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The state of critique in organizational theory

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Never before has the future seemed less certain, less knowable than it does now. And yet, never before has the future appeared as one-dimensional as it appears at the present time. Unfettered capitalist markets, globalization, the disappearance of political alternatives and the universal hegemony of the consumer have led not only to melodramatic pronouncements on the end of history, but also to a floundering of critical imagination. We have become unable to envision a future at all, other than as more of the same, more goods, more trade, more pollution, more natural catastrophes, more wars and more inequality between the haves and the have nots.

As we enter the new century, the critical consciousness of the social sciences has become blunted. Our theories have mostly given up on the Marxist ideal of changing the world and even on the more modest one of understanding and critiquing it. Instead, they increasingly seek to 'deconstruct' it through ironic or iconic engagement, endlessly lost in narrative vortices. 'All that is solid melts into air', proclaimed Marx as he surveyed the rule of the bourgeoisie, 150 years ago. Yet, under that rule, concepts were (or so we seem to believe now) immune from change. Modernity might have seen cities rise out of nothingness, distances shrunk through the powers of technology, family, political and organizational forms revolutionized. But modernity respected concepts, it respected theories and above all it respected truth. Postmodernity has no such qualms. It extends the liquefaction to concepts and theories, turning them into fleeting mirages, parodies and jeux d'esprit. More precisely, it turns them into commodities, subject to the whims of fashion, of ephemeral fun and of the marketplace.

In this short article, I shall examine the current state of critique, in the light of the crisis in humanistic thinking, narrowing my scope to the field of organization theory. This field has been dominated in the recent past by a momentous convergence of two archetypal characters at the expense of a third. I am referring to the holy alliance forged between the manager and the consumer, at the expense of the worker or the employee. The manager has emerged as a cultural archetype in an age when the work ethic has been dislodged by a consumer ethic as the basis of each individual's moral and social outlook. If Henry Ford was the manager of mass production and mass consumption, Walt Disney has become the emblematic figure of our time – the manager redefined from agent of control to orchestrator of mass fantasies. His/her central function is the re-enchantment of a disenchanted world through mass festivals in the new cathedrals of consumption – theme parks, cruise ships, tourist resorts and above all shopping malls (Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Ritzer, 1999). The consumer, the abstract individual who seeks happiness in choices and offers no account or explanations for them, becomes the sovereign in whose interest no care is spared. An 'enterprise culture', dynamic, self-confident, attractive and, of course, thoroughly spurious, has become a dominant feature of our cultural landscapes (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Gabriel, 1999; Knights & Morgan, 1993; Sturdy, 1998). This culture creates two vast categories of victims – the workers/employees, whose lives are subject to ever-increasing surveillance, control and insecurity, and the 'new poor', the armies of those excommunicated from the cathedrals of consumption and dependent on the state to make choices on their behalf (Bauman, 1988, 1992, 1995).

Another consequence of the current hegemony of the consumer has been the virtual obliteration of another great cultural character – the citizen. The two ideas, consumer and citizen, have very different pedigrees, although in a paradoxical way they both converge on critique. The citizen, the foundation of Athenian democracy, re-invented and expanded by the American and French revolutions, implies an equality among citizens, even if it denies it to others, slaves, immigrants or refugees. It is essentially a political concept, defining individuals' standing within a state and a community, according them rights and responsibilities. The citizen is an impersonation of what Philip Rieff called 'political man', the cultural ideal based on the notion that good life, justice and happiness can be attained through political action, rather than through religious faith; the latter had been the recipe for salvation of political man's predecessor, the 'religious man' (Rieff, 1959, 1966). Common to both religious and political ideals was the presupposition that each individual is an organic part of a whole, unable to achieve full individuality and happiness except as a member of that whole. Where the ideal of the citizen dramatically deviated from that of the religious believer was in the inalienable rights of citizens to hold their own opinions and views. One can be a citizen while disagreeing with the government; in *critique* lies the citizen's thoroughly modern form of freedom.

The consumer, on the other hand, originates in a very different ideal, referred to by Rieff as economic man, who seeks the good life in marketplaces. Here, individuals are free to exercise their preferences and choices. Like citizens, consumers are free to criticize; but, unlike citizens, they are never required to endure sacrifices for a superior goal, nor do their actions represent anybody other than themselves. They need not defer to any collective majority. Consumers need not be members of a community at all, nor do they have to act on its behalf. As long as they are in a position to pay, they can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations. Critique, then, is the prerogative and the mark of freedom of the consumer as it is of the citizen. But, where the citizen criticizes in the name of the community of fellow-citizens with whom meaningful and rational discourse can be had, the consumer criticizes in the name of nothing greater than his/her tastes. Where the citizen submits his/her critique to the critical discourse of the community, the consumer submits his/her critique to nothing greater than the scrutiny of the gaze of others.

The decline of the citizen throughout the 20th century has not been without obstinate efforts from the left, from the right and from the 'new centre' to keep him/her alive. These efforts amount to little more than nostalgic glances at the past or deliberate attempts to commodify citizenship, in two ways. The first is the introduction of market mechanisms into public administration. Tax offices, passport offices, prisons and other government agencies increasingly treat their constituencies as customers, as they seek to fend off further privatization. Hospitals, universities, schools are already undergoing a metamorphosis from sober and utilitarian deliverers of services in what have been described as McHospitals, McUniversities and McSchools. The second form of commodification of citizen involves its transformation into a consumer fantasy, which may then be readily fulfilled, like other consumer fantasies. Managers can see to it that consumers can be offered the experience of 'citizenship', living in small self-contained communities. If consumers get really tired of massive out-of-town cathedrals of consumption, if they desire to re-experience the feel of the small, the local and the rustic, it can all be simulated for their benefit, as the massively successful pseudo-village at Berkeley's Fourth Street with its bijou consumption 'chapels' amply demonstrates. The city of Philadelphia provides a good example of how citizenship can be transformed by nostalgia into an eminently consumable commodity. Citizen theme parks may not be that far away in the future.

While faced with this truly one-dimensional scenario, a wide range of social scientists and cultural critics have moved away from the humanist and rationalist critique of society, and its political, economic and ideological orders. This was the critique pioneered by writers like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and the Critical School, which sought to unmask, analyse and condemn exploitation and alienation, whether as intrinsic to the capitalist system of production, its political order or its ideological legitimation (Gabriel, 1984, 1991; Rouanet, 1998). This is a critique that has resurfaced through communitarianism but failed to provide the great idea which will challenge the paradigm of consumption (see contributions in Etzioni, 1998 and Putnam, 1995). Many critical theorists have beyond doubt lost faith in the humanist ideal, with its mono-cultural, universalist and rationalist heritage, one which they see as all too easily corrupted into different forms of totalitarianism and domination. Instead, a new range of critical approaches has emerged, inspired by postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives which, on the one hand, seek to unmask power and domination in the most intimate interstices of language, while at the same time being determined to celebrate difference, diversity, emotion and style (Gabriel, 1999).

So, what happens to critique in these postmodern times? This becomes, in essence, a critique of those discursive practices which marginalize or silence women and minority groups through language that incorporates power and muffles opposition (see, for example, Alvesson & Willmott, 1992a, 1992b, 1996; Carr, 1997; Parker, 1995; Thompson, 1993; Willmott, 1996). Thus, as Antonacopoulou (1999) rightly argues, far from obliterating criticism, postmodernity allows new forms of critique to emerge, critique which is not overawed or powerless in the face of established conventions and practices, but surgically cuts through them when traditional Marxist/humanist/rationalist critiques have become increasingly blunt. She singles out the critiques of rhetoric, tradition, authority and objectivity, all of which become more far-reaching when undertaken, not from a fixed position, but as an affirmation of the ability to think differently, to see differently and to act differently. Thus, in postmodernity, critique becomes praxis and lived experience rather than a cerebral motivated process. In this way, Antonacopoulou seeks to vindicate critique not as the mechanism for discovering a promised land of happiness and justice (something that is untenable in post-humanist times), but as a way of life, which leaves nothing unquestioned, not even the endlessly shifting grounds of its own motivation. In Antonacopoulou's argument, critique is not concomitant with some general revolutionizing project of society, but a restless quality of spirit which never stands still; it constantly seeks to create the space for new possibilities, not just alternatives.

