have caused the catastrophe, it is unlikely that a learning effect will occur. The origins of the pain caused by the catastrophe should be locatable, either in yourself after which you can put on your hair shirt, or in another person who then can be pilloried by the incensed masses. In either case, the involved persons have the duty to make clear not only that it will not happen again but also how future catastrophes should be prevented. This presupposes that the catastrophe will be provided with a subject: "It is, however, crucially important to understand even the worst catastrophe in context of personal action. The catastrophe as event does not have the same grammar as the catastrophe as act. About the former we claim: it has happened, it happened to us; about the second: somebody did it, somebody has let things get this far. It only makes sense to understand the catastrophe as a stimulus for self-critical different learning when the catastrophe has a subject (you may also say: a guilty person)." (Sloterdijk, 1991: 97) The Japanese pilot Senge is writing about is an exception to the rule. The subject of the catastrophe is nearly always invisible for one of the following three reasons. First, there are often so many people involved with the events that lead up to the catastrophe that almost everybody prefers forgiveness (which will, as we have seen, be likely granted when many people are involved) to the lessons that might be drawn from the events. Second, a catastrophe does hardly ever strike you; most of the times other people are involved. This, of course, undermines any learning effect whatsoever. As soon as we argue that terrible events such as the Dutroux-affair in Belgium or the Oklahoma bombing in the US are very unlikely to happen to us and that elsewhere things are by definition worse than in our neighbourhood, we have all the reasons in the world to fear the future. Finally, the lessons that might be drawn from the catastrophe are generally subordinated to organisational conditions and procedures. That is, somebody who is really willing to learn from a catastrophe is displaying emotions – fear, shame, anger, embarrassment – that are unwelcome in the

organisation because they are a greater danger to the very existence of the organisation than the catastrophe itself. Thus, emotions have to be channelled into rules and procedures. Sometimes, however, particularly in the kinetic utopia of the learning organisation, they are converted into emotions that *are* welcome in organisations: positive thinking, solidarity, a certain indifference, loyalty, reticence, and so on. But even then, emotions are subordinated to the bureaucratic routine.

In sum, people do not learn as quickly from the catastrophe as the defenders of the learning organisation claim they do. There are many mechanisms that will try to undo the didactic effects of the catastrophe. The only catastrophe that would convince us all, Sloterdijk writes, is the catastrophe that nobody survives. But then it is, of course, much too late to learn anything at all.

Concluding remarks

I have exploited Sloterdijk's idea of the kinetic utopia to express my doubts about the learning organisation. Not only is it a concept which uncritically embraces modern dynamics and thus refuses to think about a more intelligent kind of movement, but it can also be related to such notions as *Weltfremdheit* or escapism. This became especially evident in my discussion about what I called hegemonic disorganisation, which is arguably based on the principle of the desert which states that self can be developed without any reference to the obtrusive world. The microcosm, a place to which only those who are in charge have access, is a place where an open understanding of the world is ruled out. The kinetic utopia distorts our understandings of the world, of learning processes, and of morality in order to meet the formal and informal requirements of organisation. This becomes particularly evident in what I have called catastrophe-didactic.

The defender of catastrophe-didactic argues that a learning process necessarily implies a transition from one reality to the other. Such a transition is only possible if people are willing to face the mistakes and deficiencies of current reality. Moreover, they should convince themselves that the mistakes and deficiencies of the new reality will not be worse than those of the old reality. It might be argued that this is, if anything, the *raison d'être* of movement and change: in the new situation there are less or less serious deficiencies than in the old one. If this is not the case, then the point of change seems to be beyond intelligibility.

Accepting the validity of catastrophe-didactic, implies, I suggest, a fundamental paradox: if successful change leads to less or less serious mistakes, it will, inevitably undermine further capacity for learning and change. This is at least what the defender of catastrophe-didactic must hold. After all, she takes the position that people learn more from the mistakes they make than, say, from their or somebody else's successes. She must then hold the following to be true: if our efforts to bring about change have been successful, our fear to make new mistakes will increase. This explains the tendency to channel (or bureaucratised) uncertainties and anxieties, because this is, as far as I can see, the only way to cling to whatever may have brought us success. That is, success will always deteriorate into recipe; the way to bureaucracy lies always open. It is very difficult to see how this can be avoided by the learning organisation. People simply will not always

try to escape from the now. Somewhere in the present they will wish to anchor the secrets of success.

It is often thought, not only by practitioners, that success can be achieved by abandoning bureaucracy. This might be the case, but the point I am making here is that each success is inevitably an invitation for the bureaucrat that resides in all of us. It is very difficult for most people to suppress their desire to copy successes they have made. As Schwartz (1996: 139) has pointed out, we tend to develop a "mechanical fidelity", identified by him not as new élan but as "coldness of the heart", that makes us willing to identify with success. In the kinetic utopia, each success is the most serious obstacle to further success. This is exactly why modern dynamics must, at some point, come to a standstill. It often proves too difficult not to copy success. As a consequence most of us will have the proclivity to cherish what has been achieved up to the point that the improved situation itself will become a straitjacket. This becomes most apparent in the persistent will of those who were responsible for the successful changes in the past to initiate further changes in the future. We are thus left with a very tricky paradox: according to catastrophe-didactic, there is an inverse relationship between success and the capacity for learning. So, the dismal point to be inferred from this is that success will ultimately prove to be failure. According to the catastrophe-didactic, which is, I have argued, inextricably bound up with modern culture, from catholic church to learning organisation, nothing can ever change for the better.

But such a dismal conclusion assumes the validity of catastrophe-didactic. I have tried to show that people have many reasons not to learn from the mistakes they make. Very often indeed, they are not willing to improve the deficiencies of current reality, for example because they have an important stake in it, or because they have contributed to it. They will point out that each change implies unacceptable risks, because it can never be guaranteed on beforehand that the new reality will indeed be an improvement. This is a position that might be caused by fear, self-interest and other vile motives. However, it might also indicate a more postmodern position that invokes the wisdom of a stability, the wisdom of stuckness, or the wisdom of Pascal who wanted people to stay where they are.

The postmodernist (in Sloterdijk's sense of the word) points out that the unbridled will to change or move, as it is characteristic of the kinetic utopia, is not necessarily a good that we should share. It all too often is simply a leap into the absurd, a leap about the consequences of which we generally no near to nothing, a leap that may therefore be fearsome and dangerous. The postmodernist emphasises the absurdity of such changes where the modernist emphasises their rationality. More to the point, insofar as people under modern conditions will always change, the postmodernist accepts absurdity as a basic modern condition. People under modern conditions will, according to him or her, always leap into uncertainties, not because they are seriously and rationally willing to learn from the mistakes they have made and the catastrophes they have caused, *but because they have come to bear a grudge against their world.*⁴ The discontent about the present and about the self that pervade modernity are the learning organisation's finest opportunities.

On the other hand, we should keep in mind that the ideas presented in this chapter are in a sense very attractive. The wish to learn something different, to change yourself, and to see the big picture is far from reprehensible. John Holt, one of De Geus's most important

sources of inspiration, wrote long ago about learning processes in American Schools:

"[The student] learns that to be wrong, uncertain, confused, is a crime. Right Answers are what the school wants, and he learns ... countless strategies for prying these answers out of the teacher, for conning her into thinking he knows what she does not know. He learns to dodge, bluff, fake, cheat ... What the children really learn is ... to keep out of trouble, and get other people in ... mean-spirited competition against other children ... that every man is a natural enemy of every other man." (cited in: Michael, 1996: 152).

Idealism also seems to inspire the literature on the learning organization. It is important to point out that, although we do not need to share Senge's optimism about business leaders and organizations, he is, wittingly or not, building on a respectable tradition. Already in the 1930s, the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey was raising issues which would much later be recognized as important in the literature on learning (in) organizations. Dewey sincerely believed that business organizations could become much more edifying than the schools Holt writes about (Weaver, 1997: 38-41; Rorty, 1980: 369-372). More particularly, he believed that business organizations would ultimately be able to replace the Enlightenment view of the individual as a wholly autonomous person by a post-Enlightenment view of the individual as constructed in and by the community. To be sure, the latter is a free person, but s/he understands that his or her fate is in the end tied up with the fate of the community to which s/he belongs.

Companies, says Dewey, can play a decisive role in this. Indeed, they could resolve the problem of loneliness and isolation which burdens those parts of mankind that have been enlightened. And this brings us back, once more, to the notion of togetherness. Business organizations allow for a form of togetherness, Dewey believes, which engenders a sense for continuity (rather than episodic discontinuity) and community spirit (rather than egoism). So, business organizations can become places where people are learning to behave as good citizens, where there will always be room for the exceptional or the excluded, where truths are never taken as absolutes but always embedded in an appropriate context, and, finally, where edification and transformation rather than material enrichment is aspired at (Rorty, 1980: 359, 360, 379). I am sure that Senge and De Geus would endorse this pragmatic agenda for business organizations. But should we?

As Weaver (1997: 44) has pointed out, Dewey shares with Foucault the idea that organizations can truly change people. Both do not believe in the autonomous human being who stands opposed to and indeed is immune to his or her environment. People are susceptible to what happens in their environment and thus in their organization. But where this susceptibility is a source of inspiration for people like Dewey, it seems to be a source of despair for Foucault who fears that the human being will in the end be trampled underfoot by what he can only see as an outburst of sometimes extreme but oftentimes quite subtle forms of violence. With the exception of people like Michael (1996), who thinks that there is not much hope for business organizations, most defenders of the learning organization do not share Foucault's pessimism. Weaver (1997) may be right when he suggests that such differences of opinion are related not so much to theoretical conflict as to diverging states of minds.

Perhaps, Nietzsche was right when he wrote, a long time ago, that conflicts about even

the most abstract issues can always be traced back to the mood of the day. Is it possible that I was merely in a rotten temper while I wrote this chapter?

Notes

- 1 The expression 'those who have the power to act' stems from De Geus (1988a). The Dutch translation (De Geus, 1988) of this expression is 'zij die het voor het zeggen hebben', which is what Dutch people say when they want to refer to 'those who are in charge'. (It literally means 'those who have a say for it', which suggests that the English version of De Geus's text is more concerned with action whereas the Dutch version stresses talking.) Also from the context it is clear that De Geus thinks that those who have the power to act are not too far away from the boardroom.
- 2 According to Sloterdijk such intelligent movement should simultaneously meet five criteria (1991: 275):
 - Context: the ability of the self to know what happens in the outside world
 - Self-perception: the ability of the self to know about his own situation
 - Self-limitation: the ability to recognise limitation of the self
 - Reversibility: the ability to create a manoeuvring space that allows the self to go, if necessary, backwards or forwards
 - Spontaneity: the ability of the self to amaze oneself and to make a new start (rather than continuing what needs to be completed at all costs).
- 3 That hierarchy is not subverted or eliminated is also evident when we take a quick glance at the other values endorsed by Hanover. 'Localness' means "no decision should ever be made higher up than is absolutely necessary" (Senge, 1990: 401). In the traditional organisation 'localness' means, if we are to believe one of Hanover's managers, "doing the dirty stuff that the boss doesn't want to do" (1990: 184). My problem with this is that I don't see any incompatibility between the traditional and the updated meaning of 'localness'. The fourth and last value in Hanover is "leanness". It means "continually increasing the capacity to produce more, higher quality results with less resources" (1990: 401). This language at least suggests familiarity with a classic managerial and bureaucratic obsession. Efficiency is, after all, the real stuff. No utopia and idyll involved here, merely indifference and adaptation. Senge therefore puts it away in a conspicuously inconspicuous note.
- 4 The grudge against the world, or against the self, is nowhere more clear than in the widespread use of anti-depressants such as Prozac. Millions of people - there are about 17.000.000 users, including 400.000 children, in the US - use such drugs to become, perhaps against all odds, happy. Yet, we know near to nothing about how they work and about possible side-effects. (See for an extensive and personal discussion on Prozac: Kingwell, 1998: 97-104). People simply accept the leap into the absurd in order to escape the dismal here and now. More on legal and illegal drugs can be found in Sloterdijk, 1993, Chapter 4. Sloterdijk points out that many non-western cultures have used these 'means of transport' in order to get closer contact to reality. In western cultures, however, legal and illegal means of transport are used to escape from it. This might explain why in western cultures drugs and addiction have entered into a symbiotic relationship.

6 Real work, friendship, and forgetfulness

During the 1990s, a specter haunted many of our organizations. It is now slowly fading away. It may, however, also appear under different guises. No one knows exactly, but such are the little ways of spectra. Anyhow, it became known under the name of Business Process Redesign. Other names, however, will do as well: Reengineering or Process Innovation (Davenport, 1992) have also been very popular. All names have clear technological connotations. BPR, as I will call it, denotes a world where engineers, computer experts and logistical managers feel at home and conspire to make the lay world a better place. In this chapter, I am interested in the cultural context of BPR. More precisely, I hope to show that technological utopianism cannot be isolated from a broader cultural context. Technology influences culture and culture influences technology.

Pathos, rhetoric, and gospel

The best known and most popular definition of the phenomenon goes like this:

“[Business Process Redesign] is the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service, and speed.” (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 32)

Let's start with a rough sketch intended to capture the oftentimes contradictory atmosphere of this world. The texts are full with revolutionary pathos. The classical text (Hammer & Champy, 1993) is presented as nothing less than a “manifesto for a business revolution”. BPR is assumed to have *fundamental*, *radical*, and *dramatic* consequences. Its defenders argue that it is about nothing less than a revolution in the way we think about organizations. At last we are able to heave a sigh of relief as we can throw off the age-old yoke of labor division and replace it by an overall orientation on business processes. The contention is that this ‘new’ process-orientation leads to incredible improvements: low costs, high quality, excellent service and, in line with the dogmas of the learning organization, astonishing speed.

However, right from the beginning BPR has been criticized for failing to keep up its promise. Even Michael Hammer has admitted that 50% to 70% of all BPR efforts fail (Hammer & Stanton, 1995). Other gurus (Ballé, 1995; Obeng & Crainer, 1996) also acknowledge serious problems with implementation. Problems are diverse: human nature simply does not comply with such a technologically and numerically driven approach like BPR; BPR projects tend to be fairly expensive (Willmott, 1994); BPR is invariably presented as if it can be done in isolation of the social and cultural context (Grint, 1995), and so on. Nevertheless, such difficulties generally do not affect the basic idea of process-thinking. Indeed, practical problems merely serve to glorify the central idea which is, needless to say, often poorly understood by practitioners or merely halfheartedly implemented. We have warned you against these type of problems. Yet, the idea is excellent; the problem resides in implementation. It is the same old story, but carried to extremes.

The new way of thinking cannot easily adjust to doubt, let alone disagreement. Indeed, dissenters who are not aroused by the utopian promises of BPR are tiresome spoilsports who "ought to be shot" (Kalgard, 1993: 71). Hard-baked revolutionaries cannot tolerate forces that impede the pace of change. Violence is, according to long-standing utopian tradition, perfectly acceptable. There is no place here for the "incrementalist orthodoxy that has prevailed for thirty years" (Grint, 1995: 109). And why should we be 'incremental' about this in the first place? BPR is nothing less than a rediscovery of the old American way of doing business. So, what is new and revolutionary is in fact not so new and revolutionary at all. Once more, conservative anti-Japanese sentiments prevail. Japan is the big foe. See how the president of a redesigning company puts it:

"I was in Japan a couple of months ago for the first time in many years. It's perfectly clear while you're there why the Japanese are such a competitive force: That whole country is focused. They know they are in an economic battle that they intend to win. They have a homogeneous society all marching to the same drummer. Everybody you talk to over there knows what their company and their country are about. They are aligned, and it's a powerful force." (quoted in: Hammer & Champy, 1993: 169)

The Japanese have already realized their utopia. They all march to the same drummer. Good for their business. Perhaps also for ours. After all, dissenters are to be shot. But not really. We should not become like them. We, Americans, do not need to 'copy our way back' to economical domination (Grint, 1997: 45). We are not at all like the Japanese. On the contrary, BPR ...

"... capitalizes on the same characteristics that have traditionally made Americans such great business innovators: individualism, self-reliance, a willingness to accept risk, and a propensity for change ... it takes advantage of American talents and unleashes American ingenuity." (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 3)

The overall message is that if you do not like this, you are in fact against America and what it stands for. This cultural context is of overriding importance and has always overshadowed economical concerns. It helps to immunize BPR against empirical and conceptual doubt. Other immunization techniques are in operation as well. BPR is slippery and ambiguous. This allows the Guru and the Consultant to continually reshape the meaning of it merely to go along with customer wishes. This is especially important as a way of coping with critique from practitioners. They hardly seem to believe in the miracles BPR (or any other fashion) is sometimes supposed to deliver and tend to adopt a fairly realistic attitude towards it (Grint, 1997: 32). It might be concluded from this that fashions such as BPR ...

"... may be less harmful than is often suggested, and that the need for debunking is limited ... [T]he average user of a fashion may have more of a down-to-earth and critical pragmatic attitude than the naive consumer of the prevalent management rhetoric." (Benders, van den Berg, and van Bijsterveld, 1998: 213)

Thank goodness, one is tempted to say. The authors are right. Management fashions such

as BPR may not strongly affect economical performance. They become fashionable because they appeal to the soul of The Manager and the Consultant, that is to say, they somehow belong to a ideological, cultural and historical framework practitioners recognize and approve of. *I am suspicious of fashions when they pretend to deliver more than soul engineering or even to be different than soul engineering. This is, I suggest, when utopianism starts to creep into fashion.* This is when the economic bottom-line is hallowed once again.

This is also what happens when you start to argue, for example, that the American way of life is not merely providing one identity or culture among many and as such something which we should ponder on, but simply the best culture imaginable for economical performance. And if you seriously start to believe this, you may actually dispense with culture altogether and dismiss it as utterly irrelevant. You will decontextualize your ideas and argue that they are universally applicable. Once a fashion follower, you will have become a utopian who hates fads and fashion. You will not understand anymore that the revolutionary pathos, the absence of even the slightest of doubts, the unfair critique of traditional work methods, and the vehemence with which you denounce "the management fads of the last twenty years" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 25) are rubbing many people the wrong way. You will have learned to sing the holy gospel:

"Redesign is good. Redesign is a must. In our practice we notice that many organizations, whether or not without considerable help, go through a terrific learning process if they strike out upon the path of redesign. In most cases an organization will emerge that performs better and extracts more energy from its people." (Batelaan, 1993, p. 89; *my translation*)

You will, as Batelaan does, warn your readers, fully in line with the anti-fad rhetoric Hammer and Champy employ, not to put their trust in consultants. You will claim that success of organizational change programs depends on the organization and not on the fashion-following consultant. And without batting an eyelid you will suggest that there are at least some consultants who have been able to escape fashion and who are genuinely able to guide the organization through the process of change. Such consultants are revolutionaries, individualists, risk-takers, and adventurers. You will be grateful to belong to them.

In this chapter, I will first enter into the very idea of BPR, arguing that it should be related to developments in the world of logistics. This is the technical part of the chapter. In the second section I will briefly review the standard criticism of BPR. In the last section, I will discuss three notions which are often employed in texts on BPR and yet ignored in much of the criticism targeted towards it: real work, forgetfulness, and friendship. I will argue that these utopian notions play crucial roles in what might be seen as the cultural side of BPR.

You are what you eat

In one of his few unpretentious moods, Michael Hammer (1990) has contended that he

did not invent BPR, but merely coined a catching name for a trend that was taking place in some "remarkably successful" organizations. What do they know what other organizations do not seem to know?

Abandoning structure

These organizations have learned that the first and perhaps most important thing on the way to success is abandoning the functional structure of the organization. A long time ago, Adam Smith taught us that the function or the task is the ultimate core of work organizations. The managerial challenge in these organizations is coordinating the diversity of functions and tasks that need to be carried out. This coordination task is precisely what BPR wants us to reconsider, since the performance of this task is not regarded as *real work*. Coordinators, it is argued, only take care that specific portions of real work, always carried out by others, are put together. In this sense, they simply represent costs to the organization since they do not add any value. Adding value is, as we will see later in this chapter, by definition the prerogative of real workers.

But how can an organization avoid coordination? After all, if one leaves all the real workers to fend for themselves, control problems will become paramount. If one takes away the glue that has been applied between the tasks, it might be argued that the organization will become liable to fragmentation, chaos, and anarchy, the three arch-enemies of rational management. The dilemma can thus be formulated as follows: in face of the huge costs of coordination organizations should get rid of it if they are to stay competitive, but such a clearance inevitably causes serious control problems. BPR's solution to the problem is deceptively simple: "horizontal compression" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 51-53). Employees should not only carry out their tasks but also coordinate them. If this can be achieved, coordinators will become redundant and the organizational hierarchy will be compressed. According to the defenders of BPR, the advantage of horizontal compression is that you will keep coordination problems at bay. The "case worker" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 52) will develop an insight in the total process that should be carried out by the organization.

Process orientation

The second trend signaled by Hammer is that successful organizations seem to adopt a *process* orientation. A process is defined as "a collection of activities that takes one or more inputs and creates an output that is of value to the customer" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 35). Adopting this allegedly new orientation implies nothing less than a paradigm shift: task focus is, it is argued, replaced by process focus. In consultancy jargon the shift is from vertical and functional structures to horizontal work flows (Van der Linden, Van der Meer & Raaijmakers, 1993); and in academic jargon the shift is from differentiation to de-differentiation (Willmott, 1994) or, to use a really fashionable word, *integration*. This word has gained an almost mystical status in the world of managers. Integration is the panacea for organizations that want to become *customer friendly*. What the protagonists of BPR have in mind is a fully integrated process which is 'pulled' by the customer who appears as the moral figurehead of employees in the organization.

