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WHO STOLE THE CHEESE? OR: HOW POSTMODERNISM CAN *GROW* YOUR BUSINESS ...

Matthew Sharpe

In this paper, I examine some of the key management literature of the neoliberal 1990s to make a series of wider observations about contemporary ideology. Post-structuralist or post-modernist theory is often presented as the arch-enemy of neoliberal capitalism, as the orthodoxy of late capitalism. However, adding to work by Frederic Jameson, Thomas Frank and others, this paper examines the uncanny proximity between neoliberal ideas about disaggregating, outsourcing, networking, etc. and the leading motifs of postmodernist theory. Its guiding hypothesis is that postmdoernism in the academy, despite its own self-misrecognition as "radical", is a further ideological expression of the same neoliberal drive to overcome "Fordist", "authoritarian" ways of organising production and social regulation.

Keywords: Poststructuralism, Neo-liberalism, late capitalism, Frederic Jameson, Thomas Frank

Workchoices; or the Antinomies of Contemporary Conservatism

Classical representatives of Marxian ideology critique, including Lukacs, Horkheimer and Jameson, agree that Western modernity is a period of cultural and political antinomies (roughly, seemingly irreconcilable oppositions). In contemporary Australia, the antinomies which characterize the predominant postmodern form of political conservatism were condensed in the turbulent Melbourne Cup week of 2005. In this one week, markedly anti- or post-liberal anti-terrorism legislation, justified in terms of *national* security, were introduced into parliament literally *at the same time* as neo-liberal industrial relations reforms, justified with recourse to the ideas of inevitable, *post-national* globalization. This vignette condenses what commentators have long celebrated and reviled as the two poles of Australia's Liberal party, as it reshaped itself under the Leadership of John Howard: social conservatism and economic radicalism. If we ask how these two poles have been 'soldered' together, the answer seems to be: primarily by way of a new concentration of Australian politics in the *cultural sphere*. Here social conservatives and economic neo-liberals are united in 'culture wars' against "elites" or "chattering classes" concentrated in the non-Murdoch press, the public sectors, university humanities' departments, and school's curriculum boards. If for the neo-liberals these figures represent a telling sap on the public purse who should be made, like welfare recipients, to justify their 'economic rationality' (hence the vamping up of today's "audit and grants-rounds culture" in Australian universities),

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social conservatives charge that these "politically correct" elites support multiculturalism and other naïve social policies whose unintended consequences are cultures of welfare dependency, declining stocks of communal identity and a 'law and order deficit'.

Since late 2001, these social conservative concerns have congealed in anxieties about growing rates of non-European immigration, and in particular about the Australian Islamic community. Given these anxieties, Rupert Murdoch's News Limited newspapers (like *The Australian* nationally, or *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald-Sun*) have long been calling for an end to the "multicultural madness". And in this climate, a new term has emerged from out of the *avant garde* of the humanities academy into Australian public debate, first in the nation's long-running 'history wars' regarding white violences against Australia's indigenous peoples, and since 2001 in the US-led 'war on terror'. This is the term 'postmodernism'. In his 2003 address to the National Student Leadership Forum on Faith and Values, to take but one example, Treasurer and Prime Ministerial aspirant Peter Costello drew on the example of a suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem in order to raise and criticize a philosophy Australian students might encounter on campus: the philosophy of postmodernism. "Postmodernism", Mr Costello counseled, was a philosophy that claims that "all values are equally good and you can therefore believe in anything you like."(Maddox, 2005, 183) Yet the fact that the suicide bomber clearly had "faith and ... values, you can't deny that", he reflected, proved that all values were *not* equal, or some were *more* equal than others. Australian students should instead embrace the Christian "ethic and the faith background *we come from*". (*loc cit.*)

Given the inveterate anti-intellectualism of Australian culture, it is unusual that postmodernism should have become today a politically contested term, at least for the conservative side of politics. As has been widely documented, the term emerged in the 1970s to describe new movements within architecture. It then came to wider prominence in the mid-1980s. At this time, in the works of Lyotard, then Jameson, Harvey, Bauman and others, "postmodernism" was presented as a "periodizing concept" describing a broader "shift in the structure of feeling" (*P R E C I S*, 1987, cited in Harvey, 1989, p*) in the culture of advanced capitalist societies. In Jean-Francois Lyotard's classic formulation, this new "postmodern condition" is characterized by a deep skepticism towards the "grand" legitimating "narratives" of earlier periods, a kind of bidding up of Nietzsche's "death of God". So, in Lyotard's famed telling, not simply the traditional religions, but also the progressive philosophies of history of modern liberalism or socialism had irrevocably lost their capacity to "legitimate" knowledges, institutions, and practices. In their place, Lyotard describes a plurality of "language games" in the West, of which even the hard sciences constitute but one. Although the truth or 'goodness' of propositions can be decided *within* each such game, the games *themselves* are incommensurable. (Lyotard, 2008).

