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Organization 2005; 12; 9

DOI: 10.1177/1350508405048574

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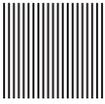
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Glass Cages and Glass Palaces: Images of Organization in Image-Conscious Times

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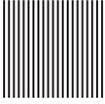
Abstract. *Max Weber's metaphor of 'the iron cage' has provided an abiding image of organizations during the high noon of modernity. But these organizations—rigid, rational and bureaucratic—may no longer be sustainable in our times. Instead of a preoccupation with efficient production and rational administration, management today is increasingly turning to the consumer as the measure of all things, a consumer who seeks not merely the useful and the functional, but the magical, the fantastic and the alluring. Management of organizations thus finds itself increasingly preoccupied with the orchestration of collective fantasies and the venting of collective emotions through the power of image, in what Ritzer has named the cathedrals of consumption, such as shopping malls, tourist attractions and holiday resorts. The core thesis of this paper is that decline of Weber's iron cage of rationality has exposed us neither to the freedom of a garden of earthly delights nor to the desolation of the law of the jungle. Instead, I propose that the new experiences of work and consumption allow for greater ambivalence and nuance, for which I offer the twin metaphors of glass cages and glass palaces. As a material that generates, distorts and disseminates images, glass seems uniquely able to evoke both the glitter and the fragility of organizations in late modernity. The metaphor of the glass cage suggests certain constraints, discontents and consolations quite distinct from those we encounter at the high noon of modernity. Shared features of the glass cage of work and the glass cage of consumption are an emphasis on display, an invisibility of constraints, a powerful illusion of choice, a glamorization of image and an ironic questionmark over whether freedom lies inside or outside the glass. Above all, there is an ambiguity about whether the glass is a medium of entrapment or a beautifying*



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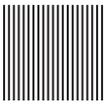
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frame. Key words. bureaucracy; consumerism; control; enchantment; image; iron cage; new organizational forms; postmodernism



Glass is the signature building material of our times, just as concrete was the signature material 40 or 50 years ago. Concrete is a substance that preserves a distant memory of its origin as fluid, yet a substance that solidifies forever into a rigid and immutable mass. Glass too may start its existence as fluid, but its defining property is optical rather than static—its ability to allow light to pass through it, even as it reflects, distorts or refracts it. It is a substance that generates changing images, a substance whose mere presence leaves us in no doubt that what it encases is worthy of attention. Glass then evokes image and movement, just as readily as concrete evokes structure and stability. Glass inspires the imagery of this paper, in which I examine some of the key social and organizational changes of the past half century. I will argue that, during this period, Western society has moved from a society of massive, concrete buildings and massive, concrete organizations to one of flexible but fragile work arrangements and flexible but fragile organizations, from a society driven by mechanism and production to a society preoccupied with spectacle, image and consumption. I will then seek to show how the nature of the demands made upon us by our organizations has drastically changed over this period. The glass building, ambiguously experienced now as glittering palace, now as suffocating cage, will emerge as the guiding metaphor of my argument.

A still earlier signature material, one that preceded both concrete and glass, and one forever identified with the great achievements of modernity, is iron. And iron is the starting point of this paper, and in particular one iron object that has a vibrant meaning for every student of organizations—the iron cage. The iron cage is an abiding image of modernity offered by one of its most eminent explorers, admirers and critics, the great German sociologist Max Weber.¹ As his famous essay on the origins of modern capitalism, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, moved towards its momentous denouement, Weber reflected on the triumph of Puritan values of thrift, hard work, future orientation and unyielding control over the passions of the soul and the temptations of the body. These values, he argued, had revolutionized economic order, by providing the moral justification for capital accumulation and rational planning and fuelling the growth of industrial capitalism. And yet, as the destination point of unparalleled economic and social progress, Weber envisaged an image so dreadful that it has haunted students of modernity ever since:



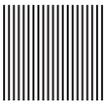
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The Puritan [in the 17th century] wanted to work for a calling; we [in the 20th] are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care of the external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (Weber, 1958: 181)

The image of the iron cage of modernity returns in another of Weber's works, *Economy and Society*, in which he argues that bureaucratic rationalization instigates a system of controls that trap the individual within an 'iron cage' of subjugation and containment (Weber, 1978). For Weber, it is instrumental rationality, accompanied by the rise of measurement and quantification, regulations and procedures, accounting, efficiency and the gradual displacement of spontaneous feeling by careful calculation of costs and benefits, that entraps us all in a world of ever-increasing material standards but vanishing magic, fantasy, meaning and emotion. Eventually, we all become trapped in the bureaucratic mechanism, which turns us into impersonal functionaries or cogs, passively following rules and procedures and relating to each other without feeling or passion. Its logic is as ineluctable as is its indifference to human feeling, suffering and desire. This mechanism, housed in solid concrete buildings with partitioned offices, represents the hallmark of modernity, at least in the sphere of work and production. Within this bureaucratic mechanism, 'the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he can become a bigger cog' (Mayer, 1956: 126).