This is a strong argument that seeks to liberate critique from the obligation to proceed from a fixed moral or political point (that endlessly longed for and never attained 'Archimedean point'). It also pluralizes critique, replacing a frontal attack on the structures of capitalism with a plurality of sorties and engagements with its vulnerabilities, recalling the arguments put forward by de Certeau regarding the subversive qualities of contemporary consumption (de Certeau, 1984). It does, however, engender its own risks. It is perfectly possible to imagine a society of highly critical and judgemental individuals where nothing ever changes as a result of everyone criticizing everything, a society of possibilities dreamt but never thought through, let alone realized. Critique becomes an unfettered unfolding of fantasy (unrestrained by the disciplines of rationality) and in exactly the same way we argued earlier a propos of consumer fantasies, it too *can be commodified*. It is the very aestheticization of critique that makes it instantly amenable to the logic of commodities and markets. 'Are you critical of traditional or modernist administration/literature/architecture/music/organizational theory, etc.? We can supply you with an 'alternative'. Thus, in postmodern times, we have a profusion of 'alternative' offerings aimed at critics, just as we have numerous offerings aimed at rebels. Like rebellion, commodified critique disintegrates into dandyism, a highly narcissistic affirmation of one's difference and taste. Such aesthetic critique (for a fine account, see Grey, 1999), in spite of its seeming postmodernity, recalls some of the most reactionary critiques undertaken by old-fashioned conservatives against the political and economic parvenu, the vulgarians whose lack of taste and manners was their most serious sin. (This was the impotent critique levelled at fascists; see Rosenthal, 1983.)

By aestheticizing critique, postmodernity risks both normalizing it and emasculating it. Nothing is sacred, nothing is above criticism. What is a cultural event nowadays if not an event that gets the critics excited and converts everyone into a critic? The more revered the object of criticism, the more iconoclastic the criticism, the easier it becomes an object of discussion, controversy and consumption. Critique proliferates to the point where meaning and value constantly disintegrate, swallowed into those semiotic black holes noted by Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b). Critique thus ceases to be socially dangerous (although it may be personally dangerous) and, like citizenship, becomes an easily accommodated part of the all-devouring processes of consumption.

Does all this matter? While the hegemony of consumerism as a set of cultural, organizational and political practices seems scarcely challenged by attempts at critique or at raising a convincing ideological alternative, it would be surpassingly naive to disregard its precarious foundations. Environmental degradation (with attendant proliferation of natural catastrophes, material depletion and escalating pollution), increasing social and economic inequalities, ever-increasing work insecurity, continuing erosion of community, massive political upheavals, self-revolutionizing technology will test the continuing promise of consumerism to provide, however fleetingly, meaning, contentment and fulfilment in ways that have not been tested thus far. Will people continue to flick through their TV channels and click their way through Internet sites engrossed in their consumer fantasies and dreams, or will they seek to make their voices heard and their actions count in ways different from that of entering their credit card details? Will the economy continue to deliver the goods? Will free trade continue to dominate? Will the capitalist state continue to sing to the tune of big business? Will the anger of the disenfranchised continue to be contained and silenced? Will alienation and discontents at work forever be silenced by escapist consolations? In addition to such potential external checks on consumerism, internal checks could be even more important. Will the overspent and overstretched consumers continue to overspend and overstretch themselves or will a new downshifting ethic take hold of them (Schor, 1998)? Will their idyll with spectacle and fantasy lose its appeal? Will the capriciousness of their tastes and preferences continue to be accommodated within the system?

It is not possible to anticipate answers to such questions. It seems to me indisputable that a consumer-driven, market-driven world economy has answered successfully the questions that radicals and critics were asking 30 or 40 years ago. Its capacity to resist both implosion and explosion, its ability to metamorphose in the light of changing circumstances, to incorporate new cultural currents and trends, to instigate and take advantage of fantastic technological and scientific developments, to numb and absorb the discontents and malaise which it generated, would have surprised even its warmest apologists of the 1950s and 1960s. It remains to be seen whether it will continue to do so in the years ahead or whether it encounters a massive and unpredicted discontinuity. At that point, it may be that even intellectuals and critics end their love affair with discourse and rediscover that there is a world to critique out there.

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