The ethical promise of postmodernism, described thus, lies in the opening afforded by the critique of previously-dominant "language games" to previously excluded voices, styles, 'phrases', 'genres', etc. Each could now claim an equal place at the cultural table as one more 'language game' in the postmodern polyphony. The ambivalent consequences associated with this 'heterotopian' vision, however, were quickly thematized within the academy. These ambivalences include the 'depthlessness' of any and all cultural products in a climate where all things are equally (re)packagable, from Plato to porno; the weakening of any sense of shared history or public space encouraged by the explosion in the sheer *quantity* of 'new' perspectives in circulation; and (so) the removal of any possibility of critical distance afforded by older, context-transcendent (but now discredited) terms like truth, justice, rightness, etc. (Jameson, 1998: Eagleton, 1996; Sardar, 1998).

Australian Treasurer Peter Costello's remarks, in this vein, single out the ethical *relativism* that characterizes strong endorsements of the postmodern "structure of feeling". As philosophers have suspected since Plato's *Thaeatetus*, such relativism is indeed not only undesirable. It has the distinct "pragmatic" disadvantage of being impossible, because performatively self-contradictory (the proposition that 'all views are relative' makes this view *itself* relative, etc.) Given the increasing cross-pollination of ideas in Australia's culture wars from those of the United States – and given that the venue where Mr Costello made his remarks is modeled on the Washington Student Leadership Forum and National Prayer Breakfasts (Maddox, 2005: 285) – though, it is probable that Mr Costello's sources for his characterization of "postmodernism" come directly or indirectly from the American 'culture wars'. In these 'wars', neoconservatives influenced by Leo Strauss and his students argue that the founding modern skepticism towards traditional authorities inevitably leads to postmodern relativism – or worse – since this skepticism ultimately must undermine its own foundations. (Strauss, 1953: 1-19) Their philosophically-informed positions in this way unite with characteristic Christian-fundamentalist critiques of the modern world as socially isolating and (im-)morally 'permissive', in whose light postmodern emphases on plurality and openness to the other appear as a culminating invitation to social chaos.

In this social and political context, I would then contend, to point out – as some academics have – that contemporary conservative attacks on "postmodernism" are simply misplaced or anachronistic, since there are now few card-carrying postmodernists in the academy, most 'post-structuralists' never called themselves postmodernists anyway, etc., is insufficient. The term 'postmodernism', it is evident, is emerging on the political right as what Lacanian cultural critics call an 'empty' (or 'catch all') signifier – alongside 'elites', 'chattering classes', 'politically correct', etc. – which serves to condense a series of wider social anxieties at this moment when Australia is opening itself out to processes of economic globalization. So the point I want to argue here is a different one. It can be approached by a brief analysis

of the language in which the Australian government's "Workchoices" industrial relations legislation of 2005 was sold to the public. Because, for all the government's and supporters' hostility to academic 'postmodernism', the point is, the marketing language of "Workchoices" bears some unlikely similarities to the characteristic tropes of celebratory postmodernist statements. I would single out three. First, just as one defining axis of postmodernism, from Lyotard to the vulgate, is a proto-paranoiac equation of authority with "totality" and hence *totalitarianism* ("let us wage a war on totality", as Lyotard enjoins (Lyotard, 2008), etc.), *Workchoices* was sold as an anti-centralist, anti-statist, anti-government reform. The persisting arbitration framework, together with the labor unions to which it gave a central place, were positioned in *Workchoices* advertising as both outdated and – a little like Lyotard's *bete noir*, the "'totalising philosophical tradition" (Lyotard, 2008) – closed to novelty, if not 'otherness', *per se*. In the words of the OECD advocating such labor market reforms, such remnants of tripartite, social-democratic national settlements were now "*ossifying* the capacity of economies and the will of societies to *adapt*". (at Mack, 2005: 158) Second: just as one aspect of postmodernist aesthetics is the "effacement" of the hierarchical, modernist distinction between high and low culture (Jameson, 1998: 2-3), *Workchoices* was pitched, from the PM's statements to the commercials featuring ordinary workers "on the ground", as a resolutely anti-elitist piece of legislation. To quote the Prime Minister in Federal Parliament, the new laws aim to:

> ... sweep away the insufferable presumption made by the present industrial relations system that men and women in Australia are too stupid to be trusted with the responsibility of deciding [for themselves] what is good for them. (at Mack, 2005: 165)

Third: if Harvey or Hassan (amongst others) agree that postmodernism is "anti-form (disjunctive, open) ... playful, anarchic, indeterminate" (Harvey, 1989: 45), so *Workchoices* (as its very title indicates) was again and again recommended to the Australian electorate as being all about "flexibility", "choice", "change", and "freedom". To cite the explanatory memoranda:

> Employees will benefit from the *enhanced choice and flexibility* available when agreeing with their employer about workplace pay and conditions beyond the minimum standards ... *an increasing number* of organizations have found that agreement-making under the WR Act provides *a wide variety of options for new and innovative initiatives* that benefit both employees and the business... (cited at Mack 2005: 164 (italics mine))

These unexpected similarities between *Workchoices* and "postmodernism", I want to contend, point towards a different line of criticism of today's conservative rhetoric against the latter, in the context of today's "culture wars". This is that the proponents of these conservative attacks are either unaware of, or willfully pass over, the fact that by far the most devastating criticisms of postmodernism have been mounted by figures politically on the left, principally Terry Eagleton,

Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Alex Callinacos in the first world, also third world figures such as Ziauddin Sardar. These figures *agree* with the Mr Costello et al's anxieties about the relativistic implications of postmodern paeans to plurality, the marginal, or local as such. When *itself* elevated to the position of the grand narrative to end all *grands recits* (cf. Jameson*), they note, postmodernism not only threatens to undermine subjects' faith in their "own" inherited "ways of life", and "values". It also robs oppressed groups of terms in which the strong, context-transcendent, ethical contents underlying their positions ('not only the claims of (eg) black single mothers, but also *just*', etc.), or alternative visions of society as a whole -- which would have to be 'totalising' (Sardar, 1998: 43) -- could be formulated. More than this, the postmodern stress on the incommensurability of the plural "local" "subject-positions" threatens to position these as incommensurable, antagonistic tribalisms ('not ours because it is just, but just *because it is ours* ...') which literally mirror the discourse of new social conservatives in the first world. (Sadar, 1998: 55-60; Antonio, 2000) Finally, *like* the neoconservative critiques which associate postmodernism with "new class elites", these authors wonder about *who* the addressee of postmodernist hymns to our new-found abilities to shift and turn between "subject-positions" could be, and what the social and material preconditions of their chameleonic capacity are. In Sardar's words:

> One doesn't see an Indian Michael Jackson, a Chinese Madonna, a Malaysian Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Moroccan Julia Roberts, Filipino 'New Kids on the Block', a Brazilian Shakespeare, an Egyptian Barbara Cartland, a Tanzanian *Cheers*, a Nigerian *Dallas*, a Chilean *Wheel of Fortune*, or Chinese opera, Urdu poetry, Egyptian drama, etc. on the global stage. (Sardar, 1998: 22).

What distinguishes the Marxian critiques of postmodernism proffered by Jameson, Harvey or Eagleton from the neoconservative and fundamentalist critiques, then, is *how* they relate this new "cultural dominant" (Jameson) to its larger historical, social and material context. In Jameson's paradigmatic figuring, indeed, postmodernism -- far from being a necessarily oppositional, anti-hegemonic thing in the first world countries -- is the "cultural logic of late capitalism". Lyotard himself already associated the "postmodern condition" with certain technological preconditions: the emergence in the 1970s and '80s of new cybernetic technologies for the storage, retrieval and reproduction of information. "It is reasonable to suppose", Lyotard opines in *the Postmodern Condition*:

> ... that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, [the advancements] in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media). (Lyotard, 2008).

Jameson's position, while in no way denying the importance of "the cybernetic revolution", nevertheless contextualizes this technical transformation as one aspect

of a wider societal conjuncture underlying the emergence of postmodernism in culture: "what is often euphemistically called modernization, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism". (Jameson, 1998: 43) It is above all characterized by the completion on a global scale of what Marx theorized as the shift from formal to real subsumption. For Jameson "late capitalism", as advocates of "globalization" pronounce, is that stage of capitalism's development when, increasingly, no "socio-economic enclaves" remain outside the circuitry of commodification and marketized exchange. (Jameson, 1998: 43) Having increasingly gone everywhere geographically, Jameson argues, in the present age capital is 'turning inwards', resulting on the one hand in new, predominantly *financial* modes of accumulation:

> ... speculation, the withdrawal of profits from home industries, the increasingly feverish search, not so much for new markets (these are ... saturated) as for the new kinds of profits available in financial transactions themselves ...— these are the ways in which capital now reacts to and compensates for the closing of its productive moment ... (Jameson, 1998: 142).

How though does "postmodernism" in culture – with its populism, pastiche, and "decentred" productions – relate to these new socioeconomic conditions? If artistic modernism reflected "the increasing abstraction and deterritorialisation of Lenin's 'imperialistic stage'", Jameson programmatically contends (Jameson, 1998: 143), artistic postmodernism reflects the "second degree abstraction" of a system wherein capitalism colonizes all cultural production *within the first world.* "[A]ny comprehensive new theory of finance capitalism", Jameson says:

> ... will need to reach out into the expanded realm of cultural production to map its effects: indeed mass cultural production and consumption themselves – ... with globalization and the new information technology – are as profoundly economic as the other productive areas of late capitalism, and as fully integrated into the latter's generalized commodity system. (Jameson, 1998: 143-144).

It is here that Jameson then situates the "decadent" effects cited by Christian and Islamic fundamentalists against consumer culture. In the words of Thomas Frank and the *Baffler* journalists, late capitalism "commodifies our dissent", in order to turn it into surplus value:

> Not only are Joyce and Picasso no longer weird or repulsive, they have become classics and now look rather realistic to us. Meanwhile, there is very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that contemporary art finds intolerable and scandalous. ... commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artifacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation: our advertising, for example, is fed by modernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it... (Jameson, 1998: 19).

Is This A Good Time, or What?