Starting from a very different premise, Freud, another astute commentator on modernity, cast his eye around and saw a somewhat different picture. To be fair, the landscape that he surveyed was not that of organizations, public spaces and civil administration, but the intimate lives of his Viennese clientele, with their dramas, their crises and their neuroses. Where was rationality to be seen in the massive displays of iridescent irrationalism that he observed in his consultation room? Where was Weberian calculation? Where were the rules and regulations? Above all, where was the silencing of stories, the cauterization of emotions, the paralysis of spontaneity? Instead of hollow automata, mechanical men and women, Freud encountered individuals bursting at the seams with anger and fear, hate and hope, guilt, shame and anxiety. He also encountered individuals capable of sustaining no end of irrational beliefs, extraordinary fantasies and freakish symptoms, most of



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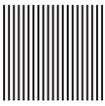
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which were entirely incapable of being corrected through mere appeal to good sense and reason.

Freud's work provides a useful corrective to Weber's. Rediscovering a major romantic line of argument, Freud saw that there is life outside the large modernist public structures; and this life is full of emotion, fantasy, spontaneity and sickness. The discontents of modernity are not merely or solely the discontents of the iron cage. They are the discontents of desolate lives, frustrated desires, broken hopes and overpowering fears. In his two late works, *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930), Freud developed the view that the iron frame of civilization leads to inner discontents for which people seek consolation in illusions, wish-fulfilling ideas. What is new about modernity is not the self-reinforcing and vicious circle of discontents and illusions, but the nature of illusions. In the past, culture had provided its own balms for the privations and horrors it inflicted on people, coming mostly in the form of religious and utopian political ideologies, those opiates of the people that Marx and Nietzsche had so well observed and so powerfully castigated (Gabriel, 1984). But both religion and politics, as collective illusions and collective neuroses, lose their grip in modernity; people lose faith in large-scale, totalizing solutions. Instead, illusions fragment, they become privatized, each person busily pursuing 'projects' of forging their own private fantasies, their own distinct neuroses and, therefore, their own individual identity. The privatization of illusions and discontents, these are the trademarks of modernity for Freud—the transformation of social problems into personal troubles, of mass delusion into individual neurosis.

Reason plays a distinctly different role in Freud's argument from the one it plays in Weber's. Reason, albeit in a very different impersonation from Weber's instrumental rationality, can still have a part in managing the discontents of modernity, keeping in check the worst of illusions and providing a critical commentary on irrationalist and populist ideologies, curtailing some of their worst excesses. Freud is certainly a declared worshipper of the voice of reason—he calls it his 'god Logos', whom he regards as the only deity in whom to place one's faith. Where Freud is in total agreement with Weber is in his view that the whole Promethean megastructure of modernity, forged of iron and fire, has failed to make people happy and has generated discontents all of its own. The modern metropolis, the city that never sleeps, is also the city that never stops suffering. It is a city of a million nightmares, a million neuroses, a million painful stories. It is a city of broken families, deracinated lives, constant anxieties, in short, a phantasmagoria of unhappiness.

Is there a massive and irreversible discontinuity that separates our times from the time whose discontents, Freud, Weber and many of their contemporaries, were at pains to describe and analyse? And, if such a discontinuity exists, is it a material discontinuity, marked by radically different technologies, economic relations, international institutions,



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forms of production and consumption, political formations and organizations? Or is it, equally importantly, a discursive discontinuity, entailing radically different ways of talking about things, experiencing things and theorizing about them? Is the preoccupation with discontinuity itself evidence of change or evidence of deeper continuity ('le plus ça change . . .')?

In addressing such questions, numerous authors have turned to the apparent contrast between the solidity of things modern and the flux of things current. Whereas modernity featured solid buildings, solid organizations, solid relations, solid selves and solid signifiers, our times are characterized by flux, mutation, reinvention and flexibility. To be sure, modernity, as all its great theorists emphasized, featured unprecedented changes—the emergence of cities, the erection of factories, the rise of the state, the domination of scientific thinking and bureaucracy. But within modernity, so the argument goes, the solidity of factories, organizations, selves and concepts was a realistic project, and one frequently attained and celebrated. Not so in our times, when solidity is revealed as a mirage, an illusion that becomes quite unsustainable. Our thoughts, emotions and experiences, as well as the furtive realities we encounter, are in constant flux—the very words, the signifiers we use to express ourselves and communicate with others, change, drift, mutate. The true prophet of postmodernity then is not Heraclitus—he who said that 'all is flux' and that you can never enter the same river twice—but his pupil Cratylus, who went one up on his teacher. Not only is *everything* in flux, he argued, but even the meaning of words is in flux, melting away, before they have been spoken or written down—so there is little point in seeking to make sense of anything or to communicate with others. He is reported as having stopped talking, simply moving his little finger when someone addressed him, maybe to indicate that he had heard a sound.

