

IN PRAISE OF BOREDOM

By

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Following Russell's *In Praise of Idleness*, (1935), Lafargue's *The Right to be Lazy*, (2002 [1883]) and Foucault's concept of the dressage functions of labour (1977), we have argued that the contemporary organisation of paid work is characterised by the increasing intensification of increasingly pointless activity as part of the carceral function of the work organisation (Carter and Jackson 2005, Jackson and Carter 1998, 2007). However, in advocating an increasing detachment, both physically and spiritually, from work, we fly in the face of contemporary management, both in theory and in practice, and, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari (1984), of the latent but potent desire of workers to collude in their own oppression. In this collusion, the workers facilitate their greater incorporation into the managerial fantasy of 'engineering' the perfect worker and the prospect of achieving the holy grail of a congruency of organisational (sic) and worker goals – and it is worth noting that such congruency would require, not a mutual approach to each other, but that workers should accept unreservedly the corporate vision. As regards the intensification of labour, the appropriation by management of what should properly be the prerogative of the individual worker, (broadly speaking, his/her psychological, emotional and spiritual life) – and thus further facilitating enslavement – is an accelerating feature of 'modern management'.

The progression of the work organisation towards the total institution makes the spaces for resistance correspondingly smaller. However, the incarceration of the corporal worker in physical, or, more recently, cyber, space has limitations in achieving the 'hearts and minds' acceptance of the corporate vision. Workers may 'attend' but that doesn't equate with motivation to work. How necessary, therefore, to engage strategies and techniques with which to corral the *emotional* presence of the worker. Since the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution, (see e.g. Marglin 1980), managers have attempted to make work attractive

beyond merely its wage benefit. The current vogue for creative play is merely the latest manifestation of this urge. Once something recognisably external and antithetical to the work obligation, play (tellingly, workers used to call a day where the factory was closed through lack of work ‘playing a day’), is, ideally, to become synonymous with work.

A Modern Fairy Tale?

The UK government is currently running a campaign, aimed at companies, to encourage them to ‘engage’ (1) their workforce. The claimed benefit to the company is, *inter alia*, increased profits, while that to the workers is, not surprisingly, only spiritual. What *is* surprising is the relapse into the sentiments and practices of the Organisation Development ‘movement’, more appropriate to the 1960s, in an epoch where those at the top of the organisational pile seem to need, and indeed claim to need, unbelievably large cash bonuses to make them engage. Seemingly, those at the bottom still do not. The old adage remains true: to make the rich work harder you pay them more, to make the poor work harder you pay them less! In the ‘old days’ it felt ‘right’ for managers to beat more effort out of workers and there is some evidence that this is not altogether history (see, for example, Ehrenreich 2009:103, on what she calls ‘motivational spankings’). As workers slowly acquired more protection from employers, the *modest* bonus scheme became, (if piece-work was not viable), the preferred method to ‘incentivise’ – or, more correctly, ‘incite’ – workers. During this developing understanding of man(sic)-management, it was still routinely part of the conceptualisation of the relations between employer and employed that there was an inherent conflict of interest between them, each party seeking to optimise their material benefits from the work/effort expended. The advent, in the 1940s and 1950s, typically attributed to Maslow, of the theory that psychological satisfaction could be gained through work spawned the heyday of the motivation to work theorists. Conveniently forgetting its clinical origins, this theory spontaneously metamorphosed into a theory applicable to an abstracted concept of wage labour. Its use in practice in this form also conveniently omitted the requirement that higher level needs did not kick in until lower level ones were satisfied, a major manifestation of which was an adequate wage. And, as Vroom showed with Expectancy Theory, (a final recognition of the subjectivity of motivation), adequacy of satisfaction of lower level needs is something determined by the worker, not by managers. The widespread perception that, however reasonable a theory Expectancy Theory might be, it is impossible to operationalise in the workplace, is, we have argued elsewhere (Carter and Jackson 1993), largely attributable to this observation, that motivation to work, as opposed to behaviour, cannot be manipulated by managers, but is a perception of the desirability of the potential rewards offered, on the part of the worker.

Inherent plurality of interest, and the role of perception in motivation, created a problem for encouraging the worker to greater effort. This problem was ‘solved’ by HRM with its (unilateral) declaration of the indivisibility of interest amongst those associated with ‘the organisation’ – unitarism, then, has usurped pluralism as the operant management ‘philosophy’. This allowed the development of the model of the ‘complex’ worker – ‘our

employees are our most valuable resource’ – along with management techniques that engineered an increasingly infantilised employee (see eg, Sievers 1994), a condition necessary to dissuade the workers from questioning ‘management’s right to manage’. However, it would appear that reducing the workers’ autonomy has also reduced their ‘engagement’ with the organisation, hence the need for a government initiative.