But where exactly is customer friendliness to be gained? If the entire working process in the organization has become the responsibility of a minimal number of 'case workers', the organization has in effect removed many obstacles to optimal and speedy service. These obstacles are, of course, the inevitable side-effect of functional structures in

which an employee who carries out task 1 'pushes' the result of her work to the next employee who has to carry out task 2; ultimately, *some* result is handed over to the customer by the tenth employee. The problem, of course, is that employees who carry out task 1, 2 and 3 are miles away from the customer and only work for their immediate boss, workmates, and not unlikely also for their own good. The customer disappears behind the horizon of the employee's department. So, the third aspect of the trend observed by Hammer is that customers should be brought, no matter what it takes, within the range of each employee. Since the customer is the most important receiving end of organizational action, customer focus or customer friendliness is a condition *sine qua non* for true competitiveness.

Interestingly, the metaphors of 'push' and 'pull' are well-known in the world of production/operations management. The difference between 'push' and 'pull' might be seen as a difference between operations systems that are "resource driven" and those that are "customer driven" (Harvey, 1989: 177-183.) The classic (modern) example of a resource-driven operations system is Fordism where portions of work are pushed from one processing stage to the other (Alders, 1993). If we are to believe people like Harvey and Alders, we are now witnessing a transition from Fordist systems to (postmodern) Kanban-systems "where components of end products are only manufactured if the next stage (that is to say, the 'customer') needs them" (Alders, 1993). This fundamental customer orientation enables the organization to prevent inventory accumulation. In Fordism, on the other hand, the capacity of each processing stage (and not the needs of the internal or external customer) determines the quantities that are produced. Inventories are necessary in the Fordist system in order to smooth out unbalances in the production process. The price to be paid for this is, of course, that they are as expensive as coordinators whose main reason for being is to smooth out unbalances in the administrative process.

The ideas behind concepts such as Kanban are very similar to those that drive BPR. The advocates of BPR simply adopt well-known logistic principles and impose them on administrative procedures within organizations. The popularity of BPR during the early 1990s is symptomatic for the trust that organizations put in technocratic solutions, even though many problems are not of a technical nature. The trust organizations put in technocracy might, indeed, be seen as the fourth aspect of the trend signaled by Hammer. After a decade in which culture was the main target of organizational change, we are back to technocratic basics. One glance at the different backgrounds of BPR-protagonists is enough. Almost without any exception, writers on the topic are computer engineers or information specialists: Hammer and Champy (1993), Huff (1993), Rai and Paper (1992) are but a few examples. There are only few people with a non-technical backgrounds who publish about BPR. If there are publications written by non-specialists (Willmott, 1994; Grint, 1995) they will very likely not be read by IT-specialists and managers, which again exemplifies the alienation problem I referred to earlier. Serious discussion is anathema under such circumstances.

Diet

Hammer claims that many organizations simply do not know how to utilize IT. Having invested heavily in IT during the 1980s, they were nonetheless unable to fundamentally change work processes. In many organization, Hammer argues, IT merely speeded up the existing work process. It hardly ever led to a profound rethinking of this working process,

in Hammer's view a missed opportunity with detrimental consequences. Merely speeding up the working process has only tempted members of organizations to store massive amounts of redundant information. This is an interesting point, because it criticizes people's relationship to IT in bureaucratic settings.

Hammer argues that in such settings the information system looks like a collection of disconnected tubes. Due to the greatly enhanced information processing capacity of IT, each tube is inevitably going to be jam-packed with information nobody is waiting for or with information that has already been stored elsewhere in the system. So the advantages that might be the consequences of speeding up the information process is virtually eliminated by a redundant viscosity in each tube. Note here the parallels with Fordist logistics where the entire processes might stagnate due to overproduction at one particular work station. Systems that are used within organizations are just like people: when they eat too much, the blood in their vessels will inevitably clog.

Hammer recommends a strict diet. Paradoxically, the weapon that might cut away the fat is IT or rather a better understanding of its possibilities. More particularly, IT might be the weapon to render functional structures superfluous. Adam Smith still taught us that such structures were indispensable and, indeed, we have to grant him that without structure one could hardly speak of organization. We have long thought that we had no option but to take the structural paradox of differentiation (the division of labor) and integration (task coordination) for granted. This might indeed have become something of a managerial intuition. BPR seems to be counterintuitive in the sense that it urges managers to dispense with structure altogether (Huff, 1992), something which is conceivable if one is no longer willing to make the unwholesome distinction between execution and communication. Aided by IT, employees themselves are now expected to coordinate the tasks they are carrying out (Hammer, 1990: 111).

This allows us to identify a fifth aspect of the trend Hammer observes: a dawning awareness of the possibilities IT offers. IT enables organizations to redesign processes in such a way that the individual *case worker* is enabled to carry out and coordinate tasks formerly divided between inadequately coordinated employees. Admittedly, not everything can be carried out by one individual. Yet, the organization might resort to so-called '*case teams*' in order to circumvent this problem. The members of these team enjoy, without a single exception, the benefits of real-time connection to the central computer system which can best be seen as a collective brain that replaces the members' individual brains. As Willmott (1994) has argued, a case-team is expected to perform as if it were a virtual individual.

In sum, BPR is described as a trend – not merely a fad or a fashion – that can be characterized as follows:

1. organizations try to get rid of the functional and vertical straitjacket inherent to their structures
2. organizations focus their attention to processes
3. organizations canonize the customer in the sense that employees are encouraged to interpret the customer as their boss and employer
4. organization increasingly suspect 'soft' options for fundamental change and put their faith in technocratic solutions
5. organizations discover the unknown possibilities of IT

Portuguese man-of-war

One problem for our understanding of BPR is, as I argued above, the ambiguity of the concept itself. McHugh, Merli and Wheeler III (1995: 14), three consultants who work for Coopers & Lybrand, have argued that there are at least three BPR-versions. The first one stands for several cost-cutting and efficiency measures; catchwords are divestment, delayering and downsizing. The second one refers to ways in which the organization might try to achieve "best practice status in one or more core business processes"; the idea here is simply to outwit the competitor in one or more areas. Finally, the third version of BPR not only subscribes to aforementioned ideas of cost-cutting and best practice, but also claims to create new markets and to "re-invent the industry". McHugh and his colleagues dub this version of BPR "BreakPoint Business Process Reengineering" which aims to link innovation to unrivaled customer orientation.

The BreakPoint version, it might be argued, takes BPR to its extreme: a holy war is declared on each form of differentiation. Superior customer orientation implies that the organization ceases to exist as an isolated entity. McHugh *et al.* extol the idea of "holonic" networks in which organizations co-operate in an organic way in order to take optimum advantage of the possibilities embodied by the customer. They emphasize that such holonic networks should be seen as the logical sequel to what used to be BPR. Within these networks, each form of differentiation is canceled: borders between several departments and, indeed, borders between organization and what is not organization have evaporated. IT, of course, comes to the fore as the big evaporator; it even cancels all geographic differences. 'Holons' are all that is left in a re-engineered society: small, flexible and impermanent entities created by a few people to accommodate customer wishes. Once there is no need anymore for such a holon, it will immediately cease to exist. Its members will once again be absorbed by the network of which the holon was a part.

The idea behind ever-changing holonic networks is that they can adopt whatever form is necessary in order to cope with a new situation. Here pops up another instance of the kinetic utopia discussed in the previous chapter: the Portuguese man-of-war (*Physalia*), described by McHugh, Merli and Wheeler (1995: 80, 82) as a model for a holonic business system:

"The Portuguese man-of-war is a distant cousin of the jellyfish. It got its name because it looks like an old Portuguese warship. A man-of-war is really a colony of hundreds of animals, called hydrozoans, joined under a sort of balloon that keeps them afloat. The tentacles can be several meters long. They trail through the water as the main float is blown along by the wind. The man-of-war's tentacles carry very painful and dangerous stings."

Aggressive and compelling, isn't it? What a single hydrozoan is to the man-of-war is the holon to the network of which it is a part. The consultants of Coopers & Lybrand discuss the image of the man-of-war at length: the customer is a fish trapped in the tentacles of the holonic network which is constantly reconfiguring itself. And again, good old Adam Smith seems to have it all wrong with his insistence on the functional division of labor:

"The holonic network, by definition, is process based and lives by business process logic. The Portuguese man-of-war reacts to the capture of a fish or to the strength of

the wind, and not to the activity of a single holon. The analogy for commercial holonic networks is that managers have to learn to manage by processes and not by functions. The holonic network distributes management processes among its participating holons. Not only is there no hierarchy and only minimal management overhead in the holonic network, but this is mirrored in each holon." (1995: 82)

Once holons (hydrozoans) become unable to transform themselves such as to engender total customer satisfaction (catch enough fish) they will be 'rejected' by the network ('colony') of which they were a part. The customer is supposed to determine the actual size and form of the network. That is, she is no longer seen as a passive consumer, but as a "prosumer" (1995: 37) who is actively engaged in the design of the product or service. Note the moral implications: if a particular product or service does not prove satisfactory to her, she is, being a part of the network, herself responsible as well. After all, the prosumer is expected to shape the network in such a way that the processes within it can help to satisfy her needs. The customer should become a part of the network, or to invoke a meanwhile familiar analogy, the network should *eat* the customer in order to become like the customer. This brings the quest for oneness which drives BPR to its logical conclusion: you are what you eat.

Debunking BPR

Although Benders *et al.* (1998) have argued, as we have seen, that the need to debunk BPR is rather limited because the Manager is not a cultural dope who mindlessly copies what the Guru and the Consultant proscribe and perhaps also because BPR is somewhat on the decline, criticism of BPR has been and is still extremely severe, both from consultants and academics (e.g. Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Willmott, 1994). Many people seem to fear the consequences that the fashion of BPR seems to entail. Elsewhere (ten Bos, 1997a) I have tried to capture the critique in ten points which I am going to discuss here as well.

BPR is not strategic

This is clearly the critique from other gurus and consultants. They argue that there is at best some casual attention for *strategic* issues since BPR is by its very nature focused on the operational realm. McHugh *et al.* (1995: 67-8, 185), for example, discuss the necessity to replace strategic planning with strategic thinking, but their ideas are utterly superficial and very reminiscent of similar ideas proposed by Hamel and Prahalad (1994) or Mintzberg (1994), which is typical for the bulk of BPR-literature and practices. Strategy might be too intellectually demanding. The point of these gurus and consultant seems to be reasonable enough. It is difficult to see how such an operations-driven approach as BPR should contribute to the creation of new markets or to what Miles and Snow (1978) have called "prospector- strategies". If BPR suits a particular type of strategy at all, then it is a defensive one which is based on cost avoidance and high efficiency and which may be particularly useful in declining markets (Walker & Rueckert, 1987). BPR is not attractive for organizations who pursue growth strategies. Operational approaches do not seek to create new markets or products. They merely wish to enhance employee productivity.

This point is well captured by management guru Gary Hamel (1994). He mocks the idea of productivity improvement by pointing out that British workers are among the most productive in the world but that this is nowhere reflected in terms of market share:

“Going through the same retrenchment wringer, ridding themselves of unneeded management layers, outmoded work rules and cumbersome bureaucracies, few of these firms are managing to grow in real terms. With a static revenue line, these firms are losing relative share in world markets. Yet, if the typical approach to restructuring, with its dominator focus, grants productivity gains only at the expense of global market share, efficiency programs may do as much harm as good.” (Hamel, 1994: 71)

One does not necessarily have to agree with Hamel’s own upbeat ideas about unrestricted globalization, economic growth and competitiveness in order to appreciate his challenge to managers:

“Slimming down the work-force and cutting back on investment is inherently less intellectually demanding for top management than discovering ways to grow output on a static or only slowly growing resource base. Cutting the buck is easier than expanding the bang; thus the preference of the former over the latter.” (Hamel, 1994: 71)

The real problem of many western companies is not their lack of productivity but their persistent belief that productivity is the single most important key to long term success.

BPR presupposes the ‘infinite malleability’ (Willmott, 1994) of employees

Once I received a glimpse of a case-worker. He played a role in an information film produced by a well-known Dutch insurance company. The case-worker had his headphones on and a small microphone constantly threatened to jump into his mouth. With wires he was connected to the advanced computer that was placed right in front of him on a very tidy bureau. He was the archetypal *cyborg*, a “connectionist self” fully dependent on technology for a contact of sorts with others (Letiche, 1999: 152). A voice-over, however, explained that the whole set-up offered considerable advantages. The computer was, for example, able to put through a phone call of a customer to the case-worker without any delay. That is, the case-worker simply heard someone talking in his headphones. What has been removed from the interaction between employee and customer was the discretion of the form as to decide when to pick up the phone. Neither is there any unnecessary hand movement to, say, a telephone. In the redesigned company not even a second can be wasted and nothing is left to chance.

People working in a redesigned organization are put under a regimen of logic and computerization. Hammer and Champy (1993) often deride the fragmented and stultifying tasks carried out in the ‘Smithsonian’ and ‘Fordist’ organization, but does this seriously imply that working for a redesigned organization is less stultifying? Or, to put it differently, should we really take for granted that the endless de-differentiation of working procedures enhances the quality of a person’s job? At face value at least, we cannot charge BPR-consultants with too much solidarity and compassion.

BPR underestimates human – political, psychological – complexity

The advocates of BPR all speak enthusiastically about job enlargement and empowerment. Their expectations in this regard, however, may be totally unrealistic, because they overlook political complexity. Case teams, for example, are seen as places where people are expected to shelve all personal affairs. The case member who refuses to do so, will meet serious sanctions and might be expelled from the team. The same holds for those who are, to put it bluntly, too stupid. In the kinetic utopia envisaged by Hammer and Champy, there is no room for simple people. Yet, the smart people belonging to the case team are not expected to stand up for themselves. Such is the grim and strange logic of BPR.

Empowerment is about enabling people to take their own decisions with respect to their own work. However, such decisions are only accepted if they contribute to the integration of jobs which is one of the essential objectives of BPR. To put it somewhat differently, only those who are competent are allowed to have a voice in the decision-making process. But competence is defined in terms of agreement with preconceived plans. Freedom of action and opinion can therefore not be a serious issue in the redesigned organization. Empowerment only relates to people who have shown to be able to act in the approved manner. Employee influence is only tolerated if the rules of the game are unconditionally accepted.

The infinitely malleable employee is the fully disciplined employee. Her rewards are job enlargement, more responsibilities and more (sham) autonomy. What to do if people are not enthused by these prospects? What to do if they do need much persuading? The suggestion made by Hammer and Champy is that people who are reluctant and have doubts about redesigning (for example because the fear of losing the jobs or merely because of the increased workload) are not only simple but also malicious. There is no consideration whatsoever for anxieties and emotions among workforce. Resistance should be handled by starting a relentless offensive against dissenters and/or by value-driven and inspired leadership. An amazing knack of persuasion on behalf of managers is simply taken for granted. They should, as Willmott (1994: 42) has argued, be able "to persuade turkeys to vote for Christmas". The widespread resistance BPR-consultants have met in the past years is itself a perfect indication that the average employee is not nearly as simple as BPR-consultants seem to believe. The redesigned organization can only be achieved if you start with redesigning people. If you want to redesign your organization, you had better forget about worries and anxieties of employees and underestimate their intelligence.

BPR unjustly draws a bead upon middle managers

Social critics (Grint, 1995) have linked BPR to a much wider arsenal of political measurements aimed at destabilizing middle class in Western societies, a process which is stimulated by the dominance and aggressiveness of financial markets (Korten, 1995: Saul, 1997). Organizations that subscribe to the rules laid down by these markets often do not develop serious alternatives for downsizing and delayering and simply share "a common dedication to the elimination of middle management" (Scarbrough & Burrell, 1996: 183). Since middle managers form a substantial part of our society's middle class, it might very well be argued that organizations with such a dedication do not help to bring forward societal welfare and peace.

But having made this moral understatement, it is also worthwhile to note that

there are economic or strategic reasons as well for not rounding up middle management. This is where the Gurus re-enters the scene. Prahalad, for example, has repeatedly pointed out that middle managers are very often not the bone idle and workshy people described by Hammer, but the carriers of the organization's core competencies (Geber, 1994: 37). That is to say, middle managers often have a much closer affinity towards the product or towards the market than top managers. By rounding up middle managers organizations inadvertently eliminate important elements of their own knowledge base, especially those forms of knowledge which are not rationally documented or laid down in bulky manuals. Yet, downsizing and delayering have become almost natural responses of management to organizational problems. This might very well lead to the sort of fatalism described by Galbraith:

"[P]eople who are shed, if I may use the subtle modern term, expect one day to be shedders again, even if they experience how the great majority of insecure people live." (cited in: Scarbrough and Burrell, 1996: 185)

Perhaps this the irony of the discussion about BPR: the how-to-re-engineer books are bought and read by precisely those who tend to become its victims.

BPR's attack on bureaucracy is merely a matter of rhetoric

Hammer's claims about bureaucracy are highly rhetorical in the sense that they are likely to appeal to his readership. Bureaucracies simply boil down to masses of paperwork, redundant procedures and widespread inertia. However, in the footsteps of Weber, many authors (Clegg, 1990) have claimed that an obsession with control is the kernel of each bureaucracy. If we take this seriously, BPR is an example of bureaucratic mentality because it shares its basic obsession. The way in which control is achieved can be very different. BPR may indeed reduce paperwork or eliminate some procedures, but computerized technology allows for other control tactics.

The anti-bureaucratic tendency which prevails in textbooks on BPR is sham. Inveighing against the inertia of bureaucracies is an essential element of the enterprise fashion, but is this to say that bureaucracies are obsolete? As Thompson (1993) has pointed out, in our postmodern times it might be better not to debate the question whether we are losing our bureaucracies or not and instead devote all our attention to observing and understanding carefully how bureaucracy changes and adapts itself to new situations. In short, the bureaucracy is not eliminated; it is compressed and intensified in order to become manageable for those at the top.

BPR does not serve the organization but capital

It has been pointed out that the impact of BPR on our society should not be underestimated and that it might very well have some unforeseen and unwelcome political effects. BPR, some people would argue, rides roughshod on broad layers of our society. The political ideology behind it is downright conservative and hinges on ideas like autonomy, economic independence on behalf of the employee, deregulation, etc. The top within the organization is allowed to dodge any moral responsibility for employee welfare just like governments are increasingly allowed to display a total lack of interest in the fate of the weak in our society. What companies need are not simple and dependent people but strong "postmodern nomads" (Van der Zee, 1994) who are willing to view

their very own life as an enterprise. In other words, the ideal employee should interpret his impending dismissal as a new entrepreneurial opportunity and not as something frightening.

As has been pointed out by Saul (1993) and many others, all efforts to undermine the very idea of job security as well as employee influence have not resulted in substantial growth or improved competitiveness. Yet, our business leaders seem to be addicted to drastic cutbacks, radical changes and massive layoffs. The reason is that these measures are rewarded by financial markets. The consequences for our organizations are dire. Who wants to work in a place where everybody is on tenterhooks because he or she might be the next in line for dismissal? The only people that might take advantage of programs like BPR are not even managers themselves but those who control financial markets. Indeed, it has been argued that the opportunism of capital may on the long term turn out to be disastrous for our organizations. Many managers who serve as paladins of the financial markets may sooner or later experience "that capital's ultimate embrace wrings them, warmly, by the neck" (Scarbrough and Burrell, 1996: 186).

BPR is difficult to reconcile with customer orientation

It is difficult to see how service to the customer can retain its quality if employees are forced to do their work as quickly and efficiently as possible. An employee whom I happened to know and who works for the post office in the city where I live complained about the many reorganization efforts he had witnessed. Work pressure, he explained to me, was so intense that he simply was not able to handle problems of the customers in the way he used to handle them in the good old days. He was repeatedly told by his boss that customers who did not address their letters properly or even forgot to address them should not be helped anymore, because making a call in order to ask for the right address and other activities that might rectify the customer's shortcoming, simply would bring the sorting process to a total standstill. Such stories serve to illustrate that the operational and technocratic mentality ingrained in BPR is very difficult to reconcile with ideas about superior customer orientation, unless of course the organization has customers that are as smart and perfect as the computers that run its working processes. In other words, redesigned organizations do not only need competent workers but also competent customers. Both should become, in Donna Haraway's terms, 'cyborgs'.

BPR offers a simplified representation of work processes

In most texts about BPR, work processes are reduced to surveyable chains of often simple jobs. Generally, the imagery is deceptively simple: a small quadrangle represents activity 1 and is by means of an arrow connected to another quadrangle representing activity 2, etc. This imagery strongly suggests that people are carrying out their tasks in a strictly formal, if not computerized way. This is, of course, a well-known problem, but the understanding that models do not represent complex reality does not seem to take root among the disciples of BPR. Wastell *et al.* (1994), however, have argued that even the most simple tasks demand considerable improvisation and problem-solving capacities. Although these aspects are crucial, models of work processes usually ignore them. BPR-consultants hold on to such models and therefore tend to ignore informal aspects of work processes.