Flexibility, along with flux, fluidity and flow, is one of the much-vaunted qualities of our times. It applies to individuals, organizations and even entire societies, suggesting an ability and a willingness not merely to adapt and change but to redefine themselves radically, to metamorphose into new entities. Flexibility stands at the opposite end of rigidity, which, not accidentally, marks the chief quality of bureaucracy, Weber's enduring conceptual masterpiece and dominant organizational form of modernity. The flexible organization (variously referred to as network, postmodern, post-Fordist, post-bureaucratic, shamrock, etc.) has emerged as the antidote to Weberian bureaucracy, a concept of organization that does away with rigid hierarchies, procedures, products and boundaries, in favour of constant and continuous reinvention, redefinition and mobility. Success, for such organizations, is not a terminus, a state of perfect stable equilibrium, but a process of irregularity, innovation and disorder, where temporary triumphs occur at the edge of the abyss and can never be regularized into blissful routine.



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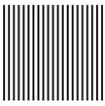
The flexible organization is currently hailed as an ideal organization type for today, as Weberian bureaucracy was held to be 50 years ago. Its characteristics are well described by Clegg:

Where the modernist organization was rigid, postmodern organization is flexible. Where modernist consumption was premised on mass forms, postmodernist consumption is premised on niches. Where modernist organization was premised on technological determinism, postmodernist organization is premised on technological choices made possible through 'de-dedicated' micro-electronic equipment. Where modernist organization and jobs were highly differentiated, demarcated and de-skilled, postmodernist organization and jobs are highly de-differentiated, de-demarcated and multiskilled. Employment relations as a fundamental relation of organization upon which has been constructed a whole discourse of the determinism of size as a contingency variable increasingly give way to more complex and fragmentary relational forms, such as subcontracting and networking. (Clegg, 1990: 181)

I am not convinced myself that these plausible and astute observations amount to a massive discontinuity. I certainly do not subscribe to the view that our times are uniquely turbulent or changeable, even supposing that such an observation were meaningful. People deracinated and transported thousands of miles to work in plantations or factories, people uprooted as refugees during the wars of the 20th or earlier centuries, people whose ways of life were ravaged by colonial conquests and diseases, people deported to concentration and labour camps, people who waited anxiously for a knock on the door in the middle of the night, might consider that our times, at least for those of us who make up those 'turbulent environments', are relatively cosy. All too often, images of today's turbulent environments are the products of a generalized nostalgia for a golden age that never existed, a time of childhood and innocence where everything was safe, small-scale, personal and constant.

Yet the belief that our time is separated by a radical and irreversible discontinuity from just such a golden age of stability, order and continuity cannot be countered by evidence drawn from the past. Nor is it a belief that can be undermined by evidence or argument that change and turbulence are different today from what they may have been in the past. It is interesting to reflect on how people in earlier eras saw themselves as different from those who preceded them. We have noticed already how Weber and Freud, in their different ways, articulated the discontents of modernity as specific to that social formation. Is it possible to undertake a similar enterprise for our times?

The question then becomes not whether Weber's and Freud's analyses apply to our times, but rather whether we recognize ourselves in the portrait of modernity that they and other critics of modernity have bequeathed to us? Do we recognize that iron cage, that neurotic nightmare, as defining the discontents and frustrations of our times? Do we recognize ourselves in those colourless people, burdened by guilt and

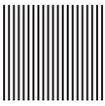


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duty, walking heavily on the city's pavements? It seems to me incontestable that this has become increasingly less so, even in the limited period of time that most of us have been around. The image of rationality ruling supreme, in the Weberian sense, can hardly be maintained; and some of the stultifying sense of guilt that so preoccupied Freud, the product of a patriarchal authoritarian structure, has doubtless evaporated. Numerous commentators have made convincing arguments that a degree of freedom hardly imagined by our grandfathers and even less by our grandmothers is available to the majority of our fellow citizens, at least in the industrialized countries of the West. This freedom is above all a freedom of choice, a freedom exercised in two supremely important acts of our time—the act of choosing what to buy and consume and the act of choosing how we spend our time and what work we do. However, this freedom becomes more generalized into a freedom to marry or to have sex with whom we wish, to look the way we wish, to dress the way we wish, to speak the way we wish and, generally, to be who we wish. In place of the black and white linear uniformity of the modern, we are now inclined to celebrate diversity and rediscover the power of story, myth and fantasy. This notion of celebration would have been quite difficult for most theorists of modernity to understand; it is as if the carnivalesque of premodern society is resurrected, along with myths, stories, narratives and fantasies in our times. There is a general aestheticization of many aspects of everyday life, ranging from home decoration to choice of holiday destinations, from presentation of food on a plate to presentation of self at the workplace, and a corresponding receding of moral, political and religious constraints. For a moment, we may lapse into believing that the old discourse of modernity and its discontents has now been overtaken by a discourse of postmodernity and its contents.