Postmodernism in Production, or The New Management Discourse

It is at this point that I want to make my more original intervention into the debates. For the weight of Jameson's "postmodernism as ideological logic of late capitalism" thesis falls on this appropriation of *avant garde* forms *in contemporary marketing*, and (as the other side of the same coin) the impact on the arts of their commodification within the new "globalized" world. In this way, then, we note that Jameson's own account in this way reflects the phenomena it describes: the increasing primacy of "finance capital", and the circulation of money and commodities facilitated by the new computer-technologies and regulatory environments, over the sphere of production.[1] As we shall return to in closing, here in fact Jameson's account mirrors the hegemonic economic teachings of neo-liberalism which have informed the *Workchoices* legislation in Australia today. What I want to draw attention to in this second half of this essay is a phenomenon which Jameson's account does not countenance, which would *supplement* (not contradict) his account of postmodernism as the logic of contemporary capitalism in the first world. This is the convergence, glimpsed above in the language of the *Workchoices* advertisements, between the terms of contemporary *management discourse* and the very type of *avant garde* theory Mr Costello thinks is in such serious danger of corrupting the youth of Australia. In order to make this case, I will draw principally on the work of American cultural theorist Thomas Frank. In his landmark work, *The Conquest of Cool*, Frank independently noted the same tension as Jameson between the allegedly "radical" form of postmodern academic theory and its *content*, given that the latter finds such uncanny echoes in post-sixties advertising: as he puts it, the "primary ideologist" of the "new economy". (Frank, 1997: 89) In his more recent *One Market Under God*, and several contributions to the *Baffler* journal, Frank—like Boltanski and Chiapello in the opening chapter of their important work, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005)—has focused on another phenomena. This is the remarkable growth in the corporate world of the 1990s of a veritable management theory industry. This growth was spawned and then hosted in such magazines as *Fast Company*, *Red Herring*, and *Business 2.0* in the USA, and soon generated its own reflexive parody in the TV program *Dilbert*. (Frank, 2000: 174).

Frank's regrettable obscurity within the academy might partly be traced to his free-wheeling, satirical wit, together with the virtue that he takes as his objects "discourses" which most radical theorists deem beneath their concern. Yet I would argue that we would do well today to say of Franks work what he does of many statements of the 1990s "business revolution": "yes, the business revolution is hilarious, but it is also deadly serious". (Frank, 2000: 177).

Frank's argument in *One Market Under God* starts, in fact, with a recognition of the same problem that troubled self-proclaimed "godfather" of the neoconservatives Irving Kristol, in his *Two Cheers for Capitalism*. (Kristol, 1978) In that work, in the immediate aftermath of the social struggles of the 60s, Kristol worried that America's corporate class might prove a ruling strata unable to generate mass enthusiasm or loyalty. The culture wars were still to be fought and the religious Right courted. For Frank, the "real object" underlying the exponential growth in marketing literature in the 1990s is related to this concern of the New Right. This literature, he argues, aimed "not [at] efficiency or excellence or even empowerment". It had "a far more abstract goal". This goal was establishing "the political and social *legitimacy* of the corporation". (Frank, 2000: 178) As Ghoshal and Bartlett reflect, in Weberian language, in their contribution to the new discourse *The Individualized Corporation*:

> The clear lesson from history is that institutions decline when they lose their social legitimacy. This is what happened to the monarchy, to organized religion, to the state. This is what will happen to the companies unless managers accord the same priority to the collective task of rebuilding the credibility and legitimacy of their institutions as they do to the individual task of enhancing their company's economic performance. (cited at Frank, 2000: 178-179)

The "legitimation crisis" of American business had become so acute in the 1990s, Frank argues, because of the very *successes* they had achieved since 1981. From the new deal through to the 1980s, Frank contends, however much business resented this, one key source of its popular legitimacy had been the private sector's forced accommodation of unionized labor, collective bargaining and state-managed arbitration. (Frank, 2000: 182) Yet following 1981, when President Reagan sanctioned the replacement of striking air controllers with permanent, non-unionized labor, the 1980s and '90s saw *both* the large-scale withdrawal of "big government" from economic regulation, and the shrinking of organized labor, facilitated by changed labor laws, to the point where in 1999 it would count only 9.4% of American workers in the private sphere. (Frank, 2000: 183, 180) The cultural problem generated by this economic and political triumph arose from the result of this sustained period of structural reform. As in Australia and other OECD countries where such structural reforms have been undertaken, wealth in America was now much more inequitably distributed – according to *Business Week* in 1999, for instance, mean CEO salaries had risen from 85 to 425 times the average blue collar workers' wage (Frank, 2000: 7). Yet at the same time, in the 1999 assessment of financial journalist Doug Henwood: "By 1993, it was clear that the quickest way to add 5 points to your stock price was to lay off 50,000 workers" (cited at Frank, 2000: 191), and well-publicized cases occurred where CEO salaries increased in direct proportion to the number of employee "lay offs" they had implemented.

