One of the things that many of us working in corporate citizenship tend to do is to assume that we are actually creating new agendas. Sometimes we do but, more often than not, other thinkers have been there before us. One such man worth revisiting in his extensive writings of over 60 years ago is Aldous Huxley, probably most famous to many for his novel *Brave New World*. This paper looks briefly at some of the things Huxley had to say that are relevant to our current thinking about the 'soul' of business and its relations to CSR and corporate citizenship.

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IN BRAVE NEW WORLD (1932) ALDOUS HUXLEY USES THE VERY POWERFUL IMAGE of the Ford Motor Company, and the developments in mass production and distribution of the Model T Ford, as a defining moment in the history of the world—so much so that the calendar is no longer marked by AD (anno Domini) but by AF (after Ford). I, therefore, have a question which I’d like to pose at the very beginning of this paper. If Aldous Huxley, literary journalist, essayist and novelist, ran the Ford Motor Company—how would he do it?

I ask this question of Aldous Huxley indirectly of course, given that he died in 1963, through his writings—mostly his essays, which don’t always receive the attention they deserve except from dedicated Huxley scholars. I do so because I am interested in the contemporary debates which have grown in vigour in the last few years, around corporate relations with society—specifically, corporate governance, corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, corporate accountability and corporate transparency.

In asking this question, I borrow from a contemporary American philosopher cum management guru, Tom Morris, who put a similar question, asking ‘if Aristotle ran General Motors—how would he do it?’ The title of his book is *If Aristotle Ran General Motors: The New Soul of Business* (Morris 1997) and, as his subtitle would suggest, Morris’s answer to this question explores what he calls ‘the new soul of business’, encouraging us all to engage in ‘reinventing the corporate spirit’, recognising that ‘The key to sustainable success in the world today . . . is provided by some of our most ancient wisdom about the human spirit, in the context of our individual lives and our corporate endeavours’ (Morris 1997: xii). His challenge to business, in both developed and developing economies, lies not in his answers, but in his asking such a question in the first place. And that, I would suggest, is also where the significance of Huxley’s thinking (and wisdom), developed in the main 60 or 70 years ago, still lies for contemporary business.

Huxley raised serious social (and spiritual) issues about business and asked searching questions about organisations, which still remain unsatisfactorily answered today. If Huxley had run Ford I believe he would have thought through his own concerns and dissatisfactions with business, most particularly the lack of humanity and charity, and he would have attempted to inject that humanity into what he considered, though not necessarily in this phrase, ‘the soul-less business’ which surrounded him. The phrase he used more than any other to describe business was, in fact, ‘lovelessness’, and I will develop his thinking along these lines as this paper progresses, linking Huxley’s concerns with those expressed by many of us today, concerned as we are with the need to reposition business as a social, public organisation, with social, environmental and economic responsibilities and accountabilities which require considerably more transparency than most businesses have traditionally been used to engaging with.

For the most part, crises of various types, inflicting social or environmental disasters on specific businesses, have caused many in the corporate world to have to rethink issues of accountability and transparency. Indeed, business overall (especially in the finance sector) began to be scrutinised much more, both externally in the media and, in some cases, internally by staff and management concerned about the reputation (linked to some of the specific practices and policies) of the companies they were working for: for example, following the financial crises in South-East Asia in the late 1990s. One key phrase that returned time and time again in the world’s media following the so-called Asian meltdown, for example, was that most, if not all, of the problems had been caused by ‘a lack of transparency’. Had business, the commentators announced, been more open and transparent—more accountable and inclusive, less reliant on concentrating solely on maximising profit for shareholders and more aware of the needs of wider stakeholders—then the ‘meltdown’ may not have been so dramatic, indeed, may never have happened. Throughout recent years, especially those marked by a growing environmental awareness in the 1970s and the corporate greed and excesses of the 1980s, a
view of business as recalcitrant, corrupt, even, in some quarters, closed in on itself, reluctant to be open to scrutiny, as somehow separate from the rest of us in society, has developed, so that there has grown an increasing distrust of business as being either socially or environmentally responsible. This overall distrust of business is characterised generally by the view that it is concerned only with the generation of profit, often at great social and environmental cost. Changing this view so that serious cultural change occurs, rather than simply a public relations exercise, is a significant challenge for the third millennium.