And yet it does not take a supremely critical spirit to supplant such levity. Numerous social theorists, working in the areas of organizations as well as consumer and cultural studies, have pointed out that our times generate discontents of their own, that the discontents of modernity have not been blown away but are in a process of mutating into a novel configuration. One such writer is Richard Sennett. In his widely read book *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), Sennett argues that new flexible work arrangements promote a short-term, opportunistic outlook among employees, one that undermines trust and loyalty. Insecurity and fear are endemic; careers become spasmodic and fragmented, their different steps failing to generate cohesive or integrated life-stories. Exposed to intrusive monitoring of performance, employees feel constantly on trial, yet they are never sure of the goals at which they are aiming. There are no objective measures of what it means to do a good job, and those celebrated for their achievements one day may easily find themselves on the receiving end of redundancy packages the next. Showing eagerness, being willing to play any game by any rules, looking attractive and



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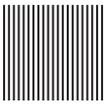
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involved, while at the same time maintaining a psychological distance and looking for better prospects elsewhere—these are the chameleon-like qualities of the new economy. Above all, the opportunism of the new economy means being constantly on the look-out for new opportunities and never being satisfied with what one has. The missed opportunity represents the ultimate failure in this state of affairs. Constant job moves, a preoccupation with image and the look of CVs, and an absence of commitments and sacrifices stand in opposition to traditional family values of duty, commitment, constancy and caring. The result is a corrosion of moral character, which in times past provided a sense of continuity and constancy to individuals as well as anchoring them to a set of reciprocal relations of caring, obligation and interdependence. In a society where individuals need no one and are needed by no one, dependence comes to be seen as shameful, evidence of personal failure.

Sennett illustrates his arguments with a few well-chosen case studies. Wherever he focuses, Sennett observes different elements of the same picture—flexibility, dictated by global markets and ever-changing technologies, promoting opportunism, short-termism and insecurity while destroying values, trust, community and caring. Deep anxiety and insecurity permeate workplaces. This, by itself, is not new. Earlier generations of employees worried; they worried because of the vagaries of the labour markets, social injustice and lack of control over their fate. Today's employees, however, perceive themselves as having choices, which can make the difference between success and failure. 'I make my own choices; I take full responsibility for moving around so much' (Sennett, 1998: 29) says one of Sennett's protagonists, who seems to abhor dependency above all else.

Sennett offers a perceptive account of Weber's views on the Protestant work ethic, capturing the tragic predicament of its archetypal character—the 'driven man' engaged in a ceaseless, yet ultimately futile, struggle to prove his moral worth through hard work in the face of the immutable rigor of predestination. Against this, he sets the superficiality of present-day workplaces, with teams of employees engaged in furtive pursuits of value through the power of images, signs and symbols. Sales expertise, dramatic flair and acting are the crucial virtues of flexible individuals, whose essential quality is to respond to the corporate call for flexibility by denying themselves an inner core.

In a thought-provoking essay called 'Collective Myths and Fantasies: The Myth of the Good Life in California' (Smelser, 1984, 1998), Smelser prefigures some of the arguments put forward by Sennett and others. What Smelser calls 'the myth of California' has become a generic fantasy of our times. California, Smelser argues, represented a land where people 'escape', a land that stood for what is new, for gold, for plenty and for the good life. Like all myths, the myth of California is a collective fantasy. A key feature of this fantasy (in contrast to the rigours of the old country, neediness, ugliness and hard work) is that California is a place where



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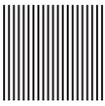
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success comes easy (Smelser, 1984: 117). In California, success is no longer the product of hard work, achievement and heroism as it was for the Puritans; instead, success is brought by the magic of 'being discovered', which involves luck, self-presentation, image and finding oneself in the right place at the right time. This recalls the 'chameleon qualities' highlighted by Sennett, only in reverse—whereas the chameleon blends with its environment, the star, like gold in the eye of the prospector, shines persistently. This dilemma between displaying chameleon-like flexibility (a willingness to play any part, to do any job, to work any patch) while also boasting unique star qualities seems to define the predicament of the individual under the sway of the Hollywood myth.

This argument is consistent with those put forward by organizational theorists studying workplace relations in sectors of the new economy—the media, entertainment industries, information technology, and so forth. If the discontent of modernity was the sacrifice of freedom in alienating jobs, the core discontent of our time as described by Sennett is the feeling of having choice but being unable to exercise it. This is frustration arising not from an absence of opportunities but from constantly having to look for them, and appearing to miss them when others succeed. It is as if the door of the iron cage is open, yet a strange and paralysing force prevents us from getting out, as described by an employee interviewed by Casey (1999: 15–16):

I have the golden handcuff sensation, that I'd like to leave but the security and benefits are such that I'm not sure I could adjust my lifestyle. But I'm continually re-evaluating my position with Hephaestus. . . . I used to be more like the typical Hephaestus person . . . task-oriented, judgmental, aggressive . . . but now I'm not like that . . . I don't want to be too negative. But it's hard for me . . . I get headaches, like, from this place. Sometimes I think this place is killing me.