"It was thanks at least in part to the hyperbolic prose" of the new management gurus who emerged in the 1990s, Frank suggests, that strike levels nevertheless

remained at historic lows in these potentially divisive times. And it was thanks to the "revolutionary crowing" of magazines like *Fast Company*, as he puts things, that:

> ... so many of the downsized agreed that what had happened to them was necessary and justified ... [so they] left the parking lots of their former employers in such an orderly fashion, talking confidently about their impending careers as 'free agents'. (Frank, 2000: 180)

How, though, if Frank is right, did the new business theory accomplish this sizable ideological feat? The answer, as Frank argues it, is by undertaking a concerted project to "give business its soul back", firstly, through the promotion of corporate "brands" (for external consumers) (Frank, 2000: 220-230; see Frank, 1998), but second, through a dynamic new consensus in management theory, concerning the "supply side": namely, people's workplaces themselves. Frank dubs this new consensus "market populism":

> Whatever recommendations individual gurus might make regarding the structure of the workplace, the management literature of the nineties almost universally insisted that its larger project was liberation, giving a voice to the voiceless, 'empowering' the individual, subverting the pretensions of the mighty, and striking moral blows against hierarchy of all kinds. (Frank, 2000: 179).

In other words, as Frank notes, at the same time as the salvos of the culture warriors reigned righteously down upon the "nihilism" of the "new class"'s "postmodern" antinomianism in the humanities faculties of American universities, a strikingly *similar* antinomian set of terms began making its way into the syllabuses of American business schools and MBA programs, and filling the pages of the bestselling corporate magazines. (Frank, 2000: 175).

The antecedents of the new nineties management theory, Frank argues, can be traced back to the "human relations" school, with its critique of Taylorist "scientific management". Initiated by Elton Mayo's 1933 *Human Problems of an Industrial Civilisation*, representatives of this school argued that Taylorist production lines suppress workers' loyalty and initiative, and thereby demonstrably diminish business' economic efficiency. (This is the famous "Hawthorne effect") (Frank, 2000: 183-4) What changed in the 1990s, as Frank documents, is first of all that support in the literature for the "vertically integrated" Taylorist organization, which had remained predominant until this time, suddenly all-but-*disappeared*. (Frank, 2000: 185) Frank's contention is, when divested of its inveterate foe, the terms characteristic of the "human relations" school were radicalized and transformed in the 1990s, such that by the end of the decade few remnants of this finally still-all-too-human*ist* (see anon) mode of critique remained.

The "central villain" in 1990s management theory, Frank observes, remains "the great, hierarchically organized corporations in whose malign service we are

all thought once to have worked". (Frank, 2000: 193) But the new management theorists unite in the opinion that Taylorist business organizations are not simply economically inefficient. More than that, in new guru Charles Handy's near-Lyotardian phrase, they constitute "a traditional authoritarian hierarchy". (cited at Frank, 2000: 194) For these theorists, most of the ills besetting contemporary America can in fact be traced back to Taylorism's baleful influence (Frank, 2000: 213), up to and including (interestingly enough) the defeat of the US's war effort under the rule of ex-Ford manager Robert McNamara. (See the note at Frank, 2000: 185) By 1994, indeed, Handy's *The Empty Raincoat* had drawn the soon-consensual conclusion that, with the cold war won, the campaign against totalitarianism needed now to smite down the enemy within: "[while] we were preoccupied with our common enemy in communism, we conveniently ignored the fact that many of our [own] organizations were run in a similar totalitarian way". (Handy, 1994: 130).

Extrapolating Whyte's much earlier concerns in *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956), the principal sin these theorists charge Taylorist managers with are ethical, or even aesthetic, in kind. A PSI Net commercial Frank analyses makes the point well: it shows a group of white men in staid suits, who age visibly as the add progresses, raging against the advent of the internet, and insisting that their *rank* should allow them to define what *they* think customers need. (Frank, 2000: 194) As my Australian readers will not be surprised to hear (since here we join the classic charge of the culture warriors), the defining charge leveled against these men (and note the gender) in new management theory is *elitism*: a "combination of class snobbery, intellectual certainty, and willful denial of Nature, of the People, and of the market". (Frank, 2000: 194) "In the battle for the future", Hamel and Prahalad's *Competing For the Future* pronounces, "elitism" and "convention" itself will be greater "enemies" of corporations' prosperity than the labor movement, or the hostile trade practices of competitors.(Hamel and Pahalad, 1996, pp. 270-271; at Frank, 2000: 195).

In the dictatorial "controlling organizations" of our Taylorist past, Senge explains in *The Fifth Discipline*, buoyed up by a "cultural addiction" to the idea of the "hero-CEO", all decisions and "learning" came from the top-down.(Senge, 1990: 69, 282, 340) All this only changed, as Hey and Moore's *The Caterpillar Doesn't Know* explains, in the late 1980s, when "individuals" became disenchanted with "institutions", principally because of the 1986 space shuttle disaster and a series of popular, *Wall Street*-style movies. (Frank, 2000: 197) The solution, as we all now know very well, was if not exactly the "deconstruction" of *all* such organizations everywhere, then their "delayering", "disaggregation", "downsizing", "reengineering" or even "disintermediation". New, more flexible, non-vertical and – you guessed it – "non-hierarchical" modes of organization had to be imagined, the new management theorists now intoned. As Oracle's bizarre 1998 marketing