An objection related to this point is that BPR apparently assumes that the work process absorbs all events within organizations (Wastell *et al.*, 1994). In fact, however, many things happen that seem to be totally unrelated to such a process. I never saw on all

the clever flowcharts presented by consultants people emptying an ashtray, buying a bunch of flowers or treating their peers to cake. But it is not unlikely that the redesigned organization has jettisoned such useless habits or activities.

BPR implies risks which might be unacceptable to many people

Risk is a subjective phenomenon. What may be an acceptable risk for the one, may be unacceptable for the other. What people think is acceptable very often depends on the way they judge their own situation. That is, if they deem this situation to be favorable, they are less prepared to take risks than if they deem it to be unfavorable (Fiegenbaum *et al.*, 1994). Thus, people are not always willing to accept the same sort of risk. BPR implies enormous risks: some people will very likely lose their jobs, investment costs rise sky-high in order to pay for new IT; consultants are generally very demanding as well. How then should organizations persuade their people that the risks are acceptable and that money and jobs will not be thrown down the drain? Wastell *et al.* (1994) have pointed out that reorganizations such as BPR are only acceptable to the workforce if the situation is deemed to be desperate. Most BPR-programs failed, they argue, because people did not share the top's judgment as to the crisis it perceives. This will even be more serious when the same message has been stated over and over again during a period of ten years or so. Moreover, very often people also feel that only their managements were taking advantage of the proposed change (see also: MacKendall, 1993). Under such conditions employees are very unlikely willing to accept the risks that BPR offers to them.

BPR presupposes a perverse view on competition

In many texts on BPR (and management in general), the authors depict a sinister and ominous world. In a way it resembles the hell depicted in Paul Auster's tantalizing novel *"In the Country of Last Things"* (1987) in which we read about a world where "nothing lasts", where everything, even the weather, is "in a constant flux" and "where anything is possible" as if you were "born in a world that has never existed before". Remember that the kinetic utopia I referred to in the previous chapter is, if anything, an answer to a kinetic hell. Hammer's (or Senge's) view of the world is Auster's horrific nightmare. Managers are taught that the world is a constant threat and that war with competitors is always imminent. Hammer puts into his readers' minds a resounding form of paranoia. The world is amoral and nobody can be trusted. Armament is inevitable and BPR serves as the coat of mail that protects the manager in a perverse and malicious world. It is a weapon that allows you to engage in cut-throat competition with anybody who stands in the way of your success.

In this world view, competition functions as the 'noumenal' reality of our organizations. It exists, it is out there, as if it is independent of our organizations and their managers (Willmott, 1994). The challenge to be competitive is not only moral but has a mystical and metaphysical component as well. What Hammer and many others tend to overlook is the "essential relativity of competition" (Saul, 1993: 366). Change programs like BPR tempt us to forget that competition is man-made, but such a perspective on competition is perverse. The following quotation is illustrative:

"Given the modern manager's devotion to an international "standard" of competition, the effect of the marginal improvement in social conditions brought

about in Korea by persistent and violent street demonstrations has been to weaken Korea's attractiveness as a capitalist producer. The citizen who listens to the modern rhetoric of free markets and free men would assume that a bit more social justice and democracy are good things. The course of Western civilization has been advanced. The manager, however, sets aside rhetoric when it comes to specifics. From his point of view, Korea is now less competitive." (Saul, 1993, p. 367)

No wonder then that in such a climate BPR is likely to be seen as a panacea and Hammer as a hero. In view of the intense competition nobody minds extracting more energy out of people. The idea to avoid competition hardly ever occurs. Stress, unemployment and the absence of democracy are therefore endemic and regarded upon as side effects that are only bemoaned by unworldly idealists. Instead of trying to solve these problems, one prefers to stir up competition once again. Hence employees are thrown into the Tartarus where they are tied to a burning wheel just like Ixion. In order not to drown they have to turn around the wheel perpetually. Nobody dares to bring this wheel to a stop.

More utopian tendencies

The approval of violence, the belief in malleability of people, the obsession with productivity, the preference for technological solutions, and the portrayal of the present world as a dangerous and inhospitable place can all be seen as utopian elements in this fashionable discourse. BPR is at home in a technocratic culture which profoundly believes in utopianism.

In this section, I will try to reinforce my point by highlighting three notions, which are explicitly used in major texts on BPR yet often ignored in standard criticism. My purposes are twofold: first, I want to provide a fashionable critique of utopian tendencies within BPR; second, I hope to make clear that the technocratic aspects of BPR cannot be isolated from its cultural aspects.

Real work

This may come as a surprise, but Hammer dreams of pre-industrial times. In an interview with Gibson (1997: 101), he enthusiastically speaks about craftsmen performing many different tasks, or, as re-engineers would have it, "processes" in order to produce value for the customer. The industrial revolution is responsible for the introduction of the "brainless worker", someone who confines herself to a specifically circumscribed part of the whole process and who is placed under control by a supervisor. The problem of bureaucracies is that they engender a massive proliferation of these 'supervisors', even to the extent that they outnumber the workers. In other words, a rather limited amount of people carry out mind-numbing tasks while most people are watching.

Such a situation should be put to an end, says Hammer. We should *rediscover* the idea of workers who are focusing on the end result of their work rather than on the isolated task they carry out. We "should go back to the concept of a team", or, more particularly, a "case-team". Such a case-team consists of a group of people "with a collective responsibility for the end result". Hammer wants organizations to catch sight of what he calls "real work", more or less to be understood as a activities who add value in the eyes of the customer. Real work is work that is being carried out by a case-team whose

members are professionals (1997: 103). They are, in other words, too valuable to carry out managerial tasks. Such ideas are eventually linked to a broader vision of the future. In the nearby future organizations will only employ people who do real work. Only a few people will supervise and still fewer will lead.

From this it should be clear what is and what is not real work. People not belonging to small, highly professional teams and not in possession of all the skills needed to carry out a task cannot do real work. To be more specific, work which does not add value, is not "real work" and should be "eliminated" (Hammer & Champy, 1993: 69). Unreal work is "[m]ost of the checking, reconciling, waiting, monitoring, tracking – the unproductive work that exists because of boundaries within an organization and to compensate for progress fragmentation" (ibid.). The very idea of re-engineering is, it might be argued, to allow people to do real work. People who watch while others work, clearly abstain from the real stuff because they are merely supervisors who do not add any value whatsoever to the end result. Note the anti-managerial stance taken here: managers are generally watchers who parasitize on those who are engaged with the real stuff. The only managers that will survive the oncoming onslaught on their jobs are those who become 'coaches'. A coach is somebody who helps "employees do richer and more demanding work" (1993: 76).

This anti-managerial stance would be radically left-wing if not related to a deeply felt disdain for the 'work' carried out by the average laborer. It is brainless, stupid, mind-numbing, and so on. In a sense Hammer might be argued to be a true follower of Adam Smith who also warned against the debilitating circumstances in which low-educated specialists had to do their job. For Smith, however, such work was a necessary evil to create welfare for the masses and those who did it were worthy of all the praise in the world. Not so with Hammer. He believes in small-scale guilds the members of which are high-skilled artisans working with superior customer orientation. How such guilds are supposed to contribute to the well-being of the masses who are refused access to the elite of hard-working people is left unexplained. In the Dutch television program "*Grandmasters in Management*", Hammer admitted that he was very worried about the huge numbers of people were being excluded from the working process. Yet he could not think of a solution for this problem. But then again, solutions were not his department since he and his colleagues were merely watching trends which were, as far as he could see it, irreversible and inescapable. Ideology, the totem of determinism, pervades BPR.

Its disdain for low-skilled work should come as no surprise in a computerizing era. Those who are too simple to work with computers, or those who refuse to become cyborgs, are inevitably marginalized. BPR contributes to this by arguing that most organizational work is not real. As we saw in the last chapter, the same kind of logic was inherent to the learning organization. Only those people who have access to the microworld of the privileged are engaged in relevant learning processes and are facing real problems. Again, the 'Orwellian' distortions are not to be overlooked. For example, an implication of the distinction between real and unreal work is that we need not bemoan the exportation of the latter type to low-income countries. Let *them* do the unreal work, while *we* can stick to the real stuff!

Hammer and his disciples mock unreal work even though it is, as was argued in the previous section, much more complicated (and perhaps also more real) than the models of IT-specialists suggest. There is more creativity and improvisation in low-skilled work than is suggested by such models. This may, paradoxically, offer an explanation for

the disdain BPR has for low-skilled work. It is, after all, a highly rationalized and computerized approach of which it is not clear on beforehand whether it may get a hold on those who are supposed to carry out such low-skilled tasks. These people often know only too well that not everything which needs to be done can be carried out according to procedures. Their work often derides overly rational approaches. The idea that old production systems such as Fordism are over-rationalized is widespread, though, not only among consultants and gurus but also among academics. Basing themselves on interpretations of Weber, Taylor, and many others, critics – both on the right and left wing of the political spectrum – have argued that under Fordist conditions laborers are merely extensions to the machines they are supposed to operate. New production systems such as Kanban, Kaizen, JIT, or BPR are offered as superior alternatives to the old system. Francis Fukuyama (1996: 8), for example, discusses the trust Toyota top managers put in their subordinates, something which becomes manifest in the employees' authority to bring the "entire plant to a halt by pulling on a cord". Such authority or autonomy, Fukuyama believes, is absent in the Fordist production system where laborers "were never trusted with this power".

Nothing, however, could be farther away from the truth. Beynon (1977), who has studied work-processes at Ford extensively, claims that workers were allowed to adjust the working pace to what they thought was convenient. For example, they were allowed to work harder as usual in order to later enjoy the benefits of a smoking pause. Collins (1997: 48-50) remarks that this would be totally inconceivable in a Mazda-plant, where the very possibility to work a little bit harder than usual would immediately be interpreted as part of the quest for constant improvement also known as *Kaizen*. So, the possibility to work harder as usual would lead to an intensification of work pace. The reward for working harder as usual in Mazda is, in other words, very unlikely to be a smoking pause. Moreover, chances that Mazda-employees are able to work harder as usual are zero. They work 57 seconds a minute which leaves the employee hardly any room to work harder, let alone to improvise or to smoke a cigarette. Before BPR entered the stage, people at Ford used to work 43 seconds an hour. That is enough to smoke a few cigarettes on a day and to ponder what might be improved. To paraphrase William Whyte (1963: 122), where the Mazda employee of the 1990s merely wonders whether he has been able to keep pace with the relentless speed of production, the Ford employee of the 1950s talks about cars.

To be sure, the disdain for low-skilled jobs has a very long tradition which goes back to the old Greeks. Aristotle, for example, made a famous distinction between *noësis* and *poiësis*. *Noësis* refers to thinking and/or knowledge; *poiësis* refers to making and/or performance. Aristotle argued that work could only be bearable if there was no gap between *noësis* and *poiësis*. In other words, workers should be able to make what they have thought up. Work is essentially unbearable, argues Aristotle, if the worker has to carry out what another person thought up. In an ideal situation, workers will, while carrying out their tasks, inevitably run into problems the solution of which will lead to general knowledge related to the job. In other words, Aristotle assumes a dialectics between *noësis* and *poiësis*. The free engagement with this dialectics allows the worker to become an autonomous subject. People who are merely doing what others tell them to do are tools rather than autonomous subjects (Murphy, 1993).

BPR refers to ideas that were existent long before bureaucracies came into being. If

interpreted favorably, BPR might be argued to hinge on the assumption that thinking and doing should be closely linked to each other. It should be clear by now that a lot of ideology is involved here. Expressions such as 'autonomy' or 'empowerment' play important roles here. What is ideological about the use of these expressions is precisely that it is difficult to see how people who have to work 57 seconds a minute can enjoy the benefits of autonomy. The idea that they can bring the entire plant to a halt with one press on the button of course does not prove anything about autonomy. Fukuyama is simply wrong here. As he himself acknowledges, people generally do not assert their right to push the button. Behind the veil of autonomy, empowerment, trust, and increased work satisfaction lurks the desire for more productivity. People who are more productive than others are more respectable than those who prefer not to sing the company's song.

Interestingly, Aristotle was not interested in respectability and dignity. In his view, work could by definition not be respectable. Those who were worthy of respect, that is, a relatively small elite of free male citizens, simply did not need to work. So, the only thing that was interesting for Aristotle in relation to work was whether it could be endured by those who had to do it and he clearly understood that the gap between thinking and doing not only made work unendurable but also people less autonomous. That is, working entails that you are subjecting yourself to necessity. It would take a very long time before work in our society was deemed to be worthy of respect. The rise of Protestantism and bourgeoisie finally reversed the old Greek idea: unworthy became he who did not work by the sweat of his brow (Achterhuis, 1984). Lafargue's desperate defense of laziness is nowadays considered as rather exceptional, if not outrageous:

"The working class of nations where capitalist civilizations rules, is obsessed by a strange madness. This madness causes much individual and moral misery which has tormented the depressed human being since two centuries. This madness is love for your labor, the deadly passion for work which wears out the zest for life of the individual and his offspring. Rather than resisting this mental aberration, priests, economists, and moralists have canonized labor." (Lafargue, quoted in: Onfray, 1992: 121; My translation)

This is not at all in the spirit of BPR. Hammer takes the bourgeois way of thinking to its extreme: unworthy are those who watch the workers. Those who have to carry out mind-numbing and debilitating tasks will sooner or later become unworthy as well since they do not behave autonomously. They live in the realm of necessity and do what the watchers tell them to do. Worthy are merely those who do *real work*. Whereas the old Greeks believed that the hallmark of aristocracy is idleness, bourgeois thinkers such as Hammer urge us to believe that aristocrats do real work. Marx would turn in his grave: the knowledge economy the proletariat of workers with an aristocracy of workers. While an increasing number of people has difficulties to contribute to our society's well-being, the (un)happy few work, assuming that their claim to real work is warranted, harder and harder.

BPR links the question of human dignity in organizations to the question whether people are able to autonomously add value. Morality, which is inconceivable without my sense for an the other person's dignity, is reduced to the following question: does somebody produce in an autonomous way or not? If the answer is affirmative, she is worthy of our moral consideration. Organizations are thus encouraged to direct their

ethical considerations to those who add economic value. They are the 'friends' about which Hammers muses quite a lot.

Friends

The members of the case team are friends (Hammer and Champy, 1994: 111), people who respect each other and who care about each other. There is, as we have seen above, no room for "private turf". The team members' common goal is to improve the performance of the process. This shared orientation does not rule out differences of opinion and conflict. If there are no differences, it is likely that nothing productive is going on. Differences of opinion and conflict are thus subordinated to a common goal. They are instruments that allow you to attain the highest. David Hume, the famous liberal philosopher is quoted, to underscore this view on conflict and friendship: "Truth arises from disagreement amongst friends."

Hume said many more things on friendship, which Hammer and Champy apparently do not know or choose to ignore. In his *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Morals*, originally published in 1751, Hume wrote the following:

"An Epicurean or Hobbist readily allows, that there is such a thing as friendship in the world, without hypocrisy or disguise; though he may attempt, by a philosophical chemistry, to resolve the elements of this passion, if I may so speak, into those of another, and explain every affection to be self-love, twisted and moulded, by a particular turn of the imagination, into a variety of appearance." (Hume, 1982: 296-297)

One may wonder which kind of chemistry the advocates of BPR use in order to hammer home their understanding of friendship.

The traditional bureaucracy suspects friendship, at least in theory. Relationships between people are formal and dominated by the rank they occupy in the hierarchy. Practice is of course much more difficult. In practice, most bureaucracies have always encouraged people to become friends, mates, or comrades because togetherness makes work more bearable. Another, more cynical reason is that attention for those who are at the receiving end of organizational action should be diverted to the friends with whom you have to work. Propinquity is a condition of morality and friendship (Whyte, 1963: 304). No form of bureaucratization can eliminate moral worries, but it might be used to direct these worries to people who are close to you, say, your boss, your colleague, or, if it proves convenient, your subordinate. BPR's call for friendship is thus by no means new or does not represent a move away from bureaucracy. Hammer and Champy's ideas about friendship are Fayol's ideas about the 'corps d'esprit'.

Friendship, as it is conceived by management thinkers from Fayol to Hammer, is interesting because it allows for forms of control which are unimaginable in the iron cage of bureaucracy. It is not reckless to delegate important tasks to people who are willing to shelve their private affairs and to subject themselves to the goal of improved performance without further ado. Such people have become the *organization men* Whyte (1963) wrote about so eloquently. Such people agree with the goals, they do not wish to learn from people who occupy different social places, and even in their private lives they share most time with those who work in the same organization or do the same kind of job. All effort in life is directed at the organization or to fellow professionals. There is no deeply felt

interest in what is going on outside this inner circle of peers.

Here we encounter yet another type of microworld, just as always inhabited by people who dislike the public place and are utterly indifferent to what goes on in society as a whole (Saul, 1994; Saul, 1997; Kaplan, 1997). Microworlds, or micro-societies, as Kaplan calls them, are well-organized, familiar, and, by the same token, attractive. Such micro-societies are the organization where people work, but also the suburban neighborhoods where they live (Whyte, 1963: 303-322). Sociologists have used the term 'neotribalism' to indicate what is going on: passion is no longer directed towards the public realm but towards the tribe to which one belongs or hopes to belong.

Nothing wrong, of course, with the desire for togetherness. Lucretius knew already that only the gods are able to get along without it. Beyond good and evil they live their lives, unconcerned about friendships and therefore invulnerable (Nussbaum, 1994: 276). Human beings are no gods and are in need of friends. Most people lack the kind of self-confidence that is needed to get along all by themselves. Nietzsche was right when he argued that "our longing for a friend is our betrayer" in the sense that "our faith in others betrays in what respect we would like to have faith in ourselves" (cited in: Santaniello, 1994: 34). Our longing for friendship is symptom of our vulnerability. It reveals more about ourselves than about the other.

Friendship and togetherness are important to most of us. This is why teamwork, commitment, group dynamics, coaching, friendship, and other euphemisms that we have thought up to describe utterly normal work relations are so fashionable. Goleman (1996: 339), an American journalist and psychologist, described in his popular text on emotional intelligence how effective friendship training can be to normalize asocial and rejected children. Before long we will see the first friendship training in the world of management and organization. After such a training, the participants will no longer be 'Nietzschean' eccentrics. Group training and coaching might already be seen as the precursors of friendship training. After such exercises nobody will see the point of performing the role of the odd man out.

Kaplan (1997) and Saul (1997) have pointed out that the many people have developed an apathy for society as a whole and prefer to be fully subservient to the organization to which they belong. Saul describes this as *corporatism*: when we act in public, we act as representatives of a group, not as representatives of ourselves. The organization we are working for contributes, after all, to our economic well-being and this is, on closer inspection, the single most important criterion for morality and friendship. Those who do not belong to the inner circle of the privileged elites have, as Hammer makes very clear, bad luck. You may or may not worry about their fate, but it is very unlikely that these worries will affect life within the narrow confines of the 'utopian' areas where you live. The outside world is only interesting as a source of services and products that can be ordered by means of information technology. This reality is grimly depicted in the cult film *Lawn Dogs* which is about the jerky relationship between the privileged and the unprivileged: "You have two kinds of people, those who own grass and those who mow grass."

Perhaps this is too bleak a picture of what is going on. Perhaps it merely describes certain American tendencies, where a small elite refuses to engage with politics and society and where the masses find comfort in Jerry Springer. Yet, Kaplan is no doubt in the right when he argues that life in Western society as a whole will increasingly be about the question to which organization or group you belong. 'Business enclaves', that is,

residential areas including shopping malls with extremely sophisticated safety devices, all of which has been created for those who work for the company and for nobody else, are not merely American phenomena. In such enclaves, which can be found in countries such as Oman, Malaysia, Indonesia or the Antilles, you will be able to dedicate your time to global business, free from worries about the customs and values in your host country. Only your friends within the confines of the enclave are worthy of your worries. The same, unworldly atmosphere can be found in the congress centers scattered around the country where you and your friends are able to devote yourselves, in seemingly rustic simplicity, to the improvement of production processes, to more intense networking, and to other kinetic exigencies.

Kaplan argues that such isolated communities can be compared, in a sense, with the Greek city-state, where a small group of males served each other's interests, undisturbed by the plight of the masses who worked as slaves. For Aristotle, friendship was primarily "the sharing of all in the common project of creating and sustaining the life of the city" (MacIntyre, 1981: 146). This idea of 'sharing in a common project' is also important in Hammer's conception of friendship. Indeed, his idea are more familiar to old Greek notions about friendship than to liberal notions about it.

In Greece, friendship was, if anything, a matter of *courage*. You can't trust somebody who lacks courage. A person who argues that he cares about you and about the community to which you both belong is only plausible if he is willing to risk the experience of loss and pain. He cannot care about you if he refuses to run this risk. So courage is the willingness to run these risks on behalf of other people or on behalf of the community to which the persons involved belong. Friendship is, according to the Greeks, also a matter of *faith*. Such faith becomes visible in courage. For example, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who waited twenty years for her husband to return and who, like him, had to undergo many severe ordeals, shows by her courage great faith. Such faith makes her a true friend of Odysseus. A third aspect of Greek friendship is related to the question whether you belong to the same community. Friendship is impossible between people who do not belong to the same community. It is a *virtue* closely related to the social structure in which two or more persons are embedded. Only in this community you will have friends. Aristotle emphasized the community, or more accurately, the city-state, as a precondition for friendship. Friendship is a 'public' event and has nothing to do with contemporary, more liberal notions about friendship as a private kind of intimacy between two or more people (Arendt, 1973: 32). There were no private friends in ancient Greece. Friends discuss in public about what is on their mind.

Hammer and Champy's claim that members of a case-team should not be occupied by private turf, as they prefer to call it, is at odds with particular liberal intuitions about friendship. This liberal kind of friendship is permeated by mutual affection. Friends are people you like. This affection supersedes concerns about social backgrounds or communities to which the people you call your friends belong. As MacIntyre (1981: 146-147) remarks, friendship "has become for the most part the name of a type of emotional state rather than of a type of social and political relationship". MacIntyre abhors this liberalization of friendship and relates it to the various types of moral relativism that haunt or society. He disapproves very strongly of the British novelist E.M. Forster who once seemed to have made the bold claim that he would prefer to betray his country than to betray his friends. MacIntyre argues that such a claim presupposes a distinction between friendship and country, a distinction regarded by

Aristotle as totally incomprehensible. For the Greeks a friendship cannot exist without the community in which it is embedded. The contemporary liberal holds the opposite to be true: you are willing to see someone as a friend because you like her, not because you took into consideration her social backgrounds.

Hammer's case-teams are a mockery of liberal notions about friendship. Pluralism, which may manifest itself in personal preferences and which is therefore the precondition of liberal friendship, is simply unacceptable. Friendship is a community affair, not something which belongs to the domain of the intimate or the affective. This brings us back to Senge's (1990: 285) kinetic utopia, where people act "in the spirit of love", understood as *agape*. Love has less to do with emotions than with *intentions*. In the kinetic utopia that Senge and Hammer envisage, friendship and love is all about togetherness, loyalty, and disinterestedness as to private issues. Such are the core ingredients of love and friendship in both the redesigned and learning organization.

Affection and emotion are not ruled out but rendered less important than unconditional subservience to the group to which one belongs. Such a point of view places, I suggest, BPR and the learning organization in an age-old tradition which is highly suspicious of emotion. Friendship, as most of us conceive it nowadays, is something vague and emotional (Saul, 1994) and as such poses a risk for the control objectives that still inhere BPR and the learning organization. This is why Greek ideas about friendship and togetherness enter the picture and why group commitment and loyalty should be clearly defined. The point is to sever friendship from uncontrollable emotion. The kind of friendship that is desired by BPR and the learning organization cannot be allowed to be fickle and vague and should be transformed into a robust instrument that is needed in order to pursue your own and your organization's interests. Michel Foucault (1997: 136) once stressed that friendship is also something amorphous, something which is open and should be reinvented continually by both parties. In the redesigned and learning organization such openness is, in spite of all rhetoric, simply unacceptable. Instrumental reason still prevails and allows only for a solid and robust forms of friendship.

Forgetfulness

I had my reasons for relating central ideas of BPR to the ancient Greeks. Not only did I wish to point out that some downright conservative tendencies are permeating BPR, but also did I want to point to the forgetfulness which characterizes its advocates. The cover of my copy of *"Reengineering the Corporation"* not only claims that this book is "a manifesto for a business revolution", but also urges you to "forget what you know about how business should work", because "most of it is wrong". Even the color of the book is revolutionary red. The paradoxical consequence of this revolutionary zest is that history repeats itself. Those who forget about the past are condemned to repeat it, as a forgotten philosopher claimed about hundred years ago. He was right. His insight may help us to explain why so many revolutionaries are extremely conservative.

Forgetfulness is a defining characteristic of the utopian mind in the sense that it is a hallmark of the violent revolution it dreams about. Forgetfulness may indeed be seen as a form of violence. The utopian mind is not at all interested in the playful dialectics of nostalgia and forgetfulness which is characteristic of fashion. There is no room whatsoever for nostalgia in Utopia. Where revolutionaries seize power, history makes its exit and victims are seen as the inevitable side-effect of the revolution. BPR is utopian

and revolutionary precisely because it engages in a kind of 'do-harm-to-do-good' rhetoric that justifies all revolutionary acts: BPR is not quick, not simple, not painless, but whatever it may bring, it can only be better than it is now. Uncertainty is accepted here, although it never contaminates the revolutionary idea itself. Many questions about BPR, Hammer and Champy (1993: 216) argue, cannot be answered conclusively. For example, it is unknown what impact BPR will have on the U.S. economy or on the unemployment rates. Each revolution is an a-historical leap into the absurd..

The point to be made here is that while BPR is infested with the rationality of revolution and utopianism and urges managers to forget about the past, it cannot but resuscitate elements from it. This is why BPR can still be seen as a fashion, although it is clearly not fashionable all the way down. In spite of all its utopian tendencies, it has to engage with the past. It is, as we saw, rife with nostalgic feelings about it. What managers need, Hammer argues, is real change and real innovation. I have tried to show, however, that the Hammer's ideas about linking together conception and execution and about friendship have a long tradition, going back as far as the Greeks. On few occasions has Michael Hammer admitted that he has been inspired by ideas from the past. To Rowan Gibson (1997: 101-102) he claimed to be fascinated by guilds where artisans worked who should clearly be distinguished from the brainless worker who was the result of the Industrial Revolution. We have to go back, he argues, to a time when people were not focused on their task, on the isolated activity, but on the end result. We have to go back, he adds, to the idea of a team.

This nostalgia is also typical in the folk philosophies of other gurus. In spite of all their utopian zest, they cannot do what they urge their readership to do, that is, they cannot shed off the past. Just read Gibson's *Rethinking the Future*, a collection of interviews with gurus. Hamel wants to go back to the city-state in Greece (cited in: Gibson, 1997: 91), Goldratt claims he is inspired by Socrates (cited in: Gibson, 1997: 116), Handy dreams about the Renaissance (cited in: Gibson, 1997: 27). It is as if they are all as obsessed by the past as by the future. Nothing wrong with this (and, to be frank, I love it!), but it makes the call for forgetfulness rather suspicious. In order to understand the future as envisaged by gurus like Michael Hammer, a look into the past may be very helpful. BPR refers to pre-industrial or pre-bureaucratic times that were not suffering from bureaucratic excesses.

Such prelapsarian times provide the inspiration to fight such excesses by fire and sword. Among these excesses are the employee who expects care from the cradle to the grave. Gurus, almost without any exception, dream of employees who dare to take initiatives and who dare to become their own entrepreneur. Rhetoric and ideology, no doubt, but the gurus find their inspiration in a time when the average worker believed it was an outrage to be considered as an employee rather than as a person who was perfectly able to sustain him- or herself quite independent of others (Jacques, 1996). The employee envisaged by the Guru seems to be a copy from the average worker in 19th century America.

Management is yet another bureaucratic excess that needs to be rectified. The paradox of many *management fashions*, BPR included, is that *part of their rhetoric is clearly anti-management*, something which is exemplified by the call for strong leadership. Organizations are in need of strong leadership and need to get rid of managers. Following people like Covey (1996b) and Hamel and Prahalad (1994, Hammer claims that management will soon be replaced by a new kind of humble and serving leadership. This

does not entail, as you might perhaps expect, that managers should become subservient to workers. Rather, they should become subservient to the community to which they belong or, as Jacques (1996) has suggested, to the Great Chain of Being, perhaps even to God himself. Thus are not only old Greek themes reinvigorated, but also the world of Benjamin Franklin and Freeman Hunt.

To put it somewhat differently, crucial notions from the language game that was played in the 19th century, notions such as 'humility', 'initiative', 'character', or 'pioneering', are extrapolated to an allegedly post-bureaucratic language game. This is, of course, not to say that the same meanings are retained. Indeed, this may be some of the more serious problems in management discourse: are its participants able to (re)define ideas about, say, humility with the same kind of matter-of-factness that was characteristic about 150 years ago? Or are the meanings of such ideas irrevocably lost after hundred years of bureaucracy? Did bureaucracy destroy the context in which such ideas and notions were obvious?

Concluding remarks

BPR is rife with revolutionary and utopian zest. It professes forgetfulness. It professes to be non-fashion, to be science, to be rational. So, what does make it fashionable?

What makes it fashionable, at least to a certain extent, is that it cannot dispense with nostalgia. It often refers to pre-bureaucratic times and therefore allows for openness. Fashions such as BPR may perhaps help to overcome what many organizations sense is a bureaucratic deadlock. Not that such fashions are anti-bureaucratic in any serious (i.e. non-rhetorical) sense of the word – utopian obsession with control is still unassailable – but they at least allow for a few ideas that seem to have been developed in pre-bureaucratic times. In this sense, BPR clearly has some seductively critical potential. After all, knowing that the bureaucratic deadlock has not always been there entails knowing that the current state of affairs should not be taken for granted and that even your organization might be subject to change. Hopefully for the better, but this can never be guaranteed on beforehand.

By repeatedly urging practitioners to become forgetful of the past and to become future-oriented, the gurus of BPR undermine part of the critical potential inhering their very own fashion. What is left, is a rather conservative mind-set intoxicated with rational cynicism as to what might happen in and outside organizations. Revolutionary boast and utopianism can be truly counterproductive. How are we to evade it? Is it possible to conceive of management thinking that can manage without it?

7 Escaping fashion?

Throughout this book, I have been criticizing management fashions. My criticism, however, was not launched in the name of rationality or science. On the contrary, I have tried to defend a more aesthetic and perhaps also a more sympathetic view of management fashion, one which would allow us to develop other kinds of understanding. As I argued in chapter one, my problem with fashion is not that it tends to be ambivalent, confusing, irrational or even idiotic. My problem is rather that the critical or liberatory potential of fashion is undermined because it is not able to get rid of certain utopian desires. I have argued *that utopian tendencies are the ill-fated effect of a rationality that seeks to undo the critical power of fashion.*

In chapter one, I have explained why fashion and utopia seem to have such a strained relationship with each other. I also indicated, using some ideas of Achterhuis (1998), why I am not a fan of utopianism. It does not only endorse different forms of *Weltfremdheit*, it also believes in a world without differences, openness, and variegation. I claimed that rather than criticizing management fashion for being fashionable, we should criticize it for not being able to lay off utopianism. Put somewhat cryptically, *my problem is often that management fashion is not fashionable all the way down.*

The utopian elements identified – unity, community, malleability, neutrality, detail, totality, radicalism, usefulness, scientific, technologically-driven, hosophobia, production, isolationism, utilitarianism, and violence – are traceable as family resemblances in various branches of management thinking. As I have hoped to show, such elements are also persistent in fashionable discourses. Not always to the same extent, and not always the same elements. But, strategic management studies, the leadership discourse, the management of culture, the learning organization and business process redesign still display some or even most of these characteristics. Hence the core tenet of this book: *Management fashions should not be criticized for being fashionable but for not having been able to get rid of utopian tendencies.*

In this final chapter, I will try to strengthen this argument by pointing out that fashion is much closer to the world of management practitioners than is rationalism or utopianism. More specifically, I will use my ideas about management fashion to criticize taken for granted assumptions about management professionalism or management science. In my opinion, management fashion is better than many of its followers or disseminators, let alone its critics, think. It is typical that even the followers and disseminators of management fashion have the paradoxical desire to escape from what they follow and disseminate. Unlike those who dress after the latest fashion or those who listen to the latest pop music, they feel *ashamed* when accused of being fashionable. What we bring or believe in, many of them are only too eager to point out, is anything but fashionable. Business process redesign, Hammer and Champy (1993: 215) emphasize, is not a fad. What they bring is different and escapes the faddish about which the Manager and the Consultant ought to be more suspicious.

In other words, followers and disseminators of fashion do not wish to flaunt with whatever it is they think is fashionable. This is perhaps why they miss the critical

potential of fashion. As I pointed out in chapter one, fashion is a critique of infrastructure in the name of a suprastructure (Taylor, 1998). As such it provides us with tools to criticize causal reasoning, law-like generalizations, hard empiricism, in short, with what counts as a good scientific and rational explanation. Fashion provides us with a more aesthetic view of organization and management. Unlike rationalism and science, it does not mistrust the senses, it refuses to get below the surface, it refuses to dig deeper.

Missing these aspects of fashion, the Guru and the Consultant are still entrenched in causal and economic reason. *Rationality and not the fashionable itself is the big seducer in a world of management fashion.* To put it differently, management fashion is thoroughly paradoxical because it does not want to be what it is. It has no self-acceptance. Whoever is fashionable in this world wishes to be more than merely fashionable. The escape from fashion is, they hope, always impending. The *new rationalists* with whom I take issue in this chapter are among the most aggressive, and fundamentalist believers in the possibility of such an escape. As Clegg (1996: 197, 204) points out in a fine review of one of these new rationalists, they have become moral fanatics. I hope to show that their ideas are dangerously utopian. *What fashion does not like is fanaticism.*

The new rationalists

As we saw in chapter one, gurus, consultants and other people who are responsible for the dissemination of management fashion have been challenged by people who claim to speak in the name of science and rationality. These people (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1997; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997; Ramsay, 1996) want to protect organizations against what they think are the eccentric and often dangerous ideas promulgated by gurus such as Peters, Senge, Handy, and others. It is argued not only that fashionable ideas are empirically unsound – hierarchies, for example, will not vanish as fast as Tom Peters thinks and we should be very grateful for that – but also that managers should be encouraged to develop systematic distrust as to fashions and trends.

That is, fashionable myths such as redesign, cultural change, the learning organization, or leadership ought to be disenchanted and debunked by managers. Indeed, distrust towards fashion should be part and parcel of the professional ethic of managers. There is a not insignificant tendency in popular management literature to emphasize once more the values of science and rationalism and to criticize fashions for being irrational. I will describe the authors who have what I think are utopian feelings about the miracles of science as ‘new rationalists’. Their paradox is that while debunking fashion on behalf of reason, they have become fashionable themselves. Their texts are easily accessible for managers and are replete with quotations of famous business managers themselves in order to make access easier and in order to distance themselves from academia. Besides, they are often brought out by the same publishers as the texts of gurus. Sometimes the books are even praised and recommended by the gurus. On the cover of Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997), the following can be read:

READ IT BEFORE BUYING ANY OTHER BUSINESS BOOK!
ROSABETH MOSS KANTER, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

A well-known management guru recommends a book that bemoans the lack of

professionalism in management and argues, among other things, that "fear and greed" are propelling management theory "more than any other branch of academia" (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997: 11), that "marketing is more interesting than the product" (1997: 346) and that the result of management industry is "enormous profits for the gurus but confusion for their clients" (1997: 68). This alone is enough to suggest that the relationship of the new rationalists with fashion or with gurus is thoroughly ambivalent. According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge, there are at least some gurus – Drucker, Handy, and, indeed, Kanter – who should not be condemned because they belong to the few who see the big picture (1997: 373). Sometimes there are even passages that quite literally echo what the gurus think: "If history was ever a guide to success in the commercial world, it is certainly not any longer" (1997: 109) or "The only currency that really matters is knowledge" (1997: 110). Micklethwait and Wooldridge repeatedly complain about the confusion in management knowledge and wish to make a plea for a more scientific foundation of the area. Yet, their text is itself, like any other fashionable product, ambivalent and confusing.

The most important indictment of the new rationalists is that fashion undermines the possibility of a professional management ethos. They argue that management should become a profession firmly rooted in a mature scientific discipline. Such a discipline, however, is at the present moment not available. Three points are thus made by the new rationalist: first, they claim that management lacks a professional identity and should become more professional; second, they claim that there is no mature scientific discipline to back up the desire for professionalism; third, gurus distract managers in their efforts to become professional. In the following section, I will enter into the very idea of a management profession and professionalism. In the subsequent section, I wish to discuss the kind of management theory that should support management professionalism. In a final section, I will draw some conclusions.

The dream of professionalism

Some gurus argue that managers should thrive on chaos and ride the waves of change. Others argue that they should manage by walking around or become charismatic and visionary. We also hear them talking about managers who have dispensed with hierarchy and structure. Occasionally we hear gurus dreaming of managers who do not make any decisions, who are suspicious of analysis and trust GUT feeling. Suppose that managers would really start doing all this. What would then become of our organizations? New rationalists like Hilmer and Donaldson (1997) argue that chaos and anarchy in our organizations would ensue. But this is not the most important objection Hilmer and Donaldson have, simply because most managers do not follow guru recipes. What is really objectionable is that such foolish propositions contribute to an anti-management atmosphere which ultimately undermines managerial authority. Not long ago, one of the leading journals in my country, *De Volkskrant*, had a headline saying that "managers swallow anything". Gurus, the new rationalists argue, help to create this negative image of managers. Hammer and Champy (1993: 29), for example, think that practitioners acquire management skills in what they believe is "the Humpty Dumpty school of management".

Managers are called upon to resist this negative image by becoming more

professional. That is, they should resist dogma, jargon, and fashionable recipes. The essence of professional management, Hilmer and Donaldson (1997: 187) argue, is the competent application of sound and tested ideas in the specific circumstances managers have to deal with. Competence, soundness, testing, and specificity are keywords here. New rationalists dream of managers who are not opportunistic but rational, who are able to see the big picture, who believe that unrestricted customer orientation is their social responsibility, who know the latest developments in their particular area of expertise, and who act in conformity with rigorous ethical codes. These are the requirements that have to be met by professional groups if they want to deserve respect. By unthinkingly following fashionable recipes respect and self-respect are fatally undermined. Well, what are we to make of this?

Professional identities

At least in one sense, the new rationalists seem to be right: managers do not have a straightforward professional identity. Mintzberg (1973) already argued that managerial practice and managerial folklore are miles apart. Managers, Mintzberg claimed, are anything but the rational and professional system thinkers some people hope they are. One of the problems Mintzberg described was that fragmentation of managerial work was so widespread and overwhelming that managers themselves could not but resort to superficiality. That is, in-depth knowledge rooted in rational science is simply useless in a world where every ten minutes or so the phone rings, where you dash from one chore to the next, and where nobody seems to be interested in your personal beliefs or welfare. Further research into the nature of managerial work (Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994) seems to have confirmed Mintzberg's findings, at least to a considerable extent. Managers, researchers argue, do not have a profession since there is no such thing as a profession called management. In fact, people whom we call managers have to do without clear job descriptions or specifications. They lack a clear occupational identity (Watson, 1994: 29-30).

Whoever is in doubt about this should consult a child and ask what job s/he would like to do as an adult. Although Manager, Guru, and Consultant are, as I argued in chapter one, characters with or against whom we readily identify, chances are unlikely that a child will answer the question by mentioning 'manager' (or, for that matter, consultant or guru). Pilot, baker or veterinarian are more plausible candidates because they have a rather clear-cut occupational identity.

Contrary to such respectable occupations, the new rationalist argues, the manager's job is affected by fashion and identity changes. People hardly ever start their careers as managers, but somewhere on their way to the top they become one. And even when they are formally designated as managers, it is by no means clear to them what their role is (Watson, 1994: 30). It is only then that they come to realize that they should follow a course or read a management book to overcome lacunae in skills and knowledge. Watson (1994) has argued that people who gradually became managers continually change their attitude with respect to their job. As a consequence, they have profound difficulties to sort out the real meaning of their jobs to their lives.

This is why, Watson suggests, managers are obsessed with their occupational and individual selves. They become, in other words, profoundly strategic in the relationship with the organization they work for. Job orientations change whenever the organization offers them something new. More precisely, what one gets from the organization

determines what one is willing to give to the organization. Such a strategic and opportunistic posture is clearly not what one expects from a respected professional. In so far the new rationalist seems to be right.

The construction of identities

However, I believe this dismissal of management fashion as undermining the manager's occupational identity is wrong-headed basically because they totally misrepresent the relationship of managers to management fashion. Indeed, I believe that the latter may play a singularly important role in the manager's frantic search for occupational identity and self-identity. In chapter one, I defined management fashion as soul engineering and folk philosophy. As such, it is particularly useful in the construction of identities. That is, managers do not need hard-boiled rational science to construct an identity.

Fashion is a far better candidate because it shares fundamental characteristics with the managerial work: fragmented, impermanent, volatile, etc. This is confirmed by Watson's ethnographic research among managers. I fully share his reservations about what he sees as the "unfortunately rather snobbish attitude among some academic colleagues to what they often dismiss as 'pop management' books" (1994: 216). As I have argued in chapter one, managers rarely unthinkingly use these books to find recipes. In general, they seem to be rather forgetful of what is contained in books of Kanter, Porter or Peters. What is then the function of these books? Watson (1994: 216, 218) suggests that they "help managers engage in a brief standing-back from everyday pressures", that they allow for some reflection, and that they offer a new language that might be useful "to frame their action differently". As one manager described his orientation towards fashionable books:

"Yes, I found them good for insights. I can't say that I have applied anything I have read in them. But they have often confirmed some of the things that I have worked out for myself or perhaps, sometimes, helped me go further down a line of thought than I might have felt confident to do." (cited in: Watson, 1994: 217).

Management fashion thus helps people in organizations to manage and construct their problematic identities, no matter how short-lived these fashions and identities may be. Although the managers studied by Watson are sometimes suspicious of fashion, especially when it turned out to be 'old wine in new bottles', management fashion does have this all-important function. More than rational theory does it enable managers to become sensitive of their own roles in a turbulent and ever-changing environment which belies reason. Not that managers are rejecting theory, but most of the time they use them in combination with feeling (Watson, 1994: 180).

Perhaps more precisely, theory evaporates in feeling, leaving behind a curious blend of principles, rules, intuition, recklessness, and instinct (Watson, 1994: 169). Managers are oftentimes unconscious of the theories they use in their work yet do have the feeling that there is a 'thought' behind what they are doing. What the thought is or where it comes from is equally uninteresting. Oftentimes, it is simply identified as 'gut feeling', or as 'second nature'. In struggling with ideas, emotions, and the requirements they have to meet on a daily basis, managers constantly interweave theory and practice. This is an endless and unfathomable process that entirely escapes rational control. Its complexities and whimsicalities are, I suggest, better captured by a fashionable outlook on management and organization than by a rational or utopian outlook.

Take, for example, the way managers perceive their controlling task. Since Taylor, Fayol, and Weber, this task has been linked with managerial professionalism. But, as Watson's points out (1994: 68-70), managers hardly ever have *professional* reasons to be in control. They may *like* to be in control, because it is always better to be leading than to be led. Control also satisfies *curiosity*, because it allows one to be in the center of things. The desire to be in control is sometimes linked to a *personal ethics*, because control enables one to work harder for the values one endorses. It may even be related to *conceit*, because being in control proves that one is not the person to be pushed around. In short, there are many reasons for managers to be in control, but few of them are professional.

A more aesthetic and superficial outlook at management allows us to understand that control is much more than merely a rational management function. When we are willing to forget that we should not look at how people should be, but focus at how they are, we may come to understand that control is also and perhaps even more so related to individual idiosyncrasies. This suggests that control is hardly ever exercised by neutral, omnipartial professionals. It is not so much an instrument to enhance organizational performance or efficiency as it is an instrument in the hand of individuals with disparate ideas and wishes.

Why should managers be professional?

The outlook I advocate here makes clear that circumstances dictate how people look at their jobs. This is, as Watson's analysis makes clear, not to say that they are unthinkingly hopping from chance to chance. His analysis of managerial practice is far from grim. On the contrary, it is rather understanding and sympathetic. But the new rationalists would disagree with Watson's mildness. People with respectable jobs, they argue, will carry out their jobs in conformity with the rules and principles, *no matter what the circumstances are*. Even under the most miserable circumstances doctors, bakers, and pilots will carry out their tasks. And so should managers.

The new rationalists argue that managers should develop a stoic attitude with regard to the circumstances. They think the practices described by Watson are disquieting, because managers who engage in political scheming or who look for other jobs once the circumstances tend to become less favorable are nothing less than dangerous. New rationalists argue that these managers should do real jobs and dispense with their strategic orientation towards it. Scientists and academics can help them to "redeem" themselves, as Hilmer and Donaldson (1997) have it. It is disquieting when managers are, unlike people who do *real* work, neither committed to the professional principles nor to the organizations they work for. They worry about managers who are primarily driven by mutual rivalry, opportunities, power, fashion and whatever the organization where they work has to offer to them. The new rationalist believes that this should all be changed. He or she dreams of people who embody norms, who have professional expertise, and who are driven by norms and values. People who are primarily led by coincidence and chance will never find redemption and do not deserve our respect.

Note the dramatic flavor in the discussion so far. The manager's obsession with fashion is, I argue, a tool for thinking about his or her professional and personal identity. The new rationalists could not be more in disagreement with this and argue that fashion undermines professionalism and is dangerous. I do not want to take the edge off this controversy and will even urge the new rationalist to make clear why managers in organizations should be professionals in the first place. That is, why should managers who

are working in the volatile circumstances described by people like Mintzberg, Watson, and many others want to become professionals? The virtues of professionalism are taken for granted rather than argued for.

Locke (1996) recently pointed out that at least in Japan companies have hardly any respect for the management professional who is guided by science and objectivity. They do not need *management* professionals, but they do need other professionals such as technicians, computer scientists, physicists, and other flesh-and-blood people who are willing to work hard, to take some risk, and to carefully experiment. Locke makes clear that the notion of 'managerial professionalism' is imbedded in a typical Western context. The call for such professionalism may have more to do with our culture than with what organizations need. That is, a culture has developed in which it is believed that management professionals are very much needed. In a sense, the rise of management in organizations can be seen as a result of this belief. For long, managers have always been seen as professionals and now several fashions are eroding this image.

Violence

The new rationalists are among the most fundamentalist believers in the managerial mystique. The crux of their argument against fashion is that it dangerously persuades managers and consultants to abandon professionalism and that it therefore undermines their position of authority. As such fashion contributes and has contributed to the widespread anti-management sentiment in our society. Managers can only escape from this danger when they are willing to give new impetus to their waning professionalism and authority. However, their call for a reinvigorated managerial professionalism is not without its complexities. In the texts of the new rationalists, it is never argued that management as such is good for organizations. On the contrary, without further ado it is generally accepted that at least some fashionable activities such as the occasional reorganization may be, at least from a financial perspective, quite wholesome.

Floyd and B. Wooldridge (1994), two American management authors who have been affected by new rationalism as well, do not hesitate to praise cost reductions, although reorganizations have to be carried out while keeping in mind the positive role of *surviving* managers. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (not the same person) also point to the positive economic effects of business process redesign. Yet they (1997: 47) warn not to take redesign as a cool, mechanic, and scientific process because this might undermine customer orientation (due to frustrated employees) and innovation (due to an erosion of informal communication in IT-driven organizations). Reorganizations are dangerous, they argue, if accompanied by salary increases for top managers. Such greed stirs the anti-management atmosphere sensed by new rationalists. Their message is: reorganization is fine, but deal with it diplomatically.

What new rationalists share with most management fashions is the utopian idea that *occasional violence will bring good to the organization*. "The downsizing and restructuring that followed [the constant pressure from the stock market] may have been painful but they increased economic efficiency." (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997: 207). As such, the new rationalists may be accused of contributing themselves to the anti-management sentiment they say they abhor. After all, the message conveyed by cost-cutting measures is that people, including managers, are in essence substitutable, perhaps even superfluous. If new rationalists would be as serious about the anti-management atmosphere as they claim they are, you would expect them to be fiercely opposed to such

violence. Instead, we hear half answers. Indeed, half-heartedness and indecision may be our society's answer to the painful question raised by fashionable gurus whether our society really needs a managerial middle class? Before long, the acceptance of their own redundancy will have become part and parcel of the professional ethos of managers.

Disparaging the senses

Asking whether we need managerial professionalism is breaking an old taboo. Breaking taboos is one of the things a fashion should do, even if it may lead to answers we do not like. In this case it urges managers (or, for that matter, consultants) to think about their self-justification rather than to hide behind taken for granted assumptions. It is interesting to address the origins of this taboo. Saul (1993: 43–47) has argued that the concept of a professional can be traced back to Ignatius Loyola who, he suggests, can be seen as history's first professional technocrat. When founding the Jesuit order in 1534, he envisaged an organization that would contribute to the improvement and betterment of the human soul by means of rational method. The order should bring people to God not through love or fate but through logic. The religious doctrine would soon prove to be rather secondary. What really counted was that members of the order became a trained elite or, as Saul has it, an army of mercenaries acting in the interests of the catholic church itself. Such an army was deemed to be necessary in times of Reformation.

Only people who would be able to apply the rational method (key words: precision, research, movement, progress, and measurement) would be allowed to become a member of the order. The method assumed that members were willing to suspend or to give up their own power of judgment and to become subordinated to organizational dogma. They would become servants of a greater Self than their own (Saul, 1993: 234). The members of the Society of Jesus would frequently be checked by a "controller of conscience" – perhaps a precursor of contemporary human resource managers – whose task it was, first, to make sure that members would indeed serve the greater Self and, second, to dampen the twinges of conscience that might take hold of a particular person. Personal grievances were less important than the overall goals of the organization.

Ignatius's ideas have been extremely influential. The rise of professionalism understood as a mixture of rationalism, technology, aloofness, depersonalization, realism, and loyalty would not have been conceivable without the Jesuits. Even on an aesthetic level, they would set a trend: the professional cherishes personal anonymity, public discretion, the invisibility of power, and, simple dress, all of which were already commended by Ignatius. Due to the successes of the first professionals in history, the craftsman became more and more marginalized as a source of economic welfare. Roughly, one may see the shift from craft to professionalism as one which leads from competence to coordination, from concretion to abstraction, from manual labor to mental labor, from quality to quantity, and from spontaneity to the exclusion of chance.

It is well known that the role of technology was extremely important in bringing about this shift. By means of new inventions such as the microscope, a reality became accessible that was until then completely unheard of. This technology allowed people to develop new and powerful perspectives, but there were some unfavorable side-effects. For example, people started to distrust their own sensory experience. Once absolutely essential to the craftsman, the senses were no longer seen as infallible sources of knowledge and became subordinated to technology-aided perception. Contempt for the senses became a hallmark of professionals who want to emancipate themselves from the

tedious sequence of trial and error. The professional was expected to be able to ban the sensory to the realm of subjectivity. The disparagement of the sensory had disastrous consequences for the position of the craftsman in Western society and perhaps even for this society as a whole. As Mumford (1963: 49) beautifully put it:

“As the outer world of perception grew in importance, the inner world of feeling became more and more impotent.”

Even worse, the disparagement of the senses caused an occupation with death, because technology-aided perception was not yet at a level that it could closely observe the “the vital processes” (1963: 50). One had to kill the object under study if one wants to know it. I alluded already to this issue in chapter four, but let me add here that the scientific obsession with *death* was also an obsession with *depth*. The anatomist became a symbol of the new sciences. By cutting open dead bodies, that is, by going below the surface, one would ultimately get a glimpse of what really mattered to an organism’s life. What was hidden from the surface became more important than the surface itself. Death and depth are the conditions of a rational science which assumes that the surface is misleading and that explanation is always a matter of digging. Mumford concludes from this that in spite of their practical achievements, sciences “were not an approach to objective reality but a departure from it. In their desire to achieve exact results the physical sciences scorned true objectivity.” (1963: 50). *Life itself became a misleading factor.*

The new rationalists disparage the senses as well. Literally so, as becomes particularly clear in Hilmer and Donaldson (1997: 86) who argue, thereby following Elliot Jaques, that management as it is currently practiced is in the same stage of development as were the natural sciences in the 16th century and earlier. Although they grant that most scientists in this area were highly experienced and practically oriented people who were able to pass on their knowledge to their students, they were unable to do three things they deem to be crucial for professionalism: a) to rise above the sensory world through careful measurement; b) the ability to detect precisely not only the static but also the process aspects of the world; c) a structure to accommodate concepts and measurements. Then they rhetorically ask what would be the position of a manager who would be unable to measure and to have knowledge. The indictment is phrased in dramatic language: Trusting the senses, that is, knowledge gathering through inadequate perception and its intuitive application hardly ever helps *humanity* in its strife for progress. Since management is still largely a primitive and immature discipline, very much based on sensory experience and hardly ever escaping the level of trial and error, we should not expect it to contribute to ongoing organizational success and societal progress.

Does society need management professionals?

So, humanity needs professionalism and, thank goodness, we have quite a lot of it. Unfortunately, the new rationalists go on, we do not have *management professionals*. This is not only bad for organizations, they say, but also bad for society as a whole. The rise of the professional can be seen as the historical answer of Western society to the menace of instability which is inevitable in overly antagonistic societies. A managerial middle class, which balances between the capitalist monsters at the top and the suppressed drudges below, is needed to keep society stable. They are the ‘general happy mediocrity’ once envisaged by Benjamin Franklin. Based on this, one might argue that the painful question

of management gurus whether organizations actually need a management ultimately jeopardizes stability in our society. That is why new rationalists, in spite of some ambivalence, think it is dangerous to break what they see as a taboo. Perhaps some organizations may be well off without these management professionals, as even some of the new rationalists grant, but our society as a whole, however, may need them desperately. This is the position defended by the new rationalists as I understand them: there are oftentimes good organizational reasons and always good social reasons for not abandoning the idea that we need management professionals.

So, the defense of management professionalism is not only phrased in terms of organizational efficiency and success but also in terms of social stability. Indeed, both parts of the argument presuppose each other. It is assumed that what is in the interest of an organization is also in the interest of our entire society. This is what makes them moral absolutists. Their position would no doubt be considered by some business critics as an unrealistic if not preposterous assumption, as if there is a common public good that we can all serve (Kingwell, 1998).

It is, however, beyond the scope of my text to enter into these issues. What I am interested in is the claim that management professionals, if there would be any, are able to serve the interests of our society. Again, however, this claim is not really argued for but simply assumed. The claim is extremely controversial for three reasons: a) as some gurus indicate, our society can very well manage without managers (this is actually one reason for the popularity of leadership discourses); b) we have already too many managers and we should therefore resist the temptation to defend their position in the name of professionalism (Saul claims that more than half of the working population in Canada is employed as manager and that the number is ever increasing); c) what is professionalism is not what the new rationalists argue it is.

The essence of professionalism, critics argue, lies in its *subordination to organization* and not to society. Management professionals are, if we are to believe people like Saul, mercenaries employed by organizations. To be sure, they are in service of a greater self, but this self is enclosed by the boundaries of the organization. The greater self to be served is never society as such but the organization. This is precisely the gist of professionalism, no matter whether it is a management professionalism or any other professionalism. Loyalty to the organization is what makes the management job respectable, not its alleged link with management science. Thus, paradoxically, if there is any identity to the professional at all, then it is should be his or her willingness to change this identity as soon as they work for a different employer. If used in this sense, professionalism among managers is already far more widespread than the new rationalists argue it is. It is this kind of professionalism that is dangerous to our society. Willfully ignoring this danger makes one a management ideologue. What are we to make of my reconstruction of the argument against management professionalism?

It is wrong, the new rationalists would no doubt say. Good professionals are not blindly following the dictates of the organization. Their conduct is determined by a body of knowledge and a set of severe ethical codes rather than by the organization they work for (Hilmer and Donaldson, 1997: 188). Such a professional charter, which is well-known amongst physicists, journalists, or scientists, would allow them to act, at least to a certain extent, independent from the employer. The problem is that this charter in which the basic rules of the profession are laid down is as yet unavailable to managers. It would surely help managers to become more respectable. Indeed, the absence of a respectable

occupational identity is exactly what makes managers so opportunistic and narrow-minded. In sum, our society desperately needs good management professionals and science and rationalism are no doubt more reliable as guides to a respectable status than irrational 'guruism'. What we have here is more than a simple controversy. It is as if the participants in the debate speak wholly different languages. Critics like Saul claim that we have too many (management) professionals and that they are a danger to societal welfare; the new rationalists, on the other hand, claim that we do not have management professionals at all. However, our society would greatly benefit if we would have a fully-fledged management professionalism.

Professionals as a discursive construct

I do not see how both positions can be reconciled. The problem is, of course, that professionalism and management have themselves become fashionable concepts which can be interpreted in many different ways. For some people, managers are the root of all evil. Management gurus such as Zaleznik (1989) or Peters (1988) are in agreement with cultural critics such as Saul (1993) that we should get rid of management. Others, however, claim that managers may very well embody the hope we have on a better world. On this, the new rationalists are in agreement with somebody like Mintzberg (1994) albeit for entirely different reasons: Hilmer and Donaldson believe that managers can be redeemed if they believe in reason, planning, and technology; Mintzberg, however, seems to argue that managers can be redeemed if they are willing to abandon their belief in reason, planning, and technology. Just as is the case with any other fashionable management concept, 'professionalism' and 'management' are highly ambivalent and confusing concepts. Given this observation, one has to work hard, very hard indeed, to fix the meanings of these concepts in order to establish the case for management professionalism.

Following a line of argument developed by Jacques (1996: 90), it might be more fruitful to see professionalism (and management) not as a concept but as a discursive reality, or a *language* constructed by people in and around organizations. Although the words and concepts used in this language – science, rationalism, professional, application, analysis, leadership, loyalty, distance, and so on – have no fixed meaning, they somehow structure relationships in and between organizations. As to the concept of professionalism, Jacques (1996: 90-95) has speculated about how this structuring might take place. Most important of all is the relationship with the customer. There has to be someone who is willing to label a certain activity as 'professional'.

Professionalism is thus a construct (just like leadership): there are no professionals if nobody is willing to use the language. In face of this, it should come as no surprise that people who have a vested interest in becoming professionals have developed tactical instruments that should persuade others to use language that might suggest professionalism. Only the 'customer' can ultimately justify the professional's claim on respect and authority. The tactical instruments used include professional codes that should, as we have seen, convince the community that the professional group is serving the interests not only of the organizations that employ them but also of society as a whole. Other instruments are patents, copyrights, quality marks, hallmarks, and other more or less legal means used to make clear to the customer, first, that the required expertise has been rightfully obtained and, second, that the customer can always recur to the law if dissatisfied.

A final group of instruments used to seduce people to construct professionalism relates to the use made by organizations of education, academia, science, the use of titles, and other ways to suggest that people in the organization are professionals who do no so much work for God, family, or a particular community, as was once the case with the craftsman, but for the well-being of society as such. After all, the relationship with science and rational objectivity is extremely useful because it suggests a certain disinterestedness. In a world which is replete with competing interests, the professional claims that he or she deserves respect due to his or her relationship with (disinterested) science. That is, the very idea to develop management theory or management knowledge – which would enable the professional to lift over the morass of contradicting interests – is from the outset affected by this desire to become a professional. So, let us now turn to management theory.

The dream of a management science

The new rationalists are not interested in science purely for theoretical reasons. They hope that management professionals of the future will be wise enough to see that they need science to avoid unfounded simplifications and blunt error in decision-making (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1997: 197). They are not interested in management theory for its own sake. The hard and irrefutable facts that ought to be delivered by such a discipline are assumed to have practical value. Such language about hard fact and irrefutable knowledge thus serves other purposes than the truth as such. Utility, for example.

New rationalists clearly do not believe in the type of science that emancipates and liberates. Such a concept of science has been defended by the members of the Frankfurter School, Habermas perhaps the most outstanding of them. They argued that only by serving the truth, science might be a liberating force (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996: 14). A science which does not opt for truth cannot be but suppressive and ideological. Habermas might be right about this, but science as it is practiced serves a wholly different kind of ‘reality principle’ than he hopes for. Pawlett (1997: 95) has pointed out that in scientific practice, truth is preceded by something else:

“Utility must be regarded as the historical, political and economical ‘reality principle’ of the Western capital nations, conditioning or pre-structuring practically all knowledge and truth-claims, theoretical speculation and methodological design. A great deal of academic thought and university-based knowledge is little other than search, discovery of *useful* thought, knowledge that may be applied, developed, circulated, utilized for greater human productivity, potentiality, or, increasing, security. (...) The principle of utility is so widespread, so firmly entrenched, so taken-for-granted that it becomes almost imperceptible, invisible against the canvas of late modern society.”

Reality is usefulness. One effect of this is that you can, in the name of reality, easily exclude people who do not deliver utility. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997: 359-361) believe that management theory should be exempt from “interlopers” such as philosophers, poets, SF-fanatics, sports people, or other “intellectual traders”, that is, “people who import ideas wholesale from other disciplines”. They ride roughshod on those who think

that, for example, chaos theory or biology should become sources of inspiration for management practitioners. A fully-fledged management theory understood as a body of knowledge with a scientific status will easily be able to get rid of such interlopers and to dispel "the stench of greed" (1997: 359).

The normalization of success

Management theory is, as we all know, often delivered in the form of good-looking recipes. These recipes are not only useful for daily practice, it is argued, but they also help preparing the readers to become a particular kind of subject. The texts of the new rationalist are no exception to this: where gurus hope their readers to become learning (Senge), entrepreneurial (Hammer), or moral (Covey) subjects, new rationalist hope they will become professionals. So, management knowledge laid down in fashionable textbooks (including, I would suggest, those of the new rationalists) do not only purport that practical goals such as increased productivity might be achieved, they also claim *to change the person* who is reading or studying the text. This is, as I have argued throughout this book, what makes management theory indelibly fashionable.

I even go so far as to suggest that management theory is not so much about telling the truth or delivering practical value as it is about changing people. In this regard, the texts of the new rationalists are not different from the gurus they claim to take issue with. Management knowledge often exemplifies a missionary zeal which is, I believe, alien to or at least less conspicuous in other scientific disciplines. In this regard there is no difference between the self-help literature offered by people like Siimon Reynolds (Kingwell, 1998), an Australian consultant who claims that he knows how to make people happy in eight minutes, and people like Lex Donaldson who urges his readers to become professionally suspicious of gurus like Reynolds. For all their differences, both men share the assumption that people in organizational contexts should become performers. Where Donaldson uses rationalism, Reynolds uses a kind of 'soft humanism' which is characteristic of much self-help literature (Garsten and Grey, 1997). Both are, however, obsessed with utility, performance, and success.

What the new rationalists want to make clear is that successful performance of organizations is always based on healthy, scientific principles. Their thrust is to *normalize* success, to make clear that no mystery is involved and to point out that success can be achieved by anybody who abides by the rules or follows the recipe. To convince managers that success is achievable, you have to rub off the veneer of mysticism that surrounds it. Management theory can make itself useful only if it soberly addresses the rules leading to success. How would, according to the new rationalists, a useful management theory look like? Here are some suggestions by Hilmer and Donaldson (1997: 188-199)

1. The knowledge management theory delivers should be universally applicable. It should be possible, at least to a considerable extent, to extrapolate the truth revealed in one company to another, no matter where both companies are geographically located.
2. Its knowledge should be related to broader social concerns, because it is relevant to society as a whole. However, such a democratization should not entail loss of quality, that is to say, you are only encouraged to participate in the discourse on management if you know something about it. The concern about quality has a moral component. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997: 369) point out that "poor management theories have cost people their jobs and have bankrupted companies". They even go as far as to claim that the political debate "might be improved if 'normal' people had a better grasp

of management theory" (1997: 367). (I feel tempted to ask two questions here. First, are greed, bad luck, corruption, conflict, or simply bad practice not as important as poor theories in order to explain problems in organizations? That is, *why do new rationalists think that good theory is so important?* Second, why not argue that managers should know more about social theory or society rather than that we, 'normal people', should know more about management?)

3. Its knowledge originates in organizations which should therefore be seen as laboratories. However, the realm of the senses are not to be trusted because it merely leads to primitive forms of knowledge. Experiments should be carried out in an objective way and should always be reproducible. Forms of knowledge that are obtained without meeting these requirements are not accepted.
4. Exact terminology is extremely important. Knowledge should be laid down in unequivocal definitions and rules. 'Terminological exactness' is crucial.
5. Its knowledge should be accessible to all practitioners. This is not to say that it should be simple. Simplification is dangerous.
6. Its knowledge should be useful.

Of course, new rationalists are painfully aware that there is no management knowledge which has attained this status. They speak about a 'primitive' and 'patchy' form of knowledge which is hindered in its efforts to become more mature by fear (for painful yet unavoidable measures), greed (see consultants), interference (by aforementioned 'interlopers') and a dangerous confidence in common sense (as a wrong answer to organizational complexities). Besides, where are the great men (or women?) in management theory? Physics has its Newton, biology has Darwin, all men who have contributed to the disciplining of their respective areas of interest. They were able to liberate knowledge from the senses which had such a suffocating grip on knowledge for so long. In sum, where is the great mainstay of management theory? Drucker perhaps, Micklethwait and Wooldridge argue, but who else?

Misrepresenting scientific practice

Above I already argued that managerial practice does not seem to mesh with the rational and scientific perspective developed by the new rationalists, as is evidenced in the ethnographic studies from which I quoted. Moreover, I claimed that fashion might mesh much better with managerial practice. Here, I would like to add a further argument against the new rationalists: *they misrepresent scientific practice*. The practitioners who are supposed to read their book are offered a picture of science which is, to say the least, fairly dubious. It is not necessary to engage here in philosophical debates about the alleged rationality of science, but theorists such as Kuhn, Lakatos, and Feyerabend have pointed out that scientists are normal people like the rest of us. One does not necessarily have to follow Feyerabend's suggestion (1975) that science is in fact a dadaistic and surrealistic activity in order to have doubts about the way in which the new rationalists represent science. Science, even physics, is not rational and objective. It has its own social dynamics (power, conflict, fear, etc.) just like any other institution, and this seems to be grossly overlooked by the new rationalists. Indeed, it is hardly imaginable that it is free from the vagaries of fashion.

To illustrate my point, it is enough to refer to ethnographic research into scientific practice. What Mintzberg and Watson did with respect to managers, Latour and Woolgar

(1979) did with respect to scientists. They did research in Salk Laboratory in California where chemists and biologists conducted experiments that would eventually lead to the Noble Prize. Latour and Woolgar claim that people in this laboratory were always debating about the question what counts as knowledge and what not. They noticed that status was extremely important during these debates: How experienced is somebody? How much did he or she publish? How long has he or she been working for the laboratory? Whether something was counted as factual knowledge or not, Latour and Woolgar suggest, was more dependent on the answers found to such questions than on what was found under the microscope. Knowledge was the result of social process of negotiation where personal impact and status rather than reproducible experiment played a crucially important role. Latour and Woolgar suggest that a kind of 'hierarchy of facts' was in operation in Salk Laboratory:

1. Commonly accepted facts that were taken for granted.
2. Facts explicitly discussed in, for example, scientific articles and books. These facts are described in statements such as: "The limbic system is important for the learning and memorial capacity of a human being."
3. Facts referred to in meta-statements (often occurring in the opening lines of articles) such as: "Oftentimes it is assumed that the limbic system is important for the learning and memorial capacity of a human being."
4. Facts referred to in terms of uncertainty as in the following statement: "There are indications that the limbic system is important for the learning and memorial capacity of a human being. More research, however, is necessary."
5. Facts referred to in people's conjectures and speculations (often described in the final paragraphs of an article), meant to incite further debate and research.

This hierarchy of facts, Latour and Woolgar claim, is the subject of endless negotiation. More precisely, debates among people working in Salk Laboratory were basically related to the question how conjectures and speculations might become taken for granted. The all-important question is how to raise a fact from level 5 or 4 to level 2 or 1. Latour and Woolgar's central claim is that a respected professor has much less difficulties with this process than an anonymous laboratory assistant. They infer that the 'objective' reality in Salk Laboratory is not to be found during experiments, but constructed during the social process in which people are engaged. In short, hard facts are not the cause of scientific behavior, but rather its consequence.

Science is thus hardly the rational and objective bulwark the new rationalists suggest it is. The image of a rational and objective science is itself thoroughly utopian. So, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, I wish to argue that actual management practice *does* resemble scientific practice, but it does not in the way the new rationalist hopes for. It is, for example, not too difficult to imagine that hierarchies similar to the one described by Latour and Woolgar are in operation in organizations as well. For example, as members have often indicated themselves, organizations are rife with gossip, rumor, and intrigue (Watson, 1994: 182; Fineman and Gabriel, 1996: 130) rather than with less disputable forms of knowledge. Following Latour and Woolgar, it would be interesting to speculate about the social dynamics involved when in a particular situation a gossip becomes more than merely a gossip and is transformed into commonly accepted knowledge. Here it suffices to note that, as Fineman and Gabriel (1996: 149) have suggested, much business, even successful business, is "done in quiet corners, bypassing the formal channels of

communication.”

The new rationalists bemoan such a state of affairs, for it breeds secrecy and suspicion, it reduces formal procedures to a “mask, beneath which the real work is done” (ibid.), and it undermines “the direction and changes desired by management” (1996: 155). All of this may be true, but we may also understand the grapevine as something positive, which allows employees and management to escape from the formal structures of communication. Fineman and Gabriel point out that the grapevine also “grows from people’s spontaneous desire to communicate and to penetrate security screens” (1996: 155). Given the important role of informal communication in organizations, one may really wonder how useful the ideal of an objective and positivistic science is for practitioners themselves.

More importantly, the ambivalence with which Fineman and Gabriel treat gossip is analogous to the ambivalence with which I have treated management fashion. We may bemoan its vagaries and uncontrollability, but like gossip (or, to mention one more example, humor) it has also a certain liberatory and critical potential, because it offers practitioners a possibility to play with identities, to experiment with signs, to momentarily escape the economic bottom line from which there oftentimes seems to be no escape. It is true, we may criticize fashion (or gossip) for masking profound social inertia or for promoting “the judgement of people by their appearances rather than by their deeds” (Negrin, 1999: 114–115), but we may also applaud its frivolity and gracefulness, or, more accurately, its (potential) power to deflect attention away from the utilitarian and rational-utopian discourses that are so pervasive in our organizations. It provides an important yet far from perfect or definite answer to people’s desire to resist the formal and the rational. Much criticism of fashion overlooks this desire.

Concluding remarks

It is often argued that fashion conspires with capitalism and leaves unchallenged the basic assumptions and structure underlying it. Much of this criticism is true, not because of fashion’s fashionability, but because of its inability to resist non-fashionable and utopian elements. It might be argued that many of these utopian elements have already been realized in our organizations and, indeed, in our entire society. The utopian obsession with productivity, detail, hygiene, control, and violence as a means to deal with scarcity, that is to say, as a means to bring about utilitarian happiness has become real for many people working for organizations in Western and East-Asian societies. They live in the “audit society”, as Power (1998) has it, a society where people are constantly checking whether their performance and productivity meet the standards; where they are never short of food, drinks, amusements, comfort, and whatever it is they think they need; and even though they are dimly aware that many people are excluded from their own world, they do not seem to suffer from this at all and are, like the inhabitants of Moore’s *Utopia*, happy and grateful that they do not have dirty hands or that hardship does not affect them.

I do not wish to suggest that management fashion genuinely threatens this realized utopia. On the contrary, it leaves intact the *happiness-machine* which many of our organizations have become, and as such it arguably contributes to social inertia. It does not seriously affect the way new rationalists and other utopians want to design happiness.

It is not capable of challenging such processes because it always wants to escape from itself and because it refuses to stick to appearances as such. Management fashion is not, as I said earlier, fashionable all the way down. As a result, most disseminators of management fashion stand alongside the utopians who claim that they are able to 'understand' what really lies underneath the world of appearances.

In short, they all claim they know what organizations are really about – and utilitarian happiness, understood as a reduction of scarcity, is, of course, what organizations are really about. In other words, the disseminators of fashion – the Guru, the Consultant, and the Entrepreneur – do not wish to challenge dogmatic understandings of organizations. Those who do so, are invariably described as dangerous and idiotic. The problem I have with the disseminators of fashion is that that they are reluctant to take their own fashionable theories fashionably.

If, however, they would do so, they would resist the temptation to explain what happens in organizations in terms of what is often hidden. I have suggested that fashion is fascinated by the surface, that it is ever-changing, volatile, whimsical, nonsensical, and so on. Managerial practice often shares the same sort of characteristics. The hidden source from which managerial practices should spring is in daily practice not as clear as rationalists and utopians would have it. What management or organization is all about, is in the experience of those who are involved not nearly as obvious as some would like it to be. A more sympathetic, more sensible and more understanding view of managers would acknowledge that for most people in organizations, there is no hidden truth behind what they do. Sometimes a vague thought perhaps, but not a hidden truth.

In other words, people in organizations refuse to live by the standards of the hidden utopia (Achterhuis, 1998: 362-363). They do not accept that calculation or method is all there is, they resist technological determination or formal closure, they change meanings according to convenience, they resist efforts to fix their identity, they sometimes behave as bureaucrats and sometimes refuse to do so, they do not always want to be productive or useful, and they themselves differ thoroughly about what the hidden truth of all organizing might be.

A consistently fashionable theory about management and organization would acknowledge and even underscore all these ever-changing self-understandings. It would resist efforts to understand organization by constantly reducing it to "a permanent or quasi-permanent foundation" (Taylor, 1998: 173). It would endorse alternative, perhaps more imaginative, literary, lyric, or aesthetic understandings of excess, emotion, strategies, ideas, planning, rumor, formalism, gossip, joy, and sadness in organizations. It would become critical of the kind of hierarchical reductionism Taylor complains about. Infrastructure is not more real than suprastructure. There is enough in the surface to warrant our curiosity.

Practitioners and theorists do not need an escape from fashion. Perhaps, they should become fashionable all the way down. After all, if theories and practices can be fashionable, why can't fashion be theoretical?

Afterthoughts

The final chapter of this book was written in June 1999. Now, five or six months later, it seems to me that my central thesis borders on the edge of plausibility. I don't regret this. It is a fine place to be. It is the place where I feel at home. Let me explain this.

Should we take somebody serious when he argues that managers should become more fashionable? Should we believe somebody who appears to believe that trusting science or rationality in organizational settings is a fairly awkward thing to do? As a friend of mine wrote, my entire project runs the risk of being dismissed as "self-conscious avant gardism", as "intellectual dandyism", or as a rather self-clever exercise in irony, something which is merely interesting for obsessed obstructionists or outsider intellectuals like myself. I run the risk that somebody will ask me: "And so you, a consultant, say that you like fashion? You must be playing the fool ..."

For reasons that will become clearer below, I do not like or wish to legitimate myself or what I have done. If people think my thesis is outlandish, I can live with that. They may feel that they have very good reasons for thinking this. But I have my reasons as well. My fascination for fashion is as playful as it is serious. My work as a consultant and trainer has convinced me long ago that traditional and ingrained ways of thinking do not learn us anything about what is going on in organizations. On the contrary, they learn us to blind ourselves for what is going on.

Take the example of strategy. It is often suggested that organizations have or should have one overarching strategy, but I have noticed only too often that the organizations I happen to know are, if anything, conglomerates of rather vague and fickle intentions which are often played out on a personal level; indeed, the monolithic and overarching strategy is simply absent or withers away on paper. Or take leadership. It is always taken for granted that it is or should be somewhere in organizations, most likely because it is reputed to provide direction, but what I see or feel is merely an ever-changing set of relationships that are oftentimes barely comprehensible.

Related to this uneasiness about what is going on is the depressing lack of irony with which issues such as strategy or leadership – but the same could be said of culture or learning – are approached by trainers, consultants, and practitioners. How serious this bunch of people are! Not long ago, an MBA-student at a business school where I happen to work, was complaining about my suggestion to embellish his paper with a nice anecdote. He complained about this to the director of the business school, saying that Mr. ten Bos should not expect a funny paper from somebody who works in a business with an annual turnover of five million dollars. Such an amount of money, after all, is not to be taken lightheartedly.

Strategy was for him a set of bloodless planning techniques that could help bloodless managers to solve their bloodless problems. So it is for most of the consultants I know. They lose the fun, but they also lose the emotional side of organizations. It is disappointingly rare to see trainers or consultants who take the uncertainty of decision-makers in organizations as a given that should be looked, as it were, straight in the eye rather than as something from which you should escape as soon as possible. My job is increasingly pervaded by technicalities that merely deliver the sort of decisiveness that

sponges on indifference. Clients are usually overloaded with methods and techniques which are all claimed to be practical but are in fact based on lousy and obsolete theories. But they ask for such techniques, one might argue, but that would merely amount to market cynicism.

With it comes a load of technobabble that takes all the fun and passion away: people in organizations, but also consultants and academics talk about 'norms', 'codes', '360 degree feedback systems', 'balance scorecards', 'benchmarks', 'management by objectives', 'double-loop learning', 'dynamic capabilities', 'core competences', 'appraisal systems', 'psychometrics', 'human resource management', and so on. All these expressions, vague, ugly, and inescapable as they may be, serve to reduce the world of organizations, that is, the mobile and ever-changing world of togetherness, intimacy, politics, and separation, to a technical problem. Even such a (to my mind quite weird) issue as leadership is systematically represented as something technical (which makes it, needless to say, still weirder). As Mark Kingwell (1996: 316) has pointed out:

"Leadership training is not sold on the wisdom of its lessons, for that wisdom could be had much more cheaply in your local bookstore – or simply by pausing to think a while. It is sold instead on the air of 'technological' sharpness contained in the surveys, overheads, and feedback tools. This is technotopian leadership (...). It is virtual leadership."

Kingwell is right. Politics, commitment, and quality are replaced by social and not so social sciences. This is part of the utopian tendency I have tried to describe and criticize. Oftentimes I have the very disquieting feeling that the kind of business I am in is also part of a broader political strategy deployed to conceal real motives of those at the top. That is, the more consultants, academics, and in their wake, employees talk about communicative cultures and spiritualism (exemplified by democratic parking lots!), the more I have the feeling that they entirely miss what big business is all about. I can't help thinking that a CEO who really engages in open communication will very soon lose his or her power position.

Psychologists would have us believe that bad communication indicates at best a lack of skills and at worst a character deficiency, but is bad communication not simply a strategic choice? To tell people that it is something else, can make you an accomplice. It is not that I expect a dark and evil conspiracy of the top executives against the rest of the world. It is more that I understand that their intentions and interests need not necessarily be those of the people with whom I work, let alone mine. In other words, there are circumstances that invite the consultant to become more subversive. There are circumstances, that is, in which he or she should refuse to collaborate with the project of idealizing the employee (i.e. making this person simultaneously assertive and docile) or the perfection of the organization (i.e. making it a happy place where everybody works oneself to death).

I have chosen the metaphor of fashion as the weapon with which to combat such utopianism. But why fashion? Wasn't there a more credible way of venting my spleen? Of course, but I needed a radical and provocative metaphor, because I am not at all optimistic about the possibilities of a new, more subversive consultancy or management practice. It is true, the consultancy world is plural enough to allow for a few outsiders or

mavericks, that is to say, for people who dare to go against the grain, but they are and will remain exceptions to the rule. Perhaps they are the true consultants. Most would-be consultants, however, have become salesmen who sell methods, techniques and panaceas. In doing so, they have often become like temps who are hired to do the unavoidable nasty jobs generally referred to with euphemisms such as 'outsourcing', 'downsizing', or 're-organizing'. The market apparently asks for this kind of consultant and not for the person I envisage. Anyhow, the business has always been chameleon-like enough to appropriately respond to whatever it is that the market desires (ten Bos & van der Wal, 1997). Nowadays, we find consultants, preferably business ethicists, who tell managers how to sack people or to plunder the world without losing their inner peace. This is one way of linking decisiveness and indifference.

I also chose fashion because it is a dangerous substance. First, it is inextricably linked to the identity of consultants like myself. Second, it is something which is often scorned by many people including consultants like myself. Third, the notion itself is so full of ambiguity and paradox that nobody in my line of business, myself included, seems to know whether s/he wants to be fashionable or not. This is, I thought, enough to make what I wrote painful or explosive. And that is what dangerous substances should be.

Not very long ago I published an article in a newspaper about the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk whose insights in biotechnology and attacks on the Frankfurter Schule had caused a vehement row among intellectuals in Germany (ten Bos, 1999). Sloterdijk defended his position by arguing that philosophers should, if anything, become masters in the art of handling dangerous substances. In the article, I use Sloterdijk's texts as an example to show one might become such a master. Here it is:

1. There should be more laughter in any intellectual work. If there is any space at all for seriousness, it should be a seriousness of the passionate rather than the detached kind. Sloterdijk's recent work on spheres or cultures (1999) provides many hilarious examples. There is a passage on teamwork, for instance. Sloterdijk suggests that this can best be studied by observing what happened on the ships of the Great Discoverers during the 15th and 16th century. These journeys became successful, Sloterdijk suggests, because the travelers respected a small number of rock-solid principles: one should believe in happy-endism in order to maintain teamspirit; one should weed out any thought of returning to Spain or Portugal (change is irreversible); and one should distinguish optimists and pessimists and, if necessary, execute the latter (cultural management). Team psychology, Sloterdijk claims, is in fact expedition psychology.
2. One should be willing to ask painful questions. This is not the same as asking new questions. Sloterdijk's book about spheres can be seen as re-addressing an old question once asked by Pascal: is objective or scientific knowledge important enough as to warrant the loss of all the comforting illusions we once had? Does it help humankind to know that God doesn't exist anymore? Are the attacks of disillusionment caused by science helpful for the species? Are we still able to see knowledge as an instrument? Has it, in face of these questions, not become an overarching goal to which we should subject ourselves? Do we wish to accept the consequences of this?
3. Related to this is the persistent refusal not to stick your nose into other people's affairs. That is, a consultant, for example, should find inspiration not only and not even primarily in the professional literature but also in the history of art, in music, literature, economics, politics, and whatever domain you like. It allows you to link

Greek mythology with cultural management, postmodern organizations with Jerry Springer or the middle ages, and globalization with the exile from paradise. You should avoid becoming a specialist and gleefully accept the scorn of those who claim to know it better. You should be willing to tell untruths or to distort the truth in order to gain deeper insights.

4. Crucially important is, finally, the ability to cause disbelief without downright dismissal. It is good when people both have difficulties to believe you and do not dare to directly dismiss what you had to say as nonsense. This is the glory of confusion and it is what good philosophers should strive for, if we are to believe Sloterdijk. The same applies to my consultants. They should confuse, break through ingrained habits of thinking and eventually introduce new ones.

They should, in short, balance on the edge of plausibility. This is, by the way, generally not what is expected of professionals whose very essence is self-legitimation and plausibility. The subversive consultants I have in mind should behave as hopeless albeit not hapless amateurs. They know only too well that they cannot legitimate themselves. They do not feel bad about this.

René ten Bos, 6-11-1999

References

- Abrahamson, L. (1996) 'Management fashion', *Academy of Management Review*, 21: 254-285
- Achterhuis, H. (1984) *Arbeid, een eigenaardig medicijn..* Baarn: Ambo
- Achterhuis, H. (1998) *De erfenis van de utopie*. Amsterdam: Ambo
- Alchian, A. & H. Demsets (1972) 'Production, information costs, and economic organization', *American Economic Review*, 62/5: 777-795
- Alders, B. (1993) 'Lean production: Is er sprake van een Westeuropes perspectief?' *M&O* 47/1: 39-54
- Alvesson, M. (1993a) *Cultural Perspectives on Organizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Alvesson, M. (1993b) 'The play of metaphors', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage, 114-131
- Alvesson, M. & H. Willmott (1996) *Making Sense of Management*. London: Sage
- Arendt, H. (1973) *Men in Dark Times*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Arrow, K. (1985) 'The economics of agency', in: J. Pratt and J. Zeckhauser (eds.) *Principals and Agents: The Structure of Business*. Boston (Ma.): Harvard Business School Press, 37-51
- Auster, P. (1982) *The Invention of Solitude*. New York: Penguin
- Auster, P. (1987) *In the Country of Last Things*. New York: Penguin
- Badaracco Jr., J. & R. Ellsworth (1989) *Leadership and the Quest for Integrity*. Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard Business School Press
- Baker, E. (1980) 'Managing organizational culture', *Management Review*, June, 8-13
- Ballé, M. (1995) *The Business Process Re-engineering Action Kid*. New York: Kogan Page
- Barnard, C. (1997) 'The nature of leadership', in: K. Grint (ed.) *Leadership. Classical, Contemporary, and Critical Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 89-111
- Barney, J. (1991) 'Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage', *Journal of Management*, 17/1: 99-120
- Barney, J. (1997) 'Strategic factor markets: expectations, luck, and business strategy', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 146-160
- Barney, J. and W. Hesterly (1996) 'Organizational economics: Understanding the relationship between organizations and economic analysis', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 115-147
- Barthes, R. 1983 *The Fashion System*. New York: Hill & Wang
- Bass, B. & B. Avolio (1990) 'Developing transformational leadership: 1992 and beyond', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 14: 21-37
- Bastos, A. (1987) *I, the Supreme*. London: Faber & Faber
- Batelaan, M.V. (1993) 'Tien manieren om redesign te verknoeien.' *Holland Management Review* 35: 84-89
- Bauman, Z. (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford: Polity/Blackwell
- Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Bauman, Z. (1995) *Life in Fragments*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Bauman, Z. (1997) *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Baumol, W. (1982) 'Contestable markets: an uprising in the theory of industry structure', *American Economic Review*, 72/1: 1-15

- Bax, E. (1991) *Organisatiecultuur, technologie en management in een veranderende samenleving*. Utrecht: Het Spectrum
- Benders, J., R.-J. van den Berg & M. van Bijsterveld (1998) 'Hitch-hiking on a hype: Dutch consultants engineering re-engineering,' *Journal of Organizational Change*, 11/3: 201-215
- Benders, J. & K. van Veen (1999) 'Worn out through use: why management concepts become unfashionable', *paper presented at the 15th EGOS colloquium*, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom
- Bennis, W. & B. Nanus (1985) *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harper & Row
- Bergen, M., S. Dutta, & O. Walker Jr. (1992) 'Agency relationships in marketing: a review of the implications and applications of agency and related theory', *Journal of Marketing*, 56/June: 1-24
- Berlin, I (1981) *Against the Current*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Beynon, H. (1977) *Working for Ford*. New York: EP Publishing
- Bhide, A. (1994) 'How entrepreneurs craft strategies that work', *Harvard Business Review*, 72/2: 15-161
- Bing, S. (1992) *Crazy Bosses: Spotting Them, Serving Them, Surviving Them*. New York: William Morrow and Co
- Blanchard, K. & N. Peale (1988) *The Power of Ethical Management*. New York: Fawcett Crest
- Braudel, F. (1987) *Beschaving, economie en kapitalisme (15^e-18^e eeuw)*. *De structuur van het dagelijkse leven*. Amsterdam: Contact
- Bryman, A. (1986) *Leadership and Organizations*. London: Routledge
- Bryman, A. (1996) 'Leadership in organizations', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy and W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 276-292
- Burrell, G. (1996a) *Pandemonium. Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*. London: Sage
- Burrell, G. (1996b) 'Normal science, paradigms, metaphors, discourses and genealogies', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 642-659
- Burrell, G. & G. Morgan (1979) *Sociological Paradigm and Organizational Analysis*. London: Heinemann
- Cheung, S. (1983) 'The contractual nature of the firm', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 26: 1-26
- Chia, R. (1996) *Organizational Analysis as Deconstructive Practice*. Berlin: De Gruyter
- Chia, R. (1998) 'From complexity science to complex thinking: Organization as simple location', *Organization* 5/3: 341-369
- Child, J. (1997) 'Strategic choice in the analysis of action, structure, organizations and environment: retrospects and prospect', *Organization Studies*, 18/1: 43-76
- Clark, T. & G. Salaman (1996) 'The management guru as organizational witch doctor', *Organization*, 3/1: 85-108
- Clegg, S. (1990) *Modern Organizations. Organization Studies in a Postmodern World*. London: Sage
- Clegg, S. (1994) 'Social theory for the study of organization: Weber and Foucault', *Organization* 1/1: 149-178
- Clegg, S. (1996) 'The curious enlightenment of professor Donaldson', *Australian Journal of Management*, 21/2: 195-205
- Clegg, S., M. Barrett, T. Clarke, L. Dwyer, J. Gray, S. Kemp & J. Marceau (1996) 'Management knowledge for the future: Innovation, embryos and new paradigms', in: S. Clegg and G. Palmer (eds.) *The Politics of Management Knowledge*. London: Sage, 190-235
- Clegg, S. & C. Hardy (1996) 'Introduction. Organizations, organization, and organizing', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 1-28
- Cohen, T. (1983) 'Jokes', in: E. Schaper (ed.) *Pleasure, Preference, and Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 120-136
- Collins, D. (1997) 'Knowledge work or working knowledge? Ambiguity and confusion in the analysis of the "knowledge age".' *Employee Relations*, 19/1: 38-50
- Collins, J. & J. Porras (1996) *Built to Last. Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. London: Random House
- Cooke, B. (1999) 'Writing the left out of management theory: The historiography of the management of change', *Organization* 6/1: 81-105
- Cools, K. (1991) 'Financiële topmanagers over hun vermogensstructuur', *Maandblad voor Accountancy en Bedrijfskunde*, Maart, 87-101
- Cooper, R. & G. Burrell (1989) 'Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis', *Organization Studies* 9/1: 91-112
- Copi, I. (1981) 'Language analysis and metaphysical inquiry', in: R. Rorty (ed.) *The Linguistic Turn. Essays in Philosophical Method*. Chicago (Il.): University of Chicago Press
- Covey, S. (1990a) *Principle-Centered Leadership*. New York: Simon and Schuster
- Covey, S. (1990b) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster
- Daft, R. (1989) *Organizational Theory and Design, 3rd Edition*. New York: West Publishing
- Dalton, M. (1959) *Men Who Manage*. New York: Wiley
- Davenport, T. (1992) *Process Innovation: Reengineering Work Through Information Technology*. Boston: Harvard Business Press
- Davies, A. (1991) *Strategic Leadership: Making Corporate Plans Work*. Cambridge: Woodhead-Faulkner
- Davis, S. & C. Meyer (1998) *Blur: the Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*. Reading (Ma.): Addison-Wesley
- Deal, T. & A. Kennedy (1982) *Corporate Culture*. Reading (Ma.): Addison-Wesley
- de Geus, A. (1988) 'Planning als leerproces', *Holland Management Review*, 16: 65-70
- de Geus, A. (1988a) 'Planning as learning', *Harvard Business Review* 66/2: 70-74
- de Geus, A. (1997) *De levende onderneming. Over leven en leren in een turbulente omgeving*. Schiedam: Scriptum.
- Waal, F. de (1997) *Van nature goed. Over de oorsprong van goed en kwaad in mensen en andere dieren*. Amsterdam: Contact
- Demsetz, H. (1997) 'Industry structure, market rivalry, and public policy', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 73-81
- Dennett, D. (1993) *Consciousness Explained*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Descartes, R. (1986) *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Donaldson, L. (1996) *For Positivist Organization Theory: Proving the Hard Core*. London: Sage
- du Gay, P. (1996) *Consumption and Identity at Work*. London: Sage
- Eccles, R., N. Nohria & J. D. Berkley (1992) *Beyond the Hype: Rediscovering the Essence of Management*. Boston (Ma.): Harvard Business School Press
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989) 'Agency theory: an assessment and review', *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 57-74
- Estes, W.(ed.) (1978) *Handbook of Learning and Cognitive Processes. Vol. 6*. New York (NY): John Wiley
- Feyerabend, P. (1975) *Against Method*. New York: Verso
- Fiegenbaum, A., S. Hart & D. Schendel (1994) 'Strategic reference point theory', in: H. Thomas, D.

- O'Neal, R. White & D. Hurst (eds.) *Building the Strategically-responsive Organization*. New York: Wiley, 129-149
- Fineman, S. (ed.) (1993) *Emotion in Organization*. London: Sage
- Fineman, S. & Y. Gabriel (1996) *Experiencing Organization*. London: Sage
- Floyd, S. & B. Wooldridge (1994) 'Dynosaurus or dynamos: recognizing middle management's strategic role', *Academy of Management Executive* 8/4: 47-57
- Foss, N. (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Foss, N. (1997a) 'Resources and strategy: A brief overview of themes and contributions', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4-18
- Foss, N. (1997b) 'Resources and strategy: problems, open issues, and ways ahead', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 345-365
- Foucault, M. (1985) *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Foucault, M. (1997) *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume I: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin
- Friedman, J. (1994) 'Mediamagenaar Summer R. Redstone', *Dutch*, 1: 84-88
- Fromm, E. (1976) *De gezonde samenleving: Psychopathologie van democratie en kapitalisme*. Utrecht: Bijleveld
- Frost, P., L. Moore, M. Louis, C. Lundberg, & J. Martin (eds.) (1985) *Organizational Culture*. Beverly Hills (Ca.): Sage
- Fukuyama, F (1996) *Trust. The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press
- Fulop, L. & W. Rifkin (1997) 'Representing fear in learning in organisations', *Management Learning*, 28/1: 45-63
- Gaines, J. (1995) '“You don't necessarily have to be charismatic ...”: an interview with Anita Roddick and reflection on charismatic processes in the Body Shop International', in: P. Frost, V. Mitchell & W. Nord (eds.) *Managerial Reality. Balancing Technique, Practice and Value*. New York: Harper Collins, 400-413
- Gagliardi P. (1996) 'Exploring the aesthetic side of organizational life', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 565-580
- Garsten, C. & C. Grey (1997) 'How to become oneself: Discourses of subjectivity in post-bureaucratic organizations', *Organization* 4/2: 211-228
- Geber, B. (1994) "An interview with C.K. Prahalad." *Training*, November: 33-38
- Gergen, K. (1992) 'Organization theory in the modern era', in: M. Reed & M. Hughes (eds.) *Rethinking Organization. New Directions in Organizational Research and Analysis*. London: Sage, 207-226
- Ghemawat, P. (1986) 'Sustainable advantage', *Harvard Business Review*, 64/5: 53-58
- Gibson, R. (1997) *Rethinking the future. Visies op leiderschap, organisaties, markten en de wereld*. Zaltbommel: Thema
- Gini, A. & T. Sullivan (1987) 'Work: the process and the person', *Journal of Business Ethics* 6: 649-655
- Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotionele intelligentie. Emotie als sleutel tot succes*. Amsterdam: Contact
- Gower (1988) *Gower Training Resources: Complete Catalogue of Training Films*. Aldershot: Gower
- Granovetter, M. (1985) 'Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91/3: 481-510
- Griffin, D., P. Shaw & R. Stacey (1998) 'Speaking of complexity in management theory and practice', *Organization*, 5/3: 315-339

- Grint, K. (1995) *Management: A Sociological Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Grint, K. (1997) *Fuzzy Management. Contemporary Ideas and Practices at Work*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Grint, K. (ed.) (1997a) *Leadership. Classical, Contemporary and Critical Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Halperin, D. (1997) *Saint=Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hamel, G. (1994) 'Breaking the frame: strategy as stretch and leverage', in: H. Thomas, D. O'Neal, R. White & D. Hurst (eds.) *"Building the Strategically-responsive Organization."* New York: Wiley, 45-99
- Hamel, G. & C.K. Prahalad (1991) 'Corporate imagination and expeditionary marketing,' *Harvard Business Review* 69/3: 81-92
- Hamel, G. & C.K. Prahalad (1994) *Competing for the Future: Breakthrough Strategies for Seizing Control of Your Industry and Creating the Markets of Tomorrow*. Boston: Harvard Business Press
- Hammer, M. (1990) 'Reengineering the corporation: don't automate, obliterate', *Harvard Business Review* 68/4: 104-112
- Hammer, M. & J. Champy (1993) *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. New York: Harper Business
- Hammer, M. & S. Stanton (1995) *Het re-engineering handboek*. Amsterdam: Contact
- Hampden-Turner, C. (1990) *Charting the Corporate Mind. From Dilemma to Strategy*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Handy, C. (1985) *Understanding Organizations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Handy, C. (1995) *The Age of Unreason*. Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard Business School Press
- Hansen, K. (1996) 'The mentality of management: self-images of American top executives', in: S. Clegg and G. Palmer (eds.) *The Politics of Management Knowledge*. London: Sage, 36-45
- Harrison, R. (1972) 'Understanding your organization's character', *Harvard Business Review*, 50/3: 119-129
- Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell
- Heidegger, M. (1979) *Sein und Zeit*. Tuebingen: Niemeyer Verlag
- Hersey, P. and K. Blanchard (1982) *The Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall
- Hilmer, F. & L. Donaldson 1997. *Management: een herwaardering (Management redeemed)*, New York: The Free Press
- Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley (Ca.): University of California Press
- Hoebeke, L. (1994) *Making Work Systems Better*. New York: Wiley
- Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work Related values*. Beverly Hills (Ca.): Sage
- Hofstede, G. (1991) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. Maidenhead (UK): McGraw-Hill
- Horkheimer, M. & T. Adorno (1987) *Dialectiek van de verlichting. Filosofische fragmenten*. Nijmegen: SUN
- Huczynski, A. (1993) *Management Gurus: What Makes Them and How to Become One*. London: Thomson Business Press
- Huff, S. (1992) 'Reengineering the business,' *Business Quarterly* 56/3: 38-42
- Hume, D. (1982) *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Hurst, D. (1995) 'Thoroughly modern – Mary Parker Follett', in: P. Frost, V. Mitchell & W. Nord (eds.) *Managerial Reality. Balancing Technique, Practice and Value*. New York: Harper Collins, 13-19
- Jackall, R. (1988) *Moral Mazes. The World of Corporate Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Jacques, R. (1996) *Manufacturing the Employee. Management Knowledge from the 19th to the 21st Century*. London: Sage
- Jameson, F. (1992) *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso
- Jeffcutt, P. (1993) 'From interpretation to representation', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage, 25-48
- Jensen, M. & W. Meckling (1976) 'Theory of the firm: managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure', *Journal of Financial Economics*, 3: 305-360
- Johnston, J. (1990) *Carnival of Repetition. Gaddis's 'The Recognitions' and Postmodern Theory*. Philadelphia (Pe.): Pennsylvania University Press
- Kafka, F. (1981) 'De Chinese muur', in: F. Kafka, *Verzameld werk*. Amsterdam: Querido, 876-887
- Kalgaard, R. (1993) 'ASAP interview with Michael Hammer', *Forbes*, September 13: 69-75
- Kanter, R. (1983) *The Change Masters*. London: Unwin-Hyman
- Kanungo, R. & M. Mendonca (1996) *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*. London: Sage
- Kaplan, R. (1989) 'Was democracy just a moment? The future of democracy', *The Atlantic Monthly*, december, 55-80
- Karsten, L. (1998) 'Organisatietijd en organisatie van de tijd', *Filosofie in Bedrijf*, 8/1: 4-13
- Keat, R. (1991) 'Introduction: Starship Britain or universal enterprise', in: R. Keat & N. Abercrombie (eds.) *Enterprise Culture*. London: Routledge, 1-17
- Kelly, P. (1994) 'MacIntyre's criticism of utilitarianism', in: J. Horton & S. Mendus (eds.) *After MacIntyre. Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 127-145
- Kerr, S. & J. Jermier (1978) 'Substitutes for leadership: their meaning and measurement', *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 22: 375-403
- Kets de Vries, M. (1997) 'The leadership mystique', in: K. Grint (ed.) *Leadership. Classical, Contemporary, and Critical Approaches*. Oxford University Press, 250-271
- Kieser, A. (1997) 'Rhetoric and myth in management fashion', *Organization*, 4/2: 49-74
- Kingwell, M. (1996) *Dreams of Millennium. Report from a Culture on the Brink*. Toronto: Viking
- Kingwell, M. (1998) *Better Living. In Pursuit of Happiness from Plato to Prozac*. Toronto: Viking
- Kirkbridge, P. (1993) 'Managing change', in: R. Stacey (ed.) *Strategic Thinking and the Management of Change*. London: Kogan Page
- Klein, G. (1998) *Sources of Power. How People Make Decisions*. Cambridge (Ma.): MIT Press
- Kogut, B. & U. Zander (1992) 'Knowledge of the firm, combinative capabilities, and the replication of technology', *Organization Science*, 3: 383-397
- Korten, D. (1995) *When Corporations Rule the World*. London: Earthscan
- Kreps, D. (1990) *A Course in Microeconomic Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Kunneman, H. (1998) *Postmoderne moraliteit*. Amsterdam: Boom
- Ladd, A. (1970) 'Morality and the idea of rationality in formal organizations', *The Monist*, 54/4: 488-516
- Ladd, J. (1984) 'Corporate mythology and individual responsibility', in: *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2/2: 1-21
- Langlois, N. (1987) *Economics as a Process. Essays in New Institutional Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Latour, B. & S. Woolgar (1979) *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. Beverly Hills (Ca.): Sage
- Law, J. (1994) 'Organization, narrative and strategy', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Towards a New Theory of Organizations*. London: Routledge, 247-268

- Learned, E., C. Roland, A. Christensen, K. Andrews, & W. Guth (1965) *Business Policy: Text and Cases*. Homewood (IL.): Irwin
- Lefebvre, E. (1997) *The Monk-Manager and the Road to Abbaye-Management*. Leuven (Belgium): Acco
- Legge, K. (1995) *Human Resource Management. Rhetorics and Realities*. London: MacMillan
- Lessem, R. (1990) 'Foreword: existential strategy', in: C. Hampden-Turner, *Charting the Corporate Mind, From Dilemma to Strategy*. Oxford: Blackwell, vii-xvii
- Letiche, H. (1999) 'Review article: Donna Haraway: the schöne, schöne Dona(u)', *Organization*, 6/1: 149-166
- Levitt, T. (1958) 'The dangers of social responsibility', *Harvard Business Review*, 36/5:41-50
- Likert, R. (1961) *New Patterns of Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- Lilley, L. (1995) 'Disintegrating chronology', *Studies in Cultures, Organisations, and Societies*, 2: 1-33
- Lilley, S. (1997) 'Stuck in the middle with you?', *British Journal of Management*, 8: 51-59
- Lincoln, B. (1994) *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Linstead, S. (1993) 'From postmodern anthropology to deconstructive analysis', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage, 49-70
- Locke, R. (1996) *The Collapse of the American Management Mystique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Machan, T. (1987) 'Human right, workers' right, and the "right" to occupational safety', in: G. Ezorsky (ed.) *Moral Rights in the Workplace*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 45-50
- MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue*. Notre Dame (In): University of Notre Dame Press
- MacKendall, M. (1993) 'The tyranny of change. Organizational development revisited', *Journal of Business Ethics* 12: 93-104
- Mahoney, J. (1992) 'Organizational economics within the conversation of strategic management', *Advances of Strategic Management*, 8: 103-155
- Mahoney, J. (1995) 'The management of resources and the resource of management', in: *Journal of Business Research*, 33: 91-101
- Mahoney, J. & R. Pandian (1997) 'The resource-based view within the conversation of strategic management', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 204-231
- McCloskey, D. (1990) *If you're so smart?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- McGregor, D. (1960) *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- McHugh, P., G. Merli & W.A. Wheeler III (1995) *Beyond Business Process Reengineering: Towards the Holonic Enterprise*. New York: Wiley
- McIntosh, M., D. Leipziger, K. Jones & G. Coleman (1998) *Corporate Citizenship. Successful Strategies for Responsible Companies*. London: Financial Times/Pitman
- McWhinney, W. (1997) *Paths of Change. Strategic Choices for Organizations and Society*. London: Sage
- Metze, M. (1996) 'Philips is een doodlopende weg ingeslagen', *De Volkskrant*, 30-7-1996
- Michael, D. (1996) *Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn. Second Edition*. Alexandria (Vi.): Miles River Press
- Michelman, J. (1993) 'Some ethical consequences of economic competition', in: T.I. White (ed.) *Business Ethics: A Philosophical Reader*. New York: MacMillan, 30-40
- Micklethwait, M. & A. Wooldridge (1996) *The Witch Doctors. What the Management Gurus are Saying, Why It Matters and How to Make Sense of It*. London: Heinemann
- Miles, R.E. & C.S. Snow (1978) *Organizational Strategy, Structure and Process*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- Miller, S., D. Hickson, & D. Wilson (1996) 'Decision-making in organizations', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 293-312
- Mintzberg, H. (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*. New York: Harper & Row