Numerous authors have observed and commented on similar work experiences across different organizations in different countries and different industries. And such experiences have directly led to an exploration of the changing nature of workplace disciplines and controls. In place of the controls that were associated with the modern bureaucracy, the rules and regulations that formed the bars of the iron cage, today's organizations resort to far subtler, yet deeper, controls, controls that are pervasive and invasive, that do not merely constrain a person but define a person. These include cultural and ideological controls (emphasizing the importance of customer service, quality and image; affirming the business enterprise as an arena for heroic or spiritual accomplishments), structural controls (continuous measurements and benchmarking, flatter organizational hierarchies), technological controls (electronic surveillance of unimaginable sophistication) and spatial controls (open-plan offices, controlled access). Theorists influenced by the work of Foucault have developed the idea of discursive controls that



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operate through language, labelling, classification, and so forth, which are invisible but unyielding. Finally, many of these controls rely on the disciplining gaze of the paying customer—the customer who chooses, demands and criticizes, the customer who has assumed an ambiguous position as the disciplining agent of management yet whose critical stare is internalized as a force of self-control and self-policing.

The proliferation of such controls has undoubtedly coincided with the decline of modernist forms of work resistance, notably strikes and the whole area of organized and class-conscious recalcitrance that used to form the bread and butter of industrial relations. Yet I take the view that requiems for the demise of employee resistance have been premature. In spite of formidable disciplinary mechanisms, today's workplace creates, if anything, even more possibilities of opposition, with employees displaying a bewildering range of responses that qualify, subvert, disregard or resist managerial calls for flexibility, commitment and quality. At certain times, employees may comply enthusiastically with some management initiative; at other times, compliance may be grudging or ritualistic. At times, fear and insecurity may dominate their responses, yet frequently they show ingenuity in supplanting and contesting management discourses, turning them into objects of amusement, cynicism or confrontation (Gabriel, 1999; Jermier et al., 1994; Sturdy, 1998). Thus, within formal organizations, employees create *niches* that are unmanaged and unmanageable; in these spaces, individuals can fashion identities that amount neither to conformity nor to rebellion but are infinitely more complex and rich than those deriving from official organizational practices (Gabriel, 1995).

This then is a situation where traditional rational/bureaucratic controls are being replaced by an array of controls operating through language, emotion, space and exposure. Forms of resistance have correspondingly changed from overt challenges to more subtle and nuanced acts of disobedience and defiance, an ongoing attempt to create spaces that are sheltered from continuous exposure or, at least, are only semi-visible from the vantage of power. We could propose then that the demise of the iron cage of rationality and the periodic rattling of its bars are leading to new forms of entrapment and opposition. This entrapment is not as rigid as that effected by traditional bureaucracy but is one that affords greater ambiguity and irony, a *glass cage* perhaps, an enclosure characterized by exposure to the eye of the customer, the fellow employee, the manager.

Why glass cage? Camera lenses everywhere, ready to intrude into people's privacy, and a quasi-religious obsession with 'transparency', audits, reviews, appraisals, feedback, lists and league tables suggest that the glass cage shares the chief quality of Foucault's panopticon,² that curious combination of Catholic obsession with the omnipotent eye of God and Protestant preoccupation with clean efficiency. Like the panopticon, the glass cage acts as a metaphor for the formidable machinery of contemporary surveillance, one that deploys all kinds of technologies—



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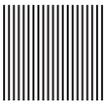
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electronic, spatial, psychological and cultural. Appearances are paramount; image is what people are constantly judged by. But, unlike the panopticon and more like the ‘magician’ David Blaine spending several weeks in a perspex box in full view of the London crowds, the glass cage also suggests that the modern employee is part of a cast exposed to the critical gaze of the customer, with all the kicks, excitements and frustrations that this implies. It evokes an element of exhibitionism and display that is entirely consistent with the narcissism of our times. The employee becomes part of the organizational brand on show, a brand whose glamorous image offers an instant face-lift to all who are part of it. Exposure, with its thrills, horrors and corresponding desires to protect privacy and create sheltered spaces, is thus the key to the experience in the glass cage, an experience not limited to employees, but applying to football managers, politicians and all other public figures when they euphemistically talk of the ‘goldfish bowl’ that magnifies the tiniest blemishes and exaggerates the smallest imperfections.³

Yet the fragility of the glass cage also suggests a brand that is easily tarnished or contaminated by the activities of a few whistle-blowers or disenchanting employees. Exposed as they are to the customer’s critical gaze, employees find themselves in the position of children capable of embarrassing their parents in the presence of strangers. Thus, the very visibility of the glass cage to the unforgiving gaze places certain limits on the overt controls that managers are able to exercise. They can hardly appear to scream abuse or exhortation at the employees. This glass cage then evokes the fundamental ambivalence in the nature of much contemporary work—an ambivalence between the anxiety of continuous exposure and the narcissistic self-satisfaction of being part of a winning team or formula.

Whereas formal rationality and the rational deployment of resources are the chief forces behind Weber’s iron cage, the glass cage emphasizes the importance of emotional displays and appearances. In particular, it highlights the emotional labour (the ‘smile’, the ‘look’) that has become part of the work of ever-increasing segments of the workforce (Fineman, 1996, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), an emotional labour that is not merely external (i.e. discovering emotional displays suitable for the requirements of different social situations) but also internal, that is coping with conflicts, contradictions and ambivalences and keeping some sense of order in potentially chaotic emotional states. More recently, the concept of aesthetic labour has been proposed (Hancock and Tyler, 2000; Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Warhurst et al., 2000; Wengrow, 2001; Witz et al., 2003), which does full justice to the idea that the bodies and movements of employees become part of a corporate aesthetic, itself a major creator of value in many industries.

In all these ways, the glass cage suggests both the rhetorical ‘transparency’ and ‘openness’ of the contemporary workplace, with its open-plan offices, its glass facades and its huge atria, and also the discretion and



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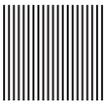
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fragility of contemporary control systems. Unlike an iron cage, which frustrates all attempts at escape with its brutish and inflexible force, a glass cage is discreet, unobtrusive, at times even invisible—it seeks to hide the reality of entrapment rather than display it, always inviting the idea or the fantasy that it may be breached, even if at the cost of serious potential injury. This image suggests that it may be not a cage at all, but a display case, a *glass palace*, a container aimed at highlighting the uniqueness of what it contains rather than constraining or oppressing it.

The analysis I have provided thus far is very one-sided. It has been silent on a rather obvious circumstance of our times—namely, the fact that most of the inhabitants of the glass cage are also the customers whose piercing looks create the feelings of exposure and insecurity. Or, to put it a different way, the individuals torn between exhibitionist thrills and the defence of privacy are the avid voyeurs who compulsively intrude on the privacy of others. Any analysis of our times must seriously engage with the consumer, the individual in whose supposed interest no effort is spared.

There can be no denying that, in the past 30 years or less, the consumer, the abstract individual who seeks happiness in buying choices and offers no account or explanations for them, has entered the world of organizations, transforming the old dyad—workers and managers locked in their long-standing feud—into a *ménage à trois* (Frenkel et al., 1999; Knights and Morgan, 1993; Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski et al., 2000; Sturdy, 1998). An ‘enterprise culture’, dynamic, self-confident, attractive and, of course, thoroughly spurious, has become a dominant feature of our cultural landscapes. There is no doubt in my mind that, in this period, a radical reconfiguration of workplace relations has resulted from the holy alliance forged between the manager and the consumer at the expense of the worker or the employee. The very nature of management has been redefined: 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. The manager’s central function is the re-enchantment of a disenchanted world through mass festivals in the new consumer settings—theme parks, cruise ships, tourist resorts and, above all, shopping malls (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Ritzer, 1999).

The cult of the consumer has become a major feature of the ideological and political order of the business enterprise, legitimating, justifying and supporting a wide range of management practices that would be regarded as intolerable were it not for the belief that the customer is sovereign. Consumption has become an ever more important sphere of human existence, one in which meanings and identities are forged and communicated, in which fantasies and desires are acted out, in which group allegiances and antagonisms are fashioned. As Bauman (1998) has forcefully argued, a consumer ethic is dislodging the work ethic of past times,



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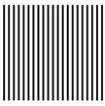
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acting as the organizing principle for individual perceptions of self and other, restoring pleasure as the key objective of action, and casting the freedom of the capitalist marketplace as the absolute guarantee of individual freedom, fulfilment and autonomy.

For many, it is the magical experience of consumption, with its promise of instant gratification, its glamour and its clamour, that makes the privations of the workplace, all those long hours at work, bearable. This simple idea, which Sennett seems to miss, couples the discourse of contemporary consumption to the earlier arguments about flexible workplaces' precarious work identities: the discontents of contemporary workplaces find at least partial consolation in consumption, in the free and unencumbered pursuit of freedom and choice. George Ritzer's book *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (1999) supplies the core of the argument. Consumption, argues Ritzer, plays an ever-increasing role in the lives of individuals, as a source of meaning, pleasure and identity. It takes place in settings that 'allow, encourage, and even compel us to consume so many of those goods and services' (1999: 2). Settings such as theme parks, cruise ships, casinos, tourist resorts, sports venues, theatres, hotels, restaurants and shopping malls are referred to as 'cathedrals of consumption' to indicate their quasi-religious, enchanted qualities. They are part of a process called by some 'Disneyization', which, thanks to TV and Internet shopping, now extends to the home, which is converted from an arena of interpersonal relations into a highly privatized consumption outpost.

Ritzer's central thesis is that today's management sets its eyes firmly, not on the toiling worker, but on the fantasizing consumer. What management does is to furnish, in a highly rationalized manner, an endless stream of consumable fantasies inviting consumers to pick and choose, thus creating the possibility of re-enchantment. Ritzer offers prodigious illustrations of the ways in which consumption is constantly promoted, enhanced and controlled in these new settings, not so much through direct advertising as through indirect means such as spatial arrangements, uses of language, images, signs, festivals, simulations and extravaganzas, as well as cross-fertilization through the merchandizing of products and images. Above all, consumption gradually colonizes every public and private domain of social life, which become saturated with fantasizing, spending and discarding opportunities. Even schools, universities and hospitals are converted from sober, utilitarian institutions into main terrains of consumption, treating their constituents as customers, offering them a profusion of merchandise and indulging their fantasies and caprices. Hyper-consumption is a state of affairs in which every social experience is mediated by market mechanisms.

In a strange way, in this particular work, Ritzer appears as oblivious to the discontents of the workplace as Sennett is to the apparent consolations of consumption. Ultimately, however, the pictures generated by each author could be said to complement each other. It is because of the



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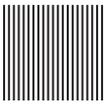
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frustrations of contemporary flexible workplaces that individuals turn to consumption for meaning, identity and fulfilment. And it is because of the corrosion of character that a culture of narcissism dominated by image, fantasy and superficiality is on the ascendant. Viewers of the award-winning film *American Beauty* will have no difficulty in recognizing both sides of the argument in the symbolically impoverished, image-dominated lives of its suburban characters. The film vividly portrays the precarious work identities of its adult protagonists, the generational gulf between parents and children, which is transcended only through sexual fantasy, as well as the universal obsessions with house interiors, video images and the physical body.

But how effective is consumption as a realm of fantasy, magic, freedom and meaning? Has it been any more successful than religion or even politics in offering effective coping mechanisms for the discontents of civilization? Are today's palaces of consumption any more effective than the real cathedrals of old? It is not accidental that many of the palaces of consumption, like the workplace cages, are made of glass. Glass is a hard and fragile medium, providing an invisible barrier that allows the insider to see outside and the outsider to see inside. As I said earlier, it is also a distorting medium that reflects and refracts light, creating illusions and false images. Looking into glass, it is sometimes easy to mistake your own reflection for an image facing from behind.

Finally, glass is a framing medium—its mere presence, as in the case of Damien Hirst's famous artistic displays, defines what lies behind it as something worthy of attention, protection and admiration. The glass palace of consumption revolves around deliberate display; it is a place where the gaze of the prospector meets the look of the prospect. In this glass palace, new fashion trends can be spotted, new badges can be identified, new lifestyles can be explored and new identities can be experimented with. Within such palaces, under the illusion of choice and freedom, subtle forms of coercion, enticement and control are exercised over the consumer. Once enticed into the cathedrals of consumption, consumers are captive, like the docile queues of Disneyland. They have no choice but to observe, to look, to desire, to choose and to buy. As Ritzer argues, 'people are lured to the cathedrals of consumption by the fantasies they promise to fulfill and then kept there by a variety of rewards and constraints' (1999: 28).

Glass palaces of consumption, then, can all too easily be mistaken for glass cages, just as the glass cages where people work can be mistaken for glass palaces. Of course, glass cages look quite different to those outside; they look glamorous and full of enticing objects. Those denied access, through their lack of resources, mobility, looks or whatever, feel truly excommunicated. To them, being inside the cage represents real freedom. As Bauman (1988) has forcibly argued, the new poor are the 'failed consumers' who end up outside the world of consumption, having the welfare state make choices on their behalf. For those inside the glass,



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on the other hand, the hungry faces of those outside are a constant reminder that there are far worse places in which to be. Inside too, consumers are frequently separated from objects they cherish by invisible barriers created by the limits of their buying powers—there are cages within the palaces and palaces within the cages.

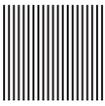
The myth of California has become commodified, a managed fantasy like those Ritzer has highlighted in his work. But the hegemony of such fantasies is not unopposed. The cathedrals of consumption are frequently defaced, modified, redefined or ignored, just as workplaces are (De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989). Consumers are becoming ever more unmanageable, eccentric and paradoxical. The casualization of work and career reinforces the casualization of consumption. Consumers increasingly lead precarious and uneven existences, one day enjoying unexpected boons and the next sinking to bare subsistence. Consumption itself becomes fragmented, spasmodic and episodic (Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

The argument then is that, like today's producers, today's consumers must rely on opportunism, seeking to be in the right place at the right time. As Bauman has argued,

In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short—so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones. . . . To keep the game short means to beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be 'fixed' one way or the other. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one's life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. Not to *control* the future, but to *refuse to mortgage* it: to take care that the consequences of the game do not outlive the past to bear on the present. (Bauman, 1996: 24)

This life-game parallels the life-game of postmodern producers, whose strategy is summed up as one of flexibility, reinvention and movement. These are not planned in advance, nor do they serve an overall design, but they unravel as life does, with its accidents, misfortunes and serendipities. It is out of such episodes that all of us construct and reconstruct our fragile selves, moving from glass cage to glass cage, at times feeling anxiously trapped by it, at others feeling energized and appreciated, and at others depressed and despondent.

This then is the argument. Using Sennett, Smelser and others as my guides, I have argued that the Protestant work ethic and the iron cage of rationality are being replaced by flexible workplaces, which demand adaptable, quiescent and emotionally literate employees. Hard, visible, tangible work is being replaced by work that relies on the manipulation of images and signs, aesthetic and emotional displays. Loyalty towards an employer, a profession or a career is being replaced by a chameleon-like proclivity to adapt to different work environments, to play any game and to be constantly on the look-out for better opportunities and better



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prospects. This creates a new variety of discontents, associated with a chronic inability to construct meaningful life narratives and identities and a sense of never being good enough or well enough. All the same, some of the meaning and identity deficits are made up within the realm of consumption, which offers, according to Ritzer and Bauman, a partial re-enchantment of the world, a realm where fantasy can be happily indulged in, where individuals express themselves by embracing different lifestyles, icons and signs. Unfortunately, consumption itself, its fantasies and mostly unrealized promises, fails to resolve the discontents of work and creates discontents all of its own—a constant disappointment with one's looks, one's possessions, one's experiences. If one has a sense of never being good enough as a worker, a producer or an employee, one has a very similar feeling as a consumer—one never has enough and what one has is never good enough. Using the twin metaphors of glass cage and glass palace, I have suggested that both pose certain unique constraints (quite distinct from those we encounter at the high noon of modernity), generate a distinct malaise and afford certain unique consolations. They also present distinct possibilities of contestation and challenge. Shared features of glass cage and glass palace include an emphasis on display, an invisibility of constraints, a powerful illusion of choice, a glamorization of image and an ironic questionmark over whether freedom lies this side or that side of the glass. Above all, there is an ambiguity as to whether the glass is a medium of entrapment, a beautifying frame or a constant reminder of the fragility and brittleness of all that surrounds us.

The typical McDonald's restaurant is an example of a situation in which the two are brought remarkably close together—a glass cage/palace for employees and customers alike. Employees develop their own survival mechanisms, testing the rules, evading the managerial gaze and engaging in diverse attempts to turn work into a game (Gabriel, 1988; Leidner, 1993). Customers, for their part, may seek to use the spaces in ways consistent with their traditions and needs, which are different from those for which they were designed. Thus, describing McDonald's customers in Korea, Bak (1997) observes that 'these consumers are creatively transforming the [McDonald's] restaurants into local institutions'. Moreover, many customers of these restaurants are also employees, and their experience of the glass cage involves both work and consumption.

It may be objected that, unlike McDonald's, numerous workplaces resist the glass cage metaphor by staying out of the public eye, quietly exploiting their employees' physical labour with no need for display and emotional labour. It is certainly premature to argue that all of modernity's iron cages have been dismantled and displaced by postmodern glass substitutes. For every celebrity trapped in a glass cage and for every employee dreaming of a glass palace, many people in every part of the globe struggle in sweatshops, in offices without air-conditioning and in factories hidden from view. Yet a video camera surreptitiously smuggled



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into a sweatshop can shatter a company's image and undo the work of millions of dollars worth of advertising, a leaked internal memo can virtually demolish a corporate colossus or a government, and a small band of environmental activists acting tactically in front of television cameras can bring a multinational corporation to its knees. When the goings-on in the Oval Office of the White House can be rehearsed in minuscule detail in front of an entire nation, it may well be that the era of the iron cage has finally given way to the era of glass.

Like all metaphors, the glass cage should not be expected to deliver too much—like glass itself, the metaphor then becomes brittle, an obstacle rather than an aid to creative thinking (Chia, 1996). This then is the message with which I would like to conclude this paper: as we move from modernity into the great unknown that lies ahead, old prisons and old chimeras are losing their grip. Old forms of entrapment and suffering do not appear so threatening any more, but ambivalence, confusion and anxiety become associated with new, different forms of entrapment for which the glass cage offers a fair evocation. New forms of consolation also appear—new breads, new circuses and new opiates, bringing with them hopes, anxieties and confusions of their own.

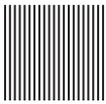
Notes

This is a revised version of a paper first presented at the ESRC Workshop on 'New Organizational Thinking' in Manchester in November 2001. I would like to thank the participants at that seminar for numerous suggestions as well as the anonymous reviewers who refereed the paper.

- 1 In the interest of accuracy, we should note that we owe the creative translation of Weber's '*stahlartes gehause*' (shell as hard as steel) as 'iron cage' to Talcott Parsons. In truth then, the iron cage is a co-authored metaphor (see Baehr, 2001).
- 2 I am not seeking support for my argument in 'early Foucault', who now seems to be going out of fashion in certain quarters in favour of 'late Foucault'. I am merely observing a similarity between the glass cage and the panopticon, an image that exercised Foucault more than the *stahlartes gehause* exercised Weber. Another spatial image that exercised a brilliant mind is Plato's cave.
- 3 I would like to thank Sarah Gilmore for this fascinating observation.

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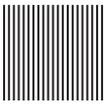
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