But the concerns are not new. Seventy years ago in his 1927 essay 'The Substitutes for Religion', Aldous Huxley pulled no punches in denouncing business, writing:

The modern apostles of commerce are trying to persuade people to accept business as a substitute for religion. Money-making, they assert, is a spiritual act; efficiency and common honesty are a service to humanity. Business in general is the supreme God, and the individual Firm is the subsidiary deity to whom devotions are directly paid. For the ambitious, the booming prosperous, and those too much involved in strenuous living to be able to do any strenuous thinking, the worship of business may perhaps supply the lack of genuine religion. But its inadequacy is profound and radical. It offers no coherent explanation of any universe outside of that whose centre is the stock exchange; in times of trouble it cannot console; it compensates no miseries; its ideals are too quickly realisable—they open the door to cynicism and indifference. Its virtues are so easily practiced that literally any human being who believes in the religion of Business can imagine himself a truly good man. Hence the appalling self-satisfaction and conscious Pharisaism so characteristic of the devotees of business. It is a justificatory religion for the rich and those who would become rich. And even with them it works only when times are good and they are without personal unhappiness. At the first note of a tragedy it loses all its efficacy; the briefest slump is sufficient to make it evaporate. The preachers of this commercial substitute for religion are numerous, noisy and pretentious. But they can never, in the nature of things, be more than momentarily and superficially successful. Men require a more substantial spiritual nourishment than these are able to provide (Huxley 1927: 285-86).

This is a harsh view of business and, one would think, one that hardly positions Huxley as an ideal candidate to be CEO of the Ford Motor Company; but it is a view not dissimilar to those highly negative images of business expressed by many today. The challenge for business lies not in simply discounting this as the view of the 'loony left' (which, given some of Huxley's views, particularly on individual capabilities, hardly describes him accurately) but in considering this as a serious concern expressed by many, irrespective of how accurate or not this may be for the practices and policies of many contemporary businesses. Whatever one's views, Huxley's is a soul-less view of business—one devoid of humanity and spirituality—and despite the degree to which he condemns all business, this lack of a 'soul' is one which many leading CEOs around the world are looking at more and more closely, as they begin to rethink the position of their businesses for the 21st century. They are rethinking business, not simply as a PR exercise (though much of that still happens) to limit the fallout of social and environmental crises, nor as a means of simply increasing corporate philanthropy in order to be seen as better 'citizens', nor indeed as a means of more effectively earning their licence to operate in a community by giving to charity or by increasing community sponsorship dollars, but by significantly rethinking corporate culture and their core business activities, as well as their responsibilities to shareholders. This rethink is informed by a number of emerging corporate citizenship principles such as accountability, transparency, stakeholder inclusivity and triple-bottom-line practices and reporting, where the business measures its performance and viability against three interrelated bottom lines: economic, social and environmental.

It is early days in this field, and there is no single company anywhere in the world that can be held up as a model of best practice in all areas of corporate citizenship. There
are a growing number that could, in certain specific areas, especially those involving stakeholder dialogue and business–community relations, stand firm against some of the harsher views expressed by Huxley in his 1927 essay. But all would do well to heed his concerns, which, unlike many of his views expressed in his novels such as *Brave New World* (1932) and *Island* (1962), were not futuristic or prophetic, but which were expressing how he saw business in his day. Writing, for example, in his 1950 essay ‘Variations on The Prisons’, where he engaged with Jeremy Bentham’s ideas of the panopticon (before Michel Foucault took up this issue) he wrote:

> Today every efficient office, every up-to-date factory is a panoptical prison, in which the worker suffers (more or less, according to the character of the warders and the degree of his own sensibility) from the consciousness of being inside a machine (Huxley 1950a: 196).