- Mintzberg, H. (1979) *The Structuring of Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall
- Mintzberg, H. (1983) *Structure in Fives. Designing Effective Strategies*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall
- Mintzberg, H. (1987) 'Crafting strategy', *Harvard Business Review*, 65/4: 66-75
- Mintzberg, H. (1994) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York: The Free Press
- Mintzberg, H., B. Ahlstrand, & J. Lampel (1998) *Strategy Safari*. New York: The Free Press
- Mintzberg, H. & J. Waters (1985) 'Of strategies, deliberate and emergent', *Strategic Management Journal*, 6: 257-272
- Mintzberg, H. & J. Waters (1990) 'Studying deciding: An exchange of views between Mintzberg and Waters, Pettigrew and Butler', *Organization Studies*, 11/1: 1-16
- Morgan, G. (1980) 'Paradigms, metaphors and puzzle solving in organizational analysis', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25: 605-622
- Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of Organization*. London: Sage
- Mumford, L. (1963) *Technics and Civilization*. New York: Harcourt Brace
- Murphy, J. (1993) *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press
- Negrin, L. (1999) 'The self as image: A critical appraisal of postmodern theories of fashion', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16/3: 99-118
- Nelson, R. (1997) 'Why do firms differ, and how does it matter?', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 257-267
- Nijssen, E. & P. Ligthart (1999) 'Swot-analyse: vloek of zegen?', *Bedrijfskunde* 71/1: 15-19
- Nonaka, I. & H. Takeuchi (1997) *De kennis-creërende onderneming. Hoe Japanse bedrijven innovatieprocessen in gang zetten*. Schiedam: Scriptum
- Noorderhaven, N. (1995) 'The argumentational texture of transaction cost economics', *Organization Studies*, 16/4: 605-623
- Nord, W. (1985) 'Can organizational culture be managed?', in: P. Frost, L. Moore, M. Louis, C. Lundberg & J. Martin (eds.) *Organizational Culture*. London: Sage
- Nussbaum, M. (1994) *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press
- Obeng, E. & S. Crainer (1996) *Making Re-engineering Happen. What's Wrong with the Organization Anyway?* New York: Pitman
- Onfray, M. (1991) *De buik van de filosoof. Kritiek van de diëtistische rede*. Baarn: Ambo
- Onfray, M. (1992) *Cynismen. Porter van de hondse filosoof*. Baarn: Ambo
- Ouchi, (1980) 'Markets, bureaucracies and clans', in: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25: 129-141
- Parker, M. (1997) 'Organization and citizenship', *Organization* 4/1: 75-92
- Parker, M. (1998) 'Organisation, community and utopia', *Studies in Cultures, Organisations and Societies*, 4: 71-91
- Pascal, R. & A. Athos (1981) *The Art of Japanese Management*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Pawlett, W. (1997) 'Utility and excess: the radical sociology of Bataille and Baudrillard', *Economy and Society*, 20/1: 92-125
- Penrose, E. (1997) 'The theory of the growth of the firm', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms and Strategy. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 29-39
- Peters, T. (1988) *Thriving on Chaos. Handbook for Organization Management*. London: MacMillan
- Peters, T. & R. Waterman (1982) *In Search of Excellence. Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. New

York: Harper & Row

Pirsig, R. (1982) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. An Enquiry into Values*. New York (NY): Penguin

Pitelis, C. (1991) *Market and Non-Market Hierarchies. Theory of Institutional Failure*. Oxford: Blackwell

Porter, M. (1980) *Competitive Strategy. Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York: Free Press

Porter, M. (1985) *Competitive Advantage. Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: Free Press

Porter, M. (1991) 'Towards a dynamic theory of strategy', *Strategic Management Journal*, 12: 95-117

Porter, M. (1996) 'What is strategy?', *Harvard Business Review*, 74/6: 61-78

Power, M. (1998) *The Audit Society. Rituals of Verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Presthus, R. (1978) *The Organizational Society*. New York: St. Martins

Punch, M. (1996) *Dirty Business. Exploring Corporate Misconduct. Analysis and Cases*. London: Sage

Putnam, H. (1990) *Realism with a Human Face*. Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard University Press

Putnam, L., N. Philips, & P. Chapman (1996) 'Metaphors of communication and organization', S. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 375-408

Rai, A. & D. Paper (1994) 'Successful reengineering through IT-investment', *The Information Strategy Journal*, Summer, 15-20

Ramsey, H. (1996). 'Managing sceptically: a critique of organizational fashion', in: S. Clegg & G. Palmer (eds.) *The Politics of Management Knowledge*. London: Sage, 155-172

Reed, M. (1996) 'Organizational theorizing: a historically contested terrain', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 31-56

Reich, R. (1996) 'Hoe ver reikt eigenlijk de sociale verplichting van ondernemingen?', *De Volkskrant*, 6 January, 13

Richards, T. (1978) *The Language of Reason*. New York: Pergamon

Roland, A. (1988) *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-cultural Psychology*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press

Roll, E. (1993) *A History of Economic Thought*. New Delhi: Faber and Faber

Rorty, R. (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell

Rorty, R. (1998) *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Rumelt, R. (1984) 'Toward a strategic theory of the firm', in: R. Lamb (ed.) *Competitive Strategic Management*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall, 556-570

Rumelt, R. (1997) 'A strategic theory of the firm', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 132-145

Santaniello, W. (1994) *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews. His Critique of Judeo-Christianity in Relation to the Nazi Myth*. Albany (NY): State University of New York Press

Sarte, J.- P. (1960) *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. Paris: Gallimard

Saul, J. (1993) *Voltaire's Bastards. The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*. New York: Vintage

Saul, J.R. (1994) *The Doubter's Companion. A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense*. New York: Free Press

Saul, J. (1997) *The Unconscious Civilization*. New York: Penguin

Scarbrough, H. & G. Burrell (1996) 'The axeman cometh: the changing roles and knowledges of middle managers', in: S. Clegg & G. Palmer, *The Politics of Management Knowledge*. London: Sage, 173-189

Schein, E. (1985) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco (Ca.): Jossey-Bass

Schumpeter, J. (1987) *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy. Fifth Edition*. London: Unwin Hyman

- Schwartz, H. (1996) *The Culture of the Copy. Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*. New York: Zone Books
- Selznick, P. (1997) 'Leadership in Administration: a sociological interpretation', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 21-26
- Senge, P. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline. The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York (NY): Doubleday
- Simmel, G. (1989) *Philosophie des Geldes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Simon, H. (1947) *Administrative behavior*. New York: Free Press
- Simon, H. (1965) *Administrative Behavior, 2nd Edition*. New York: Free Press
- Sloterdijk, P. (1984) *Kritiek van de cynische rede (deel I en II)*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers
- Sloterdijk, P. (1991) *Eurotaoïsme: over de kritiek van de politiek kinetiek*. Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1993) *Weltfremdheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Sloterdijk, P. (1998 and 1999) *Sphären I & II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Smircich, L. (1983) 'The concept of culture and organizational analysis', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28: 339-358
- Smircich, L. (1985) 'Is organizational culture a paradigm for organizations and ourselves?', in: P. Frost *et al.* (eds.) *Organizational Culture*. Beverly Hills (Ca.): Sage
- Smircich, L. and C. Stubbart (1985) 'Strategic management in an enacted world', in: *Academy of Management Review*, 10/4: 724-736
- Sorell, T. (1998) 'Beyond the fringe? The strange state of business ethics', in: M. Parker (ed.) *Ethics & Organizations*. London: Sage, 15-29
- Stahl, M. & D. Grigsby (1997) *Strategic Management. Total Quality and Global Competition*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Stubbart, C. (1985) 'Why we need a revolution in strategic planning', in: *Long Range Planning*, 18/6: 68-76
- Taylor, M. (1998) *Hiding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Teece, D., G. Pisano, & A. Shuen (1997) 'Dynamic capabilities and strategic management', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resource, Firms and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 268-285
- ten Bos, K. (1994) 'Van Pixérécourt tot soapopera, of de melodramatische zegepraal. Een onderzoek naar 19^{de}-eeuwse theaterkritiek', *unpublished paper, University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands*
- ten Bos, R. (1995) *Managers en organisatiecultuur*. Zaltbommel: Thema
- ten Bos, R. (1997) 'Bauman ethics and business ethics', in: *Organization Studies*, 18/6: 997-1014
- ten Bos, R. (1997a) 'Business process redesign: the wheel of Ixion'. *Employee Relations*, 19/4: 248-264
- ten Bos, R. (1997b) *Strategisch denken. Op zoek naar nieuwe helden*. Zaltbommel: Thema
- ten Bos, R. (1998) *Merkwaardige moraal*. Zaltbommel: Thema
- ten Bos, R. (1999) 'Uit de wereld treden is er niet bij', *Trouw*, 25 September, 33
- ten Bos, R., M. van der Ham & M. van Rooij (1994) *De manager. Leer- en praktijkboek*. Utrecht: De Tijdstroom
- ten Bos, R. & J. van der Wal (1997) 'De waarde van de adviseur', *Nijenrode Management Review* 2/6: 7-21
- ten Bos, R. ten & H. Willmott (1999) 'Interweaving emotion and reason in business ethics', *Working paper UMIST\Manchester and Schouten & Nelissen\Zaltbommel*
- Thompson, P. (1993) 'Postmodernism: fatal distraction', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage, 183-204

- Tichy, N. & M. Devanna (1986) *The Transformational Leader*. New York: Wiley
- Tieleman, H. (1997) 'Shell en het management van de moraal', *Nijenrode Management Review*, 2/3: 32-35
- Townley, B. (1994) *Reframing Human Resource Management. Power, Ethics and the Subject*. London: Sage
- Trice, H. & J. Beyer (1985) 'Using six organizational rules to change culture', in: R. Kilmann (ed.) *Gaining Control of Organizational Culture*. San Francisco (Ca.): Jossey-Bass
- Trice, H. & J. Beyer (1990) 'Cultural leadership in organizations', in: *Organizational Science*, 2: 149-169
- Tsoukas, H. (1998) 'Introduction: chaos, complexity and organization theory', *Organization* 5/3: 291-313
- Tuan, Y.-F (1998) *Escapism*. Baltimore (Md.): Johns Hopkins University Press
- Turner, J. (1986) 'In the time of the entrepreneurs', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 July 1986
- van Cayseele, P. and H. Schreuder (1988) 'De economische inbreng in de strategiebepaling van ondernemingen: een overzicht', *working paper University of Maastricht*
- van der Linden, R., D. van der Meer & S. Raaijmakers (1993) 'Business process redesign: Van strategische doelstellingen naar (her)ingerichte bedrijfsprocessen', *Working paper Twijnstra Gudde Amersfoort*
- van der Zee, H. (1994) 'De postmoderne nomade. Het managen van de eigen loopbaan', *Opleiding en Ontwikkeling*, 7/12: 23-26
- Vaneigem, R. (1994) *The Movement of the Free Spirit*. New York: Zone Books
- Volberda, H. (1998) *Building the Flexible Firm. How to Remain Competitive*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Vrieling, L. (1998) *The Pathfinder. Strategy Paths and Resources in their Territory through Times*. Capelle aan de IJssel: Labyrint Publication
- Walker Jr., O. & R. Ruekert (1987) 'Marketing's role in the implementation of business strategies: a critical review and conceptual framework', *Journal of Marketing* 51/7: 15-33
- Walzer, M. (1983) *Spheres of Justice. A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books
- Wastell, D., R. White & P. Kavalek (1994) 'A methodology for business process redesign: experiences and issues', *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* 3/1: 23-40
- Watson, C. (1991) *Managing with Integrity: Insights from American's CEO's*. New York: Praeger
- Watson, T. (1994) *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*. London: Routledge
- Weaver, W. (1997) 'Dewey or Foucault?: Organization and administration as edification and as violence', *Organization*, 4/1: 31-48
- Weick, K. & F. Westley (1996) 'Organizational learning: Affirming an oxymoron', in: S. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. Nord (eds.) *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 440-458
- Werhane, P. (1988) 'Employee and employee rights in institutional context', in: T. Beauchamp & N. Bowie (eds.) *Ethical Theory and Business. Third Edition*. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice Hall, 267-271
- Wernerfelt, B. (1997) 'A resource-based view of the firm', in: N. Foss (ed.) *Resources, Firms, and Strategies. A Reader in the Resource-Based Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 117-130
- White, H. (1988) 'Agency and control', in: J. Pratt & R. Zeckhauser (eds.) *Principals and Agents: The Structure of Business*. Boston (Ma.): Harvard Business School Press, 187-212
- White, M. and M. Trevor (1981) *Under Japanese management. The Experience of British Workers*. London: Heinemann
- Whittington, R. (1993) *What is Strategy and Does it Matter?* London: Routledge

- Whittington, R. (1994) 'Sociological pluralism, institutions and managerial agency', in: J. Hassard & M. Parker (eds.) *Towards a New Theory of Organizations*. London: Routledge, 53-74
- Whyte, W. (1963) *The Organization Man*. New York: Pelican
- Williamson, O. (1985) *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism: Firms, Markets, Relational Contracting*. New York: Free Press
- Willmott, H. (1993) 'Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: managing culture in modern organizations', *Journal of Management Studies*, 30/4: 515-552
- Willmott, H. (1994) 'Business process re-engineering and human resource management', *Personnel Review* 23/3: 34-46
- Willmott, H. (1998) 'Towards a new ethics? The contributions of poststructuralism and posthumanism', in: M. Parker (ed.) *Ethics & Organizations*. London: Sage: 76-121
- Wolf, E. (1982) *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley (Ca.): University of California Press
- Wrapp, H. (1967) 'Good managers don't make policy decisions', *Harvard Business Review*, 45/5: 91-99
- Zaleznik, A. (1989) *The Managerial Mystique*. New York: Harper & Row
- Zan, L. (1990) 'Looking for theories in strategy studies', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 6/2: 89-108
- Zwicky, J. (1992) *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto: Toronto University Press

Stellingen behorende bij het proefschrift

- Goede stellingen zijn verkapte vragen.
- Eén stelling is dat het utopische slecht en het modieuze goed is.
- In management modes is niet het modieuze het verleidelijke, maar het rationele.
- Omdat de modevolger nooit gelooft in een happy end, ontbeert ze het morele fanatisme dat kenmerkend is voor de utopist.
- Het blijft verbazingwekkend om te zien hoe ernstig en ongelukkig mensen kunnen geloven in een gelukkig einde.
- Het grote probleem met management modes is dat ze niet modieus genoeg zijn.
- Rationalisme en New Age horen beide in een denktraditie thuis waarin alles draait om de gedachte dat de wereld pas genomen kan worden als het denkende en handelende subject onneembaar geworden is.
- Objectief is alleen wat we zelf geschapen hebben (vrij naar Giambattista Vico).
- Wat meer amateurisme zou management professionals helemaal geen kwaad doen.
- Zoals mensen veel goede redenen hebben om rationeel te zijn, zo hebben ze ook veel goede redenen om de bovenste knoop van hun overhemd dicht te doen en een ongemakkelijke stropdas te dragen. Niettemin hebben bijna alle grote denkers, zelfs Kant, gewaarschuwd tegen de gevaren van zo'n stropdas. Toch zijn al die waarschuwingen in de bedrijfs- en organisatiekunde aan dovemansoren besteed (vrij naar Jan Zwicky).
- De wereld bestaat alleen maar uit aanknopingspunten. Oplossingen treft men er niet aan.
- Goede vragen zijn verkapte stellingen.

In het proefschrift wordt betoogd dat deze eigenschappen van modes in het discours over management en organisatie anders gewaardeerd zouden moeten worden. Met betrekking tot de vijf eerder genoemde domeinen zou dat kunnen leiden tot de andersoortige inzichten: strategie zou opgevat kunnen worden als een veelvormig, sociaal-psychologisch besluitvormingsproces waarbij het niet gaat over het oplossen van problemen maar over ingewikkelde keuzevraagstukken; leiderschap zou veel meer vanuit een dialectiek benaderd kunnen worden waarbij men oog heeft voor de construerende en corroderende sociale dynamiek ervan; cultuur zou gezien kunnen worden als metaforisch vehikel om de niet te managen, meer esthetisch-materiële kant van organisaties te begrijpen; lerende organisaties zouden uit kunnen gaan van de actuele leerprocessen zoals ze zijn voor de meeste mensen in organisaties en de vraag moeten stellen waarom de elites aldaar zich hieraan denken te kunnen onttrekken; business process redesign ten slotte kan ook gezien worden als een stroming die een nostalgische hang heeft naar pre-bureaucratische organisatievormen en daardoor de pijnlijke vraag stelt of we wel management (als bureaucratisch fenomeen) nodig hebben.

Door hun afkeer van idealisering bieden modes dus veel mogelijkheden tot kritische reflectie over management en organisatie. In het proefschrift wordt dergelijke reflectie ironisch aangeduid als 'volksfilosofie'. Veel management modes leveren bruikbare aanzetten tot die volksfilosofie. Als zodanig worden ze in het proefschrift ook verdedigd.

Het probleem is echter dat management modes zich onderscheiden van gewone modes doordat de volgers ervan zich schamen modieus te zijn. Waar de modekoningin trots kan zijn op haar collectie, benadrukt de management goeroe dat zijn werk niet de zoveelste mode is en dat het als zodanig serieuzer moet worden genomen. Management modes kennen met andere woorden geen zelfacceptatie. Ze willen meer zijn 'dan alleen maar mode'.

Precies hier komt het utopisme met al zijn vervelende eigenschappen weer binnen sijpelen: succesbeloften, idealisering van leiders, simplificaties van proces en cultuur, revolutionair elan, etc. Dit inzicht leidt tot de drie kernstellingen van het proefschrift:

- management modes willen altijd ontsnappen aan hun eigen modieus zijn; die ontsnapping wordt mogelijk door de deur open te zetten voor wetenschappelijk utopisme
- management modes moeten bekritiseerd worden omdat ze niet modieus genoeg zijn
- management modes verleiden meer door hun utopische dan door hun modieuze aspecten.

Uitgaande van deze drie stellingen beschrijft het proefschrift vaak op ironische wijze hoe ook in de modieuze management literatuur de kritische en bevrijdende aspecten van management modes systematisch geëlimineerd worden. Daardoor domineert in die management literatuur nog steeds een even fanatieke als escapistische denkwijze die volgens sommigen als schoolvoorbeeld van professionalisme en wetenschappelijkheid geldt, maar volgens de auteur van dit proefschrift vooral een exercitie in wereldvreemdheid is.

Laten we hopen op een denkwijze in de bedrijfs- of organisatiekundige literatuur die de wereld niet langer als een misleidende en gevaarlijke factor beschouwt.

Samenvatting

Mode en utopie in management denken

Management modes worden in de bedrijfskundige wereld vaak als iets negatiefs beschouwd. Dergelijke modes worden grillig, tegenstrijdig, nostalgisch, teleurstellend en oppervlakkig genoemd. De manager die zich aan hen overgeeft laat zich leiden door de waan en de smaak van de dag. Een dergelijke attitude past niet bij de rationelere omgang met de werkelijkheid die vaak door academici en wetenschappers bepleit wordt en aangeduid wordt met termen als professionalisme of expertise.

In het proefschrift wordt getracht tot herwaardering van management modes te komen. De auteur gebruikt daarbij een tweesnijdende tactiek. Enerzijds wil hij laten zien dat modes managers kunnen helpen met het ontwikkelen van een andersoortig, minder afstandelijk en meer esthetisch verstaan van de werkelijkheid en de rol die zij daarin spelen; anderzijds wordt het rationele begrip van die werkelijkheid ontmaskerd als heilloos utopisme dat managers op het verkeerde spoor zet. Het proefschrift kan dus gezien worden als een weinig neutrale discussie over het spanningsveld tussen modieuze en utopistische tendensen in populaire management literatuur.

De polemiek tegen utopisme is voor een gedeelte gebaseerd op het werk van Hans Achterhuis en Peter Sloterdijk. Beiden wezen op de minder aangename aspecten van het utopisme. De hoop op een betere wereld ontaardt vaak in gewelddadigheid, despotisme, isolationisme, fanatisme, eenvormigheid, wereldvreemdheid, manipulatie en rancune ten opzichte van het nu. Deze en andere aspecten van het utopisme treft men ongelukkigerwijs ook aan in veel populaire management literatuur.

Dat blijkt duidelijk in de vijf domeinen die gekozen zijn als basis voor de discussie: het discours over *strategie* is doortrokken van een inktzwarte, 'hobbesiaanse' kijk op de werkelijkheid en het utopistische geloof in de noodzaak en mogelijkheid van ontsnapping daaraan; de literatuur over *leiderschap* is een glorificatie van de sterke leider en onderstelt dat hij (zelden: zij) onmisbaar is in organisaties; de vertogen over *organisatiecultuur* reduceren hun object vaak tot een instrument dat utopische vormen van samenzijn (tirannieke idylles) moet bewerkstelligen; in de populaire teksten over *lerende organisaties* treft men een elitaire denkrichting aan die gebaseerd is op een psychologische bereidheid de wereld weg te denken; *business process redesign* ten slotte wordt opgevat als een stroming die gebaseerd is op utopische noties als echt werk, vergeten en (niet-emotionele) vriendschap.

Het pleidooi voor modes is voor een gedeelte gebaseerd op het werk van Mark Taylor. Modes zijn volgens hem gebaseerd op een fascinatie met de zintuiglijke, materiële en meer oppervlakkige aspecten van de wereld; ze zijn grillig en onwetenschappelijk; ze leveren hun volgers uit aan smaak en nostalgie; ze kunnen opgevat worden als een eindeloze jacht op het nu; ze eindigen ook onmiskenbaar in teleurstelling (van 'happy-endism' is hier geen sprake, ook al stellen ze volgers in staat door hun fascinatie voor het nieuwe snel over die teleurstellingen heen te stappen); ze hebben een afkeer van fanatisme en kunnen taboes doorbreken; ze zijn onlosmakelijk verbonden met een zekere angst.

Bibliotheek K. U. Brabant

17 000 01441902 3