campaign showing its employees dressed as AK-bearing Khmer Rouge cadres only highlighted *in extremis*, a new social revolution, a veritable "class struggle" was to sweep America. (Frank, 2000: 173) But this time, the revolutionary vanguards "stepping righteously into battle against the elites", as Frank puts it, "were the country's highest paid management consultants and CEOs ..." (Frank, 2000: 186) *Mutatis mutandis*, and echoing the old joke about Stalinism – that when the people did not agree with the party, the party changed the people – the will of the "common people" Senge, Peters *et al.* invoke had also changed. Examination of their texts confirm that this emancipitory will is not borne any longer by flesh and blood workers, because it has turned out to best represented by the *market mechanism itself*. In his 1992 book *Liberation Management*, Peters thus advocates a new categorical imperative (in his italics) of *"blasting the violent winds of the marketplace into every nook and cranny in every firm"* (cited at Frank, 2000: 190) And it is in this context, significantly, that Peters' anti-elitism takes on content. The underlying assumption of older managers who refuse to "outsource everything", as the market would advocate, is that:

> Regardless of the nature/complexity/uniqueness of the problem/any problem, the best resources ... on earth ... live on our $14^{th}/26^{th}/17^{th}/5^{th}$ etc, floor. What shocking arrogance! (Peters, 1997: 240).

It is at this point also, significantly, that we can see the *distance* between the contemporary management theory and the "human relations" school, which still after all emphasized the "value" of employee loyalty. For no less than the most "elitist", even *French*, anti-humanism, the new management theorists unite to praise "the dance of change" (the title of one of Senge's books) not for the sake of any ulterior motive, but for the sake of change *as such*. Just as post-structuralist theory again and again verges into amorphous hypostasizations of difference *as such*, potentiality *as such* or a *futurity* so radical it could never become present, so the new management theorists instruct us that in the "age of unreason" that is the new economy even "change [*itself*] is not what it used to be" (Handy, 1989: 5) Now, all is "discontinuous", and we can not – as Hamel and Prahalad echo Jacques Derrida – think of the future as "the linear extrapolation of the past". (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994: 5) In an age where "science" is putting "chaos, creativity and complexity at the heart of everything" (at Frank, 2000: 197), Handy implores, it is only those of us who "refuse to turn the wheel of learning" who can even brook such a daftly "logocentric" idea as, for example, sticking one career-long job.

If this neomanagerial anti-humanism might concern some readers, we should not be alarmed. The reason and the "good news" is that, in the new economy, silently but irreversibly, *employees* have ceased being workers in the old way, and we need to change our thinking accordingly. Indeed, as a 1996 MCI commercial, overlaid with alternative rock, demonstrated to viewers, in the new economy "there is no race ... no genders ... no infirmities", rightly therefore asking us: "is this a

good time or what?". (Frank, 2000: 172) In the veritably millenarian conjuncture envisaged by new-management theory, employees have rather become "knowledge workers", if not participants in Hardt and Negri's "general intellect". "Knowledge workers", Senge explains, "live in a continuing learning mode". In Socratic fashion, they are "acutely aware of their own ignorance, their incompetence, [and] their growth areas". In the concurring words of another enthusiast (Frank, 2000: 208):

> They come to you and they are trained and they know what you need and maybe you don't even know what you need. So the demands from them to you in terms of financial independence [are high], they have so many choices – where they can go to live and where they want to live[,] and that changes the hiring equation. (at Frank, 2000: 202).

What might look like "downsizing" or even just plain old firing of people accordingly began by the late 1990s to reappear in this literature as something much more like the triumphant, Nietzschean yea-saying of the new "knowledge-workers'" *own* burgeoning class consciousness. "Organizations have to get used to the idea that not everyone wants to work for them all the time even if the jobs are available", Handy had already warned complacent CEOs in 1989. (Handy, 1989: 73) As the "Declaration of Independence" of the "Free Agent Nation" published by *Fortune* magazine in 1997 made clear, in the new economy "free agents are gladly swapping the false promise of security for the personal pledge of authenticity" (cited at Frank, 2000: 205), even *demanding* that they be treated as independent contractors, if we truly *must* continue to rely on anything so closed to absolute futurity as contracts at all. In a formulation that nearly literally "takes the cake" if not the cheese, Handy's *Empty Raincoat* does not stop short of drawing the conclusion that in the first world we have indeed now attained to:

> ... what Marx dreamt of ... the 'means of production', the traditional bases of capitalism, are now literally owned by the workers, *because those means are in their heads and at their fingertips* ... (Handy, 1994: 23).

Given the striking echoes between this literature and "high" academic post-structuralism, nor do the new management gurus' choices surprise us, when it comes to identifying antecedents and paradigms for how we might actually *live* in this brave new utopian clime. Echoing a motif that has inhabited the European theoretical imagination from Rousseau to Agamben, Frank describes how the literature invariably invokes figures of infancy and "the child" as a first ethical paradigm. As life long learners, Senge intones, we must learn to remain in touch with "the child learner within us". Raging against US child labor laws, Peters goes further: "If your organization systems/information technology operation doesn't have a senior executive under the age of 15 ... or at least under 25 ... you're in trouble", he warns. (Peters, 1997: 21; Frank, 2000: 252) But children, fortunately, are not without guardians in their exalted role of the noble savages of the corporate age (see Frank, 2000: 231). They are joined in this exalted position by non-Western,

or more pointedly *non-European*, peoples of all ages in a festival of essentialized multiculturalist Otherness: from the Japanese of Handy or Kotkin (Frank, 2000: 256-257) to Senge's "North American Indians" (Senge, 1990: 30, 371; Frank, 2000: 236) to *Body Shop* proprietor Anita Ruddick's "indigenous people" *per se*, "caretakers of the earth" whose very company, as she confides, is "nourishing for the soul". Peter Senge, always the most esoteric of the new class of gurus, draws on the *Bhagavad Gita*. Sufi tales and explications of Chinese symbols draw in the threads. What is above all needful in the new economy is that we each, managers and knowledge workers alike, should cultivate a kind of corporate-Heideggerian *Gelassanheit* ("releasement", a term Heidegger borrows from the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhardt). The gravest sin of Taylorist managers, as Handy and others agree, is indeed the Cartesian one: the search for certainty, as if anyone could find "the absolute final word or ultimate cause". (Senge, 58-59, 159; Frank, 2000: 196) In the sage counsel of a Hugo Boss CEO:

> There are no right answers. If you deal with contemporary art, it'll teach you very fast that there are many answers and some of them are wrong and right at the same time. (cited at Frank, 2000: 210)

We must thus avoid all "anthropocentrism", Senge advises, as if humans were" the centre of the universe". Equally, "linear ways of seeing" are now to be avoided. Indeed, in truly Humean or Nietzschean style, Senge puts the strong skeptical thesis indeed that "all causal attributions made within the English language are highly suspect". (Senge, cited at Frank, 2000: 196).

Yet the researcher who, espying these parallels between new management theory and academic postmodernism, nevertheless does persist in seeking out a causal link between the two only really hits 'pay dirt' when s/he stumbles upon EJROT, otherwise known as *The Electronic Journal Of Radical Organization Theory*, and the works of William McDonald Wallace, Robert Chia, and *David Boje* & Robert Dennehy. In these works, the near-seamless connection between postmodernism and the motifs of new management theory becomes "in and for itself". In the pages of *EJROT*, a vanguard of papers drawing on Bataille, Bourdieu, Derrida, Irigaray and Foucault compete with papers from other paradigms in rethinking the nature of organisations in ways sensitive to "the myriad of heterogeneous yet interlocking organisational micro-practices which collectively generate relatively stabilized effects such as individuals, organizations and society" (Robert Chia, as cited at Weiskopf and Willmott, 1996: 4) If *EJROT* evidently addresses a relatively limited, academic audience honed to the esoteric rhetoric of High Theory, Boje & Dennehy's *Managing in the Postmodern World*, which has gone to three editions, presents itself as a "how-to" manual for managers on the ground, complete with guides on how to use Derrida to market Harley Davidsons (a simple shift from surplus signification to surplus value will suffice). Each of the main chapters (on Planning, Organising, Influencing, Leadership, and Control) is

structured around a tripartite periodization, with the virtues of "postmodern management" appearing in opposition to benighted modern and pre-modern forms. Each of the period's (eg) leadership styles are in turn assigned a number of defining parameters, the first letter of whose keywords forms an acronym (so, for example, premodern leaders are Master-s). The thrust of the book's argument, and its 'synergies' with the work of Peters, Senge and the other thinkers Frank examines, can be conveyed when we recount the "postmodern" acronyms for Planning, Organising, Influencing, Leadership, and Control, as against their benighted modern antecedents. Whereas modern management resolves itself into the ominous-sounding Pyramid, Discipline, Comply, Panoptic (sic.), and Inspect, for Boje and Dennehy, today's different terms, at once more level yet more open, are: Network, Flat, Individual, Servants (for 'leaders'), and Choice. (Boje & Dennehy, 2000).

Is BLUR a Death Sentence?

The Down Side to the "Uppers" of Postmodern Management

As Frank comments, there is certainly something unsettling about seeing spokesmen for the hardest-headed and highest-paid end of town in the world's advanced economies embracing the "weird, mystical, almost crazy slogans of management theory." (Frank, 2000: 171) One wonders what Mr Costello might say to management students learning to embrace Senge et al's patented anti-eurocentrism, which at moments strays into condemning "Anglo-American and European capitalism in general" for being insufficiently open to the innate insights of the indigenous peoples of the world (Frank, 2000 257) Yet it behooves a theoretical response to this phenomena to move beyond cynical bemusement, moral outrage, or existential alarm. Business journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge report that, even in the words describing new management theory of men who have drawn on it to lay off "thousands of workers", "sooner or later, in virtually every case, the word 'bullshit' appears". We need to be clear as to why this might be so. And since so many of the terms which originate in this theory are coming to colonize wider and wider spheres of everyday life, we surely need to understand what gives rise to such language, rather than remaining at the patrician level of – say – Don Watson's response to the phenomenon in Australia: Death Sentence. (Watson, 2003).

That postmodern management discourse has appeared in a time where, in America – but increasingly also in Australia – "executives as a class have more power now than any time since the 1920s" (Frank, 2000 2000, 177), I suspect must remain the "bottom line" in any such theoretical critique. Here, indeed, I would propose that we can precisely locate the paradigmatic similarity between today's reviled "postmodernism" and the economic neo-liberalism of which the new management theory forms a key component. Both operate by way of a

mystification of, or abstraction from, the realm of economic production. In postmodernism the true premise that "discourse" forms a part of all forms of human interaction becomes the launching pad for paradigms which take the analysis of discourse or "texts" as sufficient for a total social theory. In neoliberalism, differently, economic questions are dealt with exclusively in terms of the "market": i.e. the realm of the *distribution* of goods. In this light, "workers" can at most appear as a cost to be incurred by enterprises vying as consumers in the labor market. In "harder" neoliberal statements, workers become unsuccessful entrepreneurs who have chosen to compete in the labor market, as if they might also have gone, say, in to property or futures.

Nevertheless, as in most postmodernist or post-structuralist theory (with the exception of Foucault), I would argue, the limits of seeking to resolve sociopolitical problems by simply "restructuring how we think" (to invoike Senge's wisdom), or claiming that "thinking" is the only thing that matters, do show up in certain tell-tale marks in the texts of the new management theorists' themselves. If Senge advocates a kind of quasi-Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* for us, as we saw, he and his fellows do know enough to name the unfathomable power whose destinings we can only learn to passively obey. It is the market, which Senge sometimes simply calls "the system" or even "reality" itself, joining others in equating the workings of the market with those of the "universe" itself. *"The system has its own agenda"*, Senge italicizes. (cited at Frank, 2000 196) In a1998 book, Davis and Meyer even cast aside Senge's older terms to describe the "acceleration of business in every respect" they herald, simply dubbing this process (in capitals throughout) "BLUR". (Davis & Meyer, 1998) And as Frank comments, for these authors "BLUR" is not a "benevolent doctrine". In Peters' 1997 *Circle of Innovation*, the author was already "shouting" at his readers at key moments, for instance driving home how "market fitness tests" are "becoming the norm for us all", by warning us in capitals:

> (If You Can't Say Why you Make Your Company a Better Place, You"Re Out) i.e. the Market (capital 'M') decides. (Peters, 1997: 14).

The prophets of BLUR are no less unrelenting against the insufficiently vigilant: "Don't think you'll ever slow down BLUR, let alone bring it to a halt", they enjoin: "Don't try to beat BLUR, join it". (Davis & Meyer, 1998: 107; Frank, 2000: 243).

After 1997, as Frank documents, a new, more openly masochistic set of metaphors emerged in *Fortune* magazine, the August cover telling readers to "Cannibalise Yourself" for the sake of the market. Outreaching even the most bizarre formulations of Deleuze and Guattari, Tom Peters now instructed readers in *Circle of Innovation*, again in capitals, that "Destruction is Cool". "It's easier to kill an organization than to change it", the book explains a little more patiently, although still in strident *a priori* mode: "big idea: DEATH". (Peters 1997: 69; at Frank, 2000: 243).

With the growing reach of neo-liberal economy (or 'BLUR", if you prefer), it seems to me that times might have arrived when the descriptive value of the first generation Frankfurt School's hypotheses concerning the antinomies of a wholly market-driven society is again becoming clear. In such societies, they argued, subjects' self-experience increasingly becomes riven between the *sense* in their everyday lives and 'microeconomic' exchanges, and their increasing dependence upon 'macroeconomic' structures which determine the parameters of their lives, which they can neither understand nor control. In such societies, they argued, the social "whole" in which they live "thus appears as an admonition and demand upon the individuals in their labour" (Horkheimer, 1995: 19) In these conditions, structural conditions are engendered which promote scepticism in subjects about the evident attestation of their 'everyday experience', or the embrace of deeply irrationalist explanations for the globalized world in which they live.

For all the management literature and advertising that positions individuals as "change agents" involved in "change agendas", "initiatives" or "programs", the truth of the situation is better indicated in Spencer Johnson's management bestseller *Who Moved My Cheese?* In this work of "breathtaking obscenity" (as Frank describes it), the author tries to bring home the necessity we all must face of enthusiastically embracing careers of "lifelong learning". Johnson does so however by getting us to envisage the scenario of two mice and two "littlepeople" (one word) in a maze, wherein each day a piece of cheese is placed there by no one knows who – the ideas is, of course, that it is BLUR. One day, however, the cheese does not appear. The two "littlepeople", who are probably in a union, react badly: "ranting and raving about the injustice of it all", and lingering mournfully where the cheese had last been dispensed by BLUR. The two mice, however, fare much better. While their human-like contemporaries whine about their "entitlement" before one of them belatedly "gets it", it is the mindlessly pliant "knowledge-worker" mice who adapt best to the "inevitable", and reap the rewards – that "there was New Cheese [capital N capital C] out there just waiting to be found". (cited at Frank, 2000: 250) Or, as the former Australian Treasurer Peter Costello might have interjected, piously citing the founding book of middle Eastern and Western culture:

The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be he Lord.

Note

1. "Capital becomes free-floating. It separates from the 'concrete content' of its productive geography. Money becomes in a second sense and in a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense) as though somehow in the national context money still had a content – it was cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railway money and the like. Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight." Jameson, 1998: 142.

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