And he continued:

> For the real horror of the situation in an industrial or administrative Panopticon is not that human beings are transformed into machines (if they could be so transformed they would be perfectly happy in their prisons); no, the horror consists precisely in the fact that they are not machines, but freedom loving animals, far ranging minds and God like spirits, who find themselves subordinated to machines and constrained to live within the issueless tunnel of an arbitrary and inhuman system (Huxley 1950a: 197).

He echoes a view here that he had espoused for many years that modern social organisations, of which business is one, lacked ‘charity’—charity in the broadest sense of that word (*caritas* = love; see Birch 2006). In other words it was ‘loveless’—a not unfamiliar criticism made of business (and other social organisations today, particularly in the face of mounting globalisation and the concentration of more and more power in fewer and fewer hands). In his *The Perennial Philosophy*, for example, written just after the Second World War, Huxley puts this lack of charity like this:

> Our present economic, social and international arrangements are based, in large measure, upon organised lovelessness. We begin by lacking charity towards Nature, so that instead of trying to co-operate with Tao or the Logos on the inanimate and sub-human levels, we try to dominate and exploit, we waste the earth’s mineral resources, ruin its soil, ravage its forests, pour filth into its rivers and poisonous fumes into its air. From lovelessness in relation to nature we advance to lovelessness in relation to art—lovelessness so extreme that we have effectively killed all the fundamental or useful arts and set up various kinds of mass-production by machines in their place. And of course this lovelessness in regard to art is at the same time a lovelessness in regard to the human beings who have to perform the fool-proof and grace-proof tasks imposed by our mechanical art-surrogates and by the interminable paper work connected with mass production and mass distribution. With mass production and mass distribution go mass financing and the three have conspired to expropriate ever increasing numbers of small owners of land and productive equipment, thus reducing the sum of freedom among the majority and increasing the power of the minority to exercise a coercive control over the lives of their fellows (Huxley 1946: 109).

And he then went on to say:

> ‘Lead us not into temptation’ must be the guiding principle of all social organisations, and the temptations to be guarded against, and as far as possible eliminated by means of appropriate economic and political arrangements are temptations against charity, that is to say, against the disinterested love of God Nature and man (Huxley 1946: 110-11).

Arguing two years later in his essay ‘The Double Crisis’ that: ‘Sooner or later mankind will be forced by the pressure of circumstances to take concerted action against its own destructive and suicidal tendencies. The longer such action is postponed, the worse it will be for all concerned’ (Huxley 1949: 240).
Many in business may want to take issue with Huxley’s harsh criticisms, but there are only a few worldwide that could seriously engage with him by demonstrating that they are really serious about making changes—changes, that is, that are so deep-rooted, that corporate culture will change as a result. Nevertheless, we are, I believe, at a moment in time today where many in business are becoming more and more prepared to take the concerted actions that Huxley calls for in these essays.

Aldous Huxley, right up to his death in 1963, had been writing since the early 1920s on themes and issues that many around the world probably believe were actually invented in the 1970s. Themes and issues such as: make love not war; save the planet; be sustainable; people matter; technological advances come with a human price; journalism has descended to the lowest common denominator; feeling, willing and thinking, as the most important attributes of being human, are more and more marginalised; spirituality (not to be confused with religion) is massively in decline; society is more and more ruled by propagandists of one description or another (the term ‘spin doctor’ was not around in the 1930s); humanitarianism is on the wane; and everything, no matter how debilitating to the human spirit and individuality, is made acceptable in the name of progress, and social, political and economic stability.

At the heart of all of Huxley’s thinking is the overriding concern with the decrease in our awareness of who we are as humans in the face of advancing technology, and economic imperatives. Perhaps this is a privileged, middle-class, Western, liberal preoccupation, but it is one that lies deep within many of us as we engage with the 21st century and ask more and more questions about who we really are, our well-being and how satisfied (or not) we are with our lives and what we do to others and the world around us.

As Huxley wrote so incisively in an essay in the late 1940s, ‘In more than moderate doses, efficiency is incompatible with humanity.’ This is a lesson painted most vividly almost 20 years earlier in Brave New World, and in many ways now one of the central concerns of many of us seeking a meaning for our life beyond work, sleep and productivity. He continues:

> in a world of advanced technology efficiency tends to become the end, to which men and women are the means. The machine sets an unattainable sub-human standard; organisations and individuals are expected to conform to that standard. Failure to reach it is punished (Huxley 1950b: 42).

If we look around us right now, at what we do at work and elsewhere: is this not still the case? Is this really progress?

Huxley led the way in pointing out the destructive relationship between people and the planet. In another essay written in the 1940s, and well worth reading today, Huxley talked about this as ‘the double crisis’, writing, as if it were only yesterday, that ‘The human race is passing through a time of crisis—an upper level of political and economic crisis and a lower level of demographic and ecological crisis’ (Huxley 1950b: 225) where the world is rapidly running out of resources and the ability to feed its growing billions. He pulled no punches, arguing strongly that ‘The catalogue of man’s crimes against his environment is long and dismal’ (Huxley 1950b: 227). He describes the relationship between people and the environment as the parasitic one of ‘tapeworm and infested dog, of fungus and blighted potato’ (Thody 1973: 114), and asks, ‘How soon will the wasting assets of the world be exhausted?’ (Huxley 1948: 230).

How well do we answer that, 70 years later?

Huxley made it very clear: ‘Democracy is, among other things, the ability to say No to the boss. But a man cannot say No to the boss, unless he is sure of being able to eat when the boss’s favour has been withdrawn’ (Huxley 1948: 235). He may be seen as novelist of the future, but his concerns, as relevant today as they were 60 or 70 years ago, are very much about who we are in the here and now. Novels such as Brave New World
and his last, Island, written not long before his death, were as much about their times as they are ours, which is why they will continue to be important.

His message, uncomfortable still to many in power today, but a brilliant summing-up of what is happening right now with globalisation, is one that refuses to go away:

Let it suffice to say...that, given, first, the manifest unfitness of almost all human beings to exercise much power for very long, and, second, the tendency for social institutions to become pseudo-divine ends, to which individual men and women are merely means, it follows that every grant of authority should be hedged about with effective reservations; that political, economic and religious organisations should be small and co-operative, never large, and therefore inhuman and hierarchical; that the centralisation of economic and political power should be avoided at all costs; and that nations and groups of nations should be organised as federations of local and professional bodies, having wide powers of self-government. At the present time...unfortunately all signs point, not to decentralisation and the abolition of man-herders, but rather to a steady increase in the power of the Big Shepherd... (Huxley 1950b: 55).

A few years earlier Huxley was writing that: 'To have too much power over one's fellows, to be too rich, too violent, too ambitious—all this invites punishment, and in the long run, we notice, punishment of one sort or another duly comes' (Huxley 1946: 92). He argues, like Tom Morris and others today, for business to find its soul, a soul, for Huxley, marked as 'charity', not in its more narrow sense as usually used today, but where,

The distinguishing marks of charity are disinterestedness, tranquillity and humility. But...where there is disinterestedness there is neither greed for personal advantage nor fear for personal loss or punishment... From all this it follows that charity is the root and substance of morality, and that where there is little charity there will be much avoidable evil (Huxley 1946: 107).

He continues:

But just because it cannot compel, charity has a kind of authority, a non-coercive power, by means of which it defends itself and gets its beneficent will done in the world—not always, of course, not inevitably or automatically (for individuals and, still more, organisations can be impenetrably armoured against divine influence), but in a surprisingly large number of cases (Huxley 1946: 108).

It is, of course, completely unrealistic to imagine someone like Aldous Huxley as a contemporary CEO; his personal lack of interest in organised work, for himself, for example, would seem to militate against it, but his ideas about charity and social organisation are still highly relevant. One of his contemporaries (though a generation younger than Huxley), and now a highly regarded 'international management guru', Peter Drucker, was writing in 1946 in his now classic The Concept of the Corporation that what is needed in the redefining of a corporation as a social institution 'is an integration of the worker as a partner in the industrial system and as a citizen in society' (Drucker 1946: 137), arguing strongly that 'the relationship between the self interest of the citizen and the interests of society is the most fundamental question of a free society' (1946: 214). That argument has since been applied well beyond the individual to the corporate world, and is where corporate citizenship, as a significant way of rethinking business, functions most significantly today (see Marsden and Andriof 1998; Birch and Glazebrook 2000; Birch 2001).

As David C. Korten, in When Corporations Rule the World, writes so uncompromisingly:

If our concern is for a sustainable human well being for all people, then we must penetrate the economic myths embedded in our culture by the prophets of illusion, free ourselves of our obsession with growth, and dramatically restructure economic relationships to focus on two priorities:
1. Balance human uses of the environment with the regenerative capacities of the eco system, and

2. Allocate available natural capital in ways that ensure that all people have the opportunity to fulfil their physical needs adequately and to pursue their full social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual development (Korten 1995: 50).

This could have been Huxley writing 60 years earlier.

Peter Schwartz and Blair Gibb, in *When Good Companies Do Bad Things: Responsibility and Risk in an Age of Globalization* argue that a company's goal has to be 'in the end, not discovery of a model of social responsibility, but development of a process that will create its own living understanding of its place in the wider world' (Schwartz and Gibb 1999: 82). But, as Neil Chamberlain pointed out in 1982, 'to pretend that social purpose can simply be grafted onto the existing corporate organisation is an illusion and an evasion' (Chamberlain 1982: 12); it requires systemic, holistic, cultural change.

It is clear, then, as Huxley had been saying for many years, that we have to change the narrow emphasis on economic growth at all costs if we are to be sustainable in the future. Charles Handy, another international management guru, argues that:

a three percent growth rate continued for one hundred years would mean that we would be consuming sixteen times as much stuff as we do today. We cannot, can we, buy sixteen times as many cars or television sets, travel all of us, sixteen times as far or as often, eat sixteen times as much food or consume that amount of extra oil and gas? (Handy 1997: 45).

His solution is to 'perhaps create more activity outside the purely economic sphere where the motivation will be unconnected with efficiency and more to do with intrinsic satisfaction and worth' (Handy 1997: 48), an argument at the core of corporate citizenship discussions and, equally, at the heart of Huxley's thinking.

This stands in strong opposition to a very common, and generally uncontested, view, that, in Handy's words, and as Huxley had been saying for years, seems 'to be saying that life is essentially about economics, that money is the measure of most things and that the market is its sorting mechanism' (Handy 1997: 73). Many of us, increasingly, don't accept this view but, as Handy suggests, trapped though we may be in the rhetoric of modernist economics, 'there is a hunger for something else which might be more enduring and more worthwhile' (Handy 1997: 73).

As we move ever closer to cloning ourselves; to our almost total dependence on the media to do our thinking for us; to our increasing destruction of the world's resources; and to getting richer at the expense of increasing numbers in the world getting poorer; we could do no better than revisit Aldous Huxley and reflect with him in his foreword to a later edition of *Brave New World* that, were he to write it again, he would have the savage, a central character in the novel, learn 'something at first hand about the nature of a society composed of freely cooperating individuals devoted to the pursuit of sanity'.

Let's hope we get there. There are good signs that some, though not all, in business have the vision to do so—but it is a fragile vision, one still highly susceptible to economic imperatives which can (and will sometimes) push the social and environmental bottom lines into the background. We need a sanity in business that will treat all three bottom lines equally; that, despite the vision of some, is still a brave new world destined, perhaps, for the future, but unlikely to become present reality very easily. We need to embrace the vision, but also engage with the everyday realities of its fragility. As Huxley said in his 1931 essay 'Beliefs and Actions', the same year he wrote *Brave New World*:

A vast amount of personal ambition, of rapacity, of lust for power is sanctified and at the same time made actively effective by this idea [of progress]. It is the idea of progress, coupled very often with the humanitarian idea of universal welfare and social service, that the modern businessman finds excuses for his activities. Why does he work so hard? Why does he fight so ruthlessly against his rivals? To obtain power and make himself
rich, the cynical realist would answer. Not at all, the businessman indignantly replies, I
am working and fighting for progress, for prosperity, for society (Huxley 1931: 324).

References


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