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Managerialism and Nihilism

David Currie

University of Lincoln, UK
dcurrie@lincoln.ac.uk

Gerard McElwee

Sheffield Hallam Business School, UK
g.mcelwee@shu.ac.uk

Peter Somerville

University of Lincoln, UK
psomerville@lincoln.ac.uk

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Abstract

This reflection adopts a critical approach to critique the 'Excellence Literature' in management, taking a Nietzschean perspective on nihilism. Nihilism is often seen as a negative state, and the work of White (1990) suggests that there are different forms of nihilism which we argue have consequences for the nature of management. Two case studies and an illustration of issues encountered in the authors' direct experience serve to illustrate these forms. We are also concerned in our roles as 'management educators' as to the implications for our classroom practice, where we seek to engage in what has been described as 'critical management development'. Thus, the paper concludes by questioning why approaches such as the 'Excellence' literature are still so prominent in MBA programmes.

Introduction

Our shared interest in Nietzsche led us to connect the loss of higher/transcendental values he associated with the 'death of God' to the invocation of super-ordinate goals or 'higher values' within the 'Excellence' literature and in management development. In this literature, the individual is transcended by these super-ordinate goals as defined by management; the higher values are managerially defined through the management of 'the culture'; beliefs are similarly controlled by the leaders of the organisation. Managers appear to play the role of high priests to a new god, that is to say the Free Market or the customer who pays for the goods and services that the organisation delivers.

When Peters and Waterman's 'In Search of Excellence' was published in 1982 it soon became a world-wide best seller and was the next in a long line of 'best way to manage' management textbooks. It has been suggested that Peters and Waterman and their collaborators, Deal and Kennedy, recognised that an increasing loss of faith and a growing mood of meaninglessness in western society, had left a void in organisations which could be filled by establishing a unity of purpose and value within the contemporary work organisation, purpose and value apparently otherwise missing in peoples' lives.

Thirty years on, although no-longer a feature on the best-seller lists, the legacy of this book is still apparent, especially in relation to the continued focus on a unitarist approach to organising and a concern with having the 'right' culture in

organisations. This unitaristic fervour now also predominates the organisational landscape across the Public Sector in the UK, Liddle and McElwee (2012) and the third and voluntary sectors, Somerville and McElwee (2011) both of which were previously considered the domain of a more participative pluralism. We argue that the predominantly unitaristic rhetoric and the appropriation of organisational culture as an integrating force as employed by (senior) managers in general and Chief Executives in particular, are the main means by which a managerialist ideology is promoted. But, rather than giving greater meaning to the lives of organisational members, the approach is ultimately and paradoxically nihilistic.

Conceivably, managerialist ideology, articulated throughout the 'Excellence' literature, as well as promoting instrumental reasoning at the heart of organisational relationships, is essentially and paradoxically nihilistic. This paper has two aims; first to show how Nietzsche's work can be used to illustrate the phenomena of Managerialism and Nihilism and second to offer two mini-case studies and an illustration, which genuinely reflect the reality of the management and the experience of mismanagement, where style and presentation appear to be more important than substance and results. We particularly found our experiences as Management Development practitioners resonated with the work of scholars such as Fenwick (2005), Grey et al. (1996), Cunliffe (2002) and Hagen et al. (2003). In particular, we identified with Amanda Sinclair's (2007) account of teaching leadership to MBA students. The problems and joys she encountered are all too familiar to us.

The paper is structured as follows. We first provide a background to the concept of managerialism in order to provide the ideological context of the ensuing discussion. We then introduce a philosophical context and particularly consider the contribution of Nietzsche on Nihilism. Thirdly, we present the case studies. We then provide a narrative to make sense of the case studies before concluding with a discussion.

On managerialism

Managerialism can be conceptualised in a number of ways, which in turn shape the ways in which organizational life can be analysed. Managerialism has been used in a multiplicity of contexts to either legitimise management action or to provide moral constraints on the way in which management action is manifested. For example, Macintyre has discussed how some writers have seen 'the manager's function as that of controlling and suppressing conflict' (1982:27). This view of course portrays a confrontational view of management.