It is, perhaps, revealing in itself that this is a government initiative! So dominant has the business model of government become that politicians, elected and unelected, see no contradiction in furthering the interests of business without reference to the impacts on the workers, aka the electorate, or a goodly proportion of it, in whose interest they are supposed to govern. Any attempt by labour to improve its condition is routinely resisted and indeed the prevailing political wisdom, in all parties, is that workers must work harder and longer. Thus, any call to encourage worker ‘engagement’ assumes that the outcome will be more work. ‘Engagement’ may improve the sense of well-being in the worker (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) and make them healthier and happier, but it must, firstly, make them more productive. If not, then they must remain unhappy. Managers do not have an absolute desire for their employees to be ‘engaged’. If, by ‘engaging’ them, profits were reduced, then disengaged they would stay. We should not regard expressions of concern for workers as anything other than a desire for more work from them. For that is the purpose of the worker – to work, to *perform*.

Marcuse (1969) labelled the current form of the Freudian reality principle ‘the *performance principle*’. In its earlier form, the reality principle is what gets us out of bed in the morning and off to the ‘factory’. For Freud, ‘(n)o other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; ... And yet, as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men (sic).’ (1963 [1930]:17 note1). We go to work to earn our daily bread, to bring home the bacon. Because of this manifold existential necessity, we forgo the pleasures we desire – the pleasure principle gives way to the reality principle as the ‘manager’ of our motivation. We forgo *immediate satisfaction, pleasure, joy (play), receptiveness, absence of repression*, and seek *delayed satisfaction, restraint of pleasure toil (work), productiveness, security* (Marcuse 1969: 30). However, once we have enough to ensure our existence, then surely we revert to, at least in part, the pleasure principle? Not so. The reality principle re-establishes itself as the performance principle, ‘which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society’, ‘stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members’ (ibid: 50). In other words, wages must be kept low enough to ensure that workers must work, and this work must occupy ‘practically the entire existence of the mature individual’ (ibid: 45), notwithstanding that the economic affluence of modern society makes this imperative no longer necessary. In contemporary society, the imperative derives not from primordial scarcity, that which makes the reality principle inescapable, but from a manufactured, organised, scarcity which ensures that workers remain workers. However, the work performed is no longer linked directly to satisfying the existential needs of the worker, but is an abstracted, alienated work, designed to satisfy the desires of the manager.

The opportunity cost of performing, for the worker, is much greater than the time and effort expended – work-incarceration also dehumanises. Marcuse suggests (ibid: 52) that employment and what we might think of as maintenance activities – sleeping, eating, etc. – leaves us only about four hours per day for experiencing the pleasure principle. But even this is contaminated by work, as the pleasure principle does not function at the convenience of externally imposed time constraints. The more we are ‘captured’ by the logic of work, the less opportunity for negating the performance principle. We can now see that ‘engagement’ is merely another aspect of performance, and of the performance principle. (Indeed, on a larger scale, Baudrillard (1993:119) argues that it is the ‘total unleashing of the performance principle’ that is driving us to the tipping point for Anthropogenic Global Warming.) And, this is not just a rhetorical point. Marcuse points out, the performance principle and its concomitant, surplus repression, produce ‘a destructive dialectic: the perpetual restrictions on Eros ultimately weaken the life instincts and thus strengthen and release the very forces against which they were ‘called up’ – those of destruction [Thanatos]’ (1969: 50). Perhaps it is even some very dim recognition of this that underlies the increasingly relentless exhortations to positive thinking, to which requirements for ‘engagement’ at work belong: we need pleasure, so, as work comes to occupy more and more of our time, thus allowing fewer and fewer opportunities for the pursuit of pleasure outside work – in any case, an illusory ‘freedom from toil’ because already colonised by the demands of work (see, for example, Marcuse ibid: 51) – we should find our life-enhancing pleasure *within* work.

The purpose of encouraging engagement is, in effect, another attempt to rewrite the employment contract in favour of the employer. A wage-labour system of employment is eminently simple. One party has a task that they wish to have done by someone other than themselves and can afford to pay for such a service. The other party needs the payment in order to survive. The only detail to be resolved is how much work for how much pay? There is no reason why the employee should share the employer’s views about the necessity, desirability or value of the work to be done. In fact, it is not even necessary for the worker to know the purpose of the work they do. (In contemporary organisations, it is not even necessary for the employer, in the shape of the owner, to know what their employees do, or why they do it, or even who they are.) However, it is not really surprising that there are benefits to both parties from having a commitment and involvement beyond the minimum contractual one. The unresolved question is, how are these benefits to be shared? As noted, the preferred distribution is material benefits to capital and spiritual ones to labour. As people work for money – whatever the claims of some managers who have been exposed to motivation-to-work theory – extra work for no extra pay is a form of the rate-cutting so prevalent in piece-work systems, and from which workers have traditionally had to protect themselves – think of truck shops. However, whereas workers are immediately sensitive to relative reductions in wages, they are less secure when the reduction is achieved through ‘engaging’ their interest and commitment. There is, of course, no law preventing employers sharing the material benefits of increased engagement, but this does not seem to have much attraction for them. Even if there is held to be some balance between the gains of material and spiritual benefit, there is no balance of effort – it is not a win-win situation. The employers’ gains cost them nothing, the workers’ gains mean more work. It is, then, dangerous for the

worker to be seduced by the promise of increased satisfactions for which there is no contractual benefit, whereas it is something-for-nothing for the employer. And once the worker becomes ‘engaged’, their ability to resist exploitation diminishes.

The Power of Boredom

If this level of incorporation is to be challenged, what will serve as an anti-dote?

Employers can use and gain from *enthusiasm*. *Boredom* on the other hand defeats them. It is personal and protected. The ‘organisation’ cannot make use of it. It forms a base for resistance to the demands of management. It gives the worker the opportunity to ‘buy out’ of the corporate vision. *Disengagement* from the corporate fantasy world creates space in which to regain an identity that is not derived from the wishes of management, rather than existing as an idealised corporate labour-unit. Boredom stimulates awareness of the life outside the organisation.

We are not, of course, advocating boredom as a way of life, but merely as a useful antidote to exploitation at work. Indeed, as is already well-known, boredom is a salient feature of modern work, but it is almost universally regarded as in need of remedial treatment in order to optimise the productive potential of the worker – boredom can be **cured**. (For expressions of this concern, ranging from the academic journal to the broadsheet press, see, for example, Fisher 1993, Mann 2007, Hollis 2007.) However, the poet Joseph Brodsky (1995) has a more constructive approach. Boredom is to be embraced as a natural human experience, if only as the precursor to something better. Boredom provides a space for contemplating things of desire, things to strive for. Nonetheless, these things, if achieved, will only give a transient satisfaction, because, he argues, boredom **cannot** be cured! So, to experience boredom is not to be suffering from some pathological condition, psychological or moral. According to Brodsky,

‘(w)hen hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is: The sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface. The idea here is to exact a full look at the worst. The reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendor. Boredom is your window on the properties of time that one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one’s mental equilibrium.’

He adds, ‘It puts your existence into its proper perspective...’. Some things at work just *are* boring, perhaps inherently, or perhaps as a reflection of our own emotional condition, transient or otherwise. Either way, boredom is something for us to experience, not something to be proscribed, treated or legislated against by managers. In the way that enthusiasm cannot be demanded of us, other than at the level of the signifier, so our boredom cannot be banished by fiat – or by some behaviour modification technique furnished by OB. After all, if our job is boring, whose fault is that? Not ours, the workers. Job design is the prerogative of management. If they have so little regard for our capabilities that, as Morgan (1997: 312)

noted, many people exercise more skill in driving to work, than they do *at* work, why shouldn't we be bored? Has not deskilling been an essential part of the expansion of management control over workers for decades? Reversing the trend would loosen the grip of managers on the productive process – not a prospect for which they have ever shown any enthusiasm. This is what makes calls for 'engagement' nothing more than the prescription of a placebo – workers might feel better, but the underlying conditions have not been remedied. Indeed, one might suggest that to start to believe that what is boring is actually engaging could indicate a much more worrying development!

Brodsky (1995) makes the point that

'what's good about boredom, about anguish and the sense of meaninglessness of your own, of everything else's existence, is that it is not a deception'.

It might have been wondered why the UK government's initiative, deriving from the work of MacLeod and Clarke (2009) the government commissioned, is aimed at employers rather than at employees, if they too have so much to gain from 'engagement'. We would suggest that, perhaps, the answer is that, for the worker, 'engagement' is just another exploitative technique that is very unlikely to deliver even spiritual gains to them – it will be, precisely, yet another deception.

Conclusion

Given the limited opportunities for workers to opt out of the managerial 'regime of truth', we propose the therapeutic benefits of **boredom** at work. We champion Russell's argument, that work should be seen as just 'a necessary means to a livelihood' and that, for workers, 'it is from their leisure hours that they [should] derive whatever happiness they may enjoy' (1935:21). Rather than trying to make work appealing to the senses and to last as long as can be borne, it should bore workers to the extent that they demand as little as possible of it. How much better to do four hours per day of tedious but useful toil, than to do eight hours of pleasurable but significantly useless work? Of course, as noted above, much work contains much that is already boring – what is required is to reject the managerial verity that boredom is both remediable and a dysfunctional response on the part of the worker (in a 'properly managed' organisation), which thus places the responsibility for feeling bored onto the worker and characterises it as a shameful lack of commitment to corporate values. Boredom, when functioning correctly, really should generate the desire to escape from work to something more pleasurable, rather than the obligation to re-educate one's priorities. Indeed, contra Benjamin, we define boredom at work as knowing precisely what we are waiting for: finishing-time! Management theory has a woeful lack of concepts with which to cope with tomorrow's world. The lead given by *Manifestos for the Business School of Tomorrow* (Jones and O'Doherty 2005) requires an expansion of concepts relevant to management and organisation. We are arguing here that one such is Boredom.

Footnote

- (1) For all you could wish to know about the ‘meaning’ of ‘engagement’, see Macleod and Clarke (2009).

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