The term was first used by Berle and Means (1932) to discuss the separation of ownership from managerial control by large corporations characterised by publicly traded shares. In these large companies there is such a widespread dispersion of share ownership that shareholders are not a homogeneous decision making entity and consequently control rights over corporate assets and policies are exercised by management to the detriment of the majority of shareholders but for the benefit of the minority of large shareholders.

In order to understand the genesis of the term it is useful to provide a brief account of how managerialism as a concept has developed.

Managerialism has been characterised in a variety of ways. Enteman (1993), for example, describes managerialism as an international ideology. Davis (1997: 305) claims that managerialism has swept aside 'an idyllic older bureaucratic world reducing every relation to a mere money exchange'. Managerialism has also been characterised as a 'set of beliefs and practices, (that) will prove an effective solvent for.....economic and social ills' (Pollitt, 1990: 1).

For Davis, alongside the development of capitalism, managerialism has:

'refashioned the world in its image. Managerialism signifies the shift from the owner to the professional manager to legitimate the control of individuals, societies and their organisations in the interests of capital' (1997:305).

According to Enteman (1993), management-dominated companies are sometimes called 'managerialist' companies, and they have evolved a philosophy of 'managerialism'. Such a notion assumes a conscious process on behalf of those who act in a controlling function.

Defining managerial ideology or managerialism seems to be problematic. For example, Reed and Anthony's seminal paper (1992) uses these terms and that of managerial work without ever defining either. However, the term managerialism is now firmly embedded in popular discourse, and management and managerialism appear to be used interchangeably. Whilst 'management' is used to define a process or action, 'managerialism' is often used positively, as an organisational ideology, or negatively, as a term of personal abuse, or simply to define the process of managing people (Brown, 1992). Blake, Mouton and McCauley (1989) describe managerialism as a process or set of processes in which managers engage, Mullins (1996) discusses *managerial* style, basic *managerial* philosophies and *managerial* effectiveness, and Brown

(1992) discusses *managerial* prerogative, *managerial* control and *managerial* authority. None of these authors, however, actually defines managerialism.

Jackson and Carter argue that ‘there has been a tendency to claim that the purpose informing managerial action is that of servicing an objective rationality’ (2000.114). But what could be meant by this objective rationality? It is perhaps to do with what Marx called the ‘logic of capital’? Is the role of management to ensure the maximisation of profitability, the greatest return on capital investment?

What is apparent is that managerialism is conceptualised in a number of ways by different actors and status groups and is complex to define. The use of the term shapes the way in which organizational life is problematized and how organizational actors respond to the (il)legitimacy of its strictures. Managerialism has been used in a multiplicity of contexts to either legitimise management action or to provide moral constraints on the way in which management action is manifested.

Whilst the above illustrates some of the concerns academics may have with defining managerialism, it is also clear that much management literature promotes, in an uncritical manner, a managerial worldview which is predicated on managerial prerogative, promoting a unitarist view of organisation and an integrative approach to organisational culture. This literature and the assumptions about the nature of management inculcated there-in, might have been dismissed by Burrell as Heathrow Organisation Theory, but it is clear to us in our management development roles in UK Business Schools, that this literature/ideology still predominates the landscape. The next section examines Nihilism in particular using Nietzsche, who is the thinker most associated with the term.

Nihilism

The origins of Nihilism may be traced back to Greek philosophy and the ways in which human beings began to examine the purpose of existence. In essence, nihilism suggests that all values held by humans are without validity; to suggest otherwise is futile. This of course posed fundamental challenges to thinkers such as Kierkegaard, who as a Christian, suggested that individuals need to distinguish between, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious – a nihilistic levelling. More latterly, developing these themes, Carr (1992) considers Nihilism as an ongoing condition of human philosophical tension and Stanley (2000) regards it as a state of meaninglessness. In our case studies we will see that these two views are ongoing. The next section discusses Nietzsche’s levels of Nihilism.

Three ‘levels’ of nihilism

White points out at least twenty different ‘types’ of nihilism referred to in Nietzsche’s seminal text ‘Will to Power’. These include ‘radical’ nihilism, ‘passive’ nihilism, ‘religious’ nihilism, ‘active’ nihilism, and ‘suicidal’ nihilism. White suggests that these apparently different forms of nihilism can be related to three ‘fundamental levels’ (ibid, p16) terming them ‘religious’, ‘radical’ and ‘complete’ nihilism. We consider each of these in turn.

Religious nihilism

It should be noted that Nietzsche firmly places the emergence of nihilism with

‘...the failure of the attempt to endow the world with value [of its own] by attributing to it an ultimate “purpose”, “unity”, or “truth” (N:11[99] / WP:12). This failure leads to nihilism as “the radical rejection of value, meaning, and desirability” (N:2[127] / WP:1)’(ibid, p16).

Radical Nihilism

The next ‘level’ of nihilism is the step towards a ‘conscious’ or ‘radical’ nihilism. The radical nihilist does not deny the ‘highest values’, but rather comes to acknowledge that:

‘... the three categories of value (purpose, unity and truth) remain uninstantiated [in our world] ... the only world to which we have the slightest right’ (ibid p17).

Crucially, radical nihilists retain belief in the ‘rational categories’, ‘belief that the world could have value only if it either had a purpose, exhibited an “infinitely valuable” unity, or were related to another “true” world of “being” (N:11[99] / WP:12).’ (ibid, p18). Radical nihilists are ‘horrified’ to discover the absence of these higher values in our world and, in recognising that there is no reason to expect to discover them in this the ‘only world to which we have the slightest right’ (ibid, p18), they feel they have to draw a verdict of absolute condemnation, and their acceptance of that verdict makes them nihilists (ibid, p18).

Complete nihilism

The final level is complete or accomplished nihilism. This state is achieved when the ‘highest values devalue themselves’ (White, p 21) and is an acknowledgement that humans’ socially constructed worlds do not correspond to the highest values and, importantly, that no other world ought to exist. In short, the complete nihilist would not will things other than they are. This is often termed ‘amor fati’ (the love of fate) but it is not the same as fatalism. For Nietzsche, amor fati is an absolute affirmation of what is, a Dionysian revaluation of values, a joyful overcoming of self. The complete nihilist is not a nihilist at all but rather, as Nietzsche referred to himself, has ‘lived nihilism through to its end, within himself - who has it behind him, outside of him’ (ibid, p21). In short, the complete nihilist has annihilated nihilism itself.

It was the realisation that Christian religious belief was indeed nihilistic because of the inherent denial or negation of value in the ‘world of becoming’ that led us to speculate about the religiously nihilistic nature of the prescriptions in the ‘Excellence’ literature. The subservience of individual goals and desires to the super-ordinate, so-called organisational goals, the promotion of an integrative view of culture (i.e. culture is the thing that binds the organisation and unifies it; culture is something that an organisation has rather than culture being what it is) all contrive to give meaning for organisational members, in terms defined by senior management. Is this problematic? We shall return to this question later.

But what impact does this ideological rhetoric have on less senior managers? The next section considers these tensions using two case studies.

The case studies

This section provides case studies of two different organisations and management events to illustrate our concept of what maybe considered as the abuse of managerial prerogative and align them with the account of nihilism described above. The first is derived from a teaching episode, the second from an organisational setting. Both case studies are taken from real events.

Case Study 1: ‘Essential behaviours’

The authors are teachers on a Decision-making course, a part of an MBA programme. One of the students, Ally, described how the appraisal scheme operated at his organisation and how the scheme impacted on his actions at work. The company is a large multi-national employer and the student is a middle manager in the organisation at its site in the North East of England. He described how they [the managers] had to demonstrate identified essential/desirable behaviours in their communications with their subordinate staff. These behaviours had been determined by senior management as being necessary to help to promote and achieve the company mission. He was appraised by his immediate line manager in terms of how well he had demonstrated these essential behaviours. Security in the role, annual pay rises and general promotion prospects were all determined by the outcome of the appraisal process.

The student disclosed to the MBA group that he did not actually believe in the mission and its associated list of ‘essential behaviours’. However, in order to maintain his job security and to earn his annual performance related pay, he nonetheless attempted to demonstrate the required behaviours in all his dealings with his subordinates. He was fairly certain that his performance was convincing and his staff had no idea that his enthusiasm for the company mission was anything other than genuine. In Goffman’s terms, he kept his cynicism well ‘off-stage’ (Goffman, 1959). During the discussion, Ally indicated that his immediate manager, *Walter*, was also assessed in the same manner within the scheme i.e. his manager’s manager, *Craig*, appraised *Walter* in terms of how well he had demonstrated the essential behaviours in his dealings with the MBA student, Ally, and his peers. In fact, this procedure operated right to the top of the organisation’s hierarchy, stopping just short of the CEO. *Ally* was asked if he thought that his manager, *Walter*, believed in the mission and the essential behaviours? He replied unreservedly in the affirmative. When asked how he knew this to be so he replied that in all his dealings with him, *Walter* was always promoting the mission and its achievement unreservedly. “Oh”, we said, “Just like you do with your subordinates?” The speed with which the proverbial penny dropped for *Ally* was unforgettable, as indeed was his reply: “F-----g hell! No one believes it!”

This example serves to show how tenuous the belief might be within an organisation and how coercive tactics are required to 'bolster' the 'belief'. At the same time the individual is increasingly negated through these overt control mechanisms. It might be useful at this stage to reflect on Nietzsche's attack on the "selfishness" of the State and its impact on Christianity:

One should recall what has gradually become of Christianity under the selfishness of the State. Christianity is certainly one of the purist revelations of this urge for culture and especially for the ever renewed generation of the saint; as it has been used hundreds of times, however, to turn the mills of the State's forces, it has gradually become diseased to the very marrow, hypocritical and full of lies, and has degenerated to the point where it contradicts its original aim. (Nietzsche, quoted in Kaufmann, W, 1974, p164)

The force of Nietzsche's words can be perhaps understood set in the context that part of the company's mission is to 'empower' the staff. The managers, far from being 'empowered,' are coerced into [being] "hypocritical and telling lies" for the selfishness of the 'organisation'. And, as with our MBA student, many of these managers will come to realise the inauthenticity of their enforced position and will feel negated – organisational anomie. They, either knowingly or unknowingly, become highly instrumental in their relationships with their staff; just as their managers become instrumental with them, as seen with Ally's manager, Walter.

Illustration 1: 'A Real Turn Out'

The memorandum below is an actual example sent within a department of another large national company, with a divisional operation in the North East of England. The memo is reproduced verbatim, apart from changing the names of the people and the department. We obtained our copy of the email memo from a student who was related to one of the recipients. The memo could be dismissed as an isolated example. However, our source and personal contacts at the company suggest that this sort of communiqué is commonplace. One can only marvel at the irony of the plea for a 'real turn out'.

Illustration 1

TO: All Staff

FROM: Bob

Subject: SPEC STAFF DINNER – RAYMOND EXPECTS

All,

Rather like 'England Expects' we have a 'Raymond Expects' and in many ways 'BOB Expects'.

We are all members of SPECIAL Services and throughout the year I expect loyalty from you, to me and to the department, and once a year I expect an open demonstration of that loyalty - the Xmas night out.

We are all members of the SPECIAL SERVICES department and again loyalty and demonstration of that loyalty would be nice - the SPEC. Staff Dinner.

There are things you don't enjoy, that cost you money that you don't have, but are expected of you when you take on the side of 'management'. Some of you are willingly taking the money for training on 'XXX-1 and 2', support for degrees, etc. Others simply enjoy the status and high salary.

Have a real think about it and we will discuss it before I submit the merit rise list.

Talk to your staff along the same lines and let's have a real turn out.

Bob

The promise of unity of purpose and value inherent within the Excellence literature may be appealing but is there any evidence to hand that it is a promise that is being delivered? The companies in the examples above were hardly achieving anything approaching unity of purpose and value, due to their increasingly instrumental relationships. As we suggested above, although these are but two examples, we have other links with these organisations and know that these aren't isolated events.

Instrumental Reason

Taylor (1991) suggests that the growth in instrumental reason is a key phenomenon of our age:

‘We might call this the primacy of instrumental reason. By “instrumental reason” I mean the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success.’
(Taylor, 1991, 4-5)

This drive towards instrumental reason is at the ideological core of managerialism and it results in religious or radical nihilism. Employees are a valued resource, but only insofar as they can deliver the necessary outcomes. For us, Nihilism is a necessary consequence of this approach. For, just as ‘unity of purpose and value’ has not been delivered by Christianity, according to Nietzsche, neither will it be delivered by a managerialist ideology and its attendant instrumentality. Arguably, managerialism just preaches an oppressive rule of the manager and for the manager.

We now turn to an example derived directly from our own experience of working within a management department within a university to further illustrate this point.

Case Study 2: ‘Pie in the Sky’

Following a restructuring of the organisation some new middle managers were appointed. The section manager, Lenny, was one of those new to the organisation. His first meeting with the staff was punctuated with the rhetoric of managerialism. We were to be a team; we were to be collegiate; there would be unheard of openness; his well appointed office, including mini-bar, was to be made available to all on suitable occasions for entertaining important visitors; he would be a ‘hands-on’ manager; there would be weekly staff meetings to discuss both administrative and technical affairs at which pizzas or Chinese food would be provided. Together we were to create a section to be proud of.

In spite of there being many people present at the meeting who were well versed in critical management studies due to their academic roles as management lecturers, the rhetoric was well received by an obviously uplifted group of staff. We should add, of course, that this was not a universal reaction; some staff were advising caution, preferring to taste the pudding (or rather, pizza) before passing judgement. Nonetheless, a clear majority of the staff present were enthusiastic about what they had heard: how remarkable it was that so many staff appeared genuinely to believe in the vision on offer; remarkable in the sense that those same staff spent many collective hours in the classroom encouraging their students to be critical and ask difficult questions of themselves and others about the nature of management.

While there are similarities to the scenario with Manager Ally in our earlier example – some staff might very well have been behaving as they thought was required of them - other sense-making occurs as many staff see an opportunity to start again and perhaps to put some unpleasant experiences of an ‘ancien régime’ behind them. Indeed discussions with several staff in the aftermath of the meeting seemed to indicate a genuine desire for successful implementation of the new vision.

The first event which indicated Lenny might not be able to deliver much of what had been promised happened just a few weeks after he took up his post. A Staff Development Committee was to be democratically constituted from the staff group and a meeting of all staff was called to agree the procedures for choosing the committee and making applications for

funding. In essence this was the first of the ‘regular’ lunchtime meetings. There was tea, coffee and biscuits but..... no pizzas. Someone mischievously remarked to the manager’s nominated Chairperson that she was not sure whether to fill herself with biscuits or to wait for the pizzas to come. Rather sheepishly he advised the meeting that Lenny had discovered there were insufficient funds in the Section budget to be able to provide pizzas. As the drama unfolded, memories were recalled of the early American trade union activists who barracked the Salvation Army with the following parody of a well-known Salvationist song:

‘Can’t you see by and by?

You’ll get [pizza] pie in the sky when you die!’

[our ‘pizza’ added]

This may seem a relatively trivial example but it shows an example of ineffective management and how unrealistic the promises made by Lenny were in operational terms, never mind any philosophical shortcomings. Slowly but surely, Lenny failed to deliver on the remainder of the promises. What started to emerge was the preoccupation Lenny had with status and his need to be liked. It was not possible for an individual to take a stand on an issue in opposition to Lenny’s view. This was seen as disloyalty and loyalty was the key pre-requisite demanded - loyalty at all cost. As Lenny commented in an aside to one of our colleagues one day, ‘there are three essential elements to management: Loyalty! Loyalty! and Loyalty!’ Such incessant demand for loyalty is clearly at odds with his promised democratic, collegiate Section approach. This also resonates with our earlier assertion that rather than the customer being king, the Chief Executive/Senior Manager becomes more and more god-like. Any populist leader wants all the people to be on his or her side. Democracy is not necessarily liberal – cf ancient Athens! It is the loyalty to the manager, in Lenny’s case (rather than loyalty to the organisation), that makes this set-up undemocratic

Over a period of time more and more staff came to be disillusioned with the ever-increasing gap between the rhetoric and the reality. More and more staff became marginalised and those who remained loyal were increasingly put upon. Staff in one sub-section took out a collective grievance against Lenny over an attempt to impose changes to workloads without either consultation with the staff or due consideration of the operational impact of the changes. For many of the staff, it was the first time they had ever been involved in such a dispute - ironic given Lenny’s early rhetoric. They would soon also find themselves involved in a second collective grievance, to be followed shortly thereafter by a number of individual grievances.

The two years under Lenny’s management regime were punctuated with a plethora of dysfunctional events.

The changing position of the staff in his Section over this period is analysed below in terms of ‘levels’ of Nihilism. Three periods of time can be considered, ‘the early days’ (immediately after Lenny’s appointment), ‘mid term’ (six months down the line - time of first collective grievance) and ‘end-point’ (eighteen months down the line - second collective grievance and individual grievances ongoing; Lenny about to move on[wards and upwards]).

Early days

The ‘early days’ would be categorised as predominantly religiously nihilistic. The majority of staff were buying into the rhetoric. But some staff were more sceptical and a few may well have been at the ‘radical’ level. In a period of less than three months from Lenny taking up his post there was a growing concern amongst an initially small group of staff. Already some staff were being marginalised, others finding themselves ‘flavour of the month’. There was a particularly amusing incident at Christmas when a group of staff shared their Christmas greeting card message from Lenny with each other in the public house opposite their premises. There was a clear correlation between the enthusiasm contained in Lenny’s message and how ‘in favour’ you were. Some had literally two pages of praise – ‘thanks for all your efforts’; ‘loyalty’; ‘support’; ‘magnificent contribution’ ... and so on – down to a very grudging ‘Happy Christmas’ and a signature

on the cards of the less favoured staff. Don't people in such positions ever imagine that staff might share these things with each other? The willingness of some staff who were considered by Lenny to be loyal subjects to share their personal message in the pub also indicates that at least some were sitting on the fence and perhaps not quite so loyal!

End point

As the months passed, fewer staff were seen to be 'on board'. There was increased disillusionment with the way the Section was being managed. More and more staff saw that promises were not being met. Perhaps the worst aspect was the overtly sycophantic behaviour of those 'loyal' to Lenny. It no longer mattered what skills you had, the key was what lengths you would go to support Lenny; to be loyal and to be seen to be loyal. Staff were being marginalised if they would not conform. This was eventually to have the effect, once there were more staff 'out' than 'in', of a small loyal band being left in the bunker that the Section Executive Committee had now become. Interestingly, having allowed the passage of time before committing this to print, insider accounts now obtained from some of that once-loyal band indicate that instrumental rationality was key to the way Lenny managed them and he regularly played one follower off against another.

The turning point in terms of there being more staff 'out' than 'in' came when two or three staff who had been highly co-operative were mistreated by Lenny.

For example, Lenny started to interfere in the organisation of events being run by his loyal band when it was obvious to all, including the loyal band, that this was being done as an expression of *Lenny's power as there was no operational need or imperative for him to so intervene*. This resulted in one instance of an entire team who were due to deliver a residential programme to a large cohort of postgraduate students, resigning en masse from the event. The fall out from that particular event was quite remarkable.

Firstly Lenny had to assemble a mixture of those remaining loyal to him and a number of part time consultants to take on the running of the event at very short notice. Secondly, and more importantly in terms of the current focus, this really became a watershed in terms of the collapse of any remaining façade that Lenny was interested in anything other than the ruthless pursuit of his own self interest.

Up to that point much of what had been going on within the Section could have been rationalised as being symptomatic of the actions of disaffected troublemakers. Such a response is indeed classically unitarist and it seemed that Lenny was not unsuccessful in transmitting both internally and externally that some staff were being awkward and might have to be got rid of. However, now that these, hitherto highly co-operative, staff were being harshly treated, Lenny's regime was increasingly exposed for the rhetorical myth that it was. The collapse was not quite as sudden as with the manager in Case Study 1, but collapsing it most certainly was and despite Lenny's dogged determination to dig-in, his position had become untenable.

At this stage, in terms of the present analysis, there was a marked shift by many towards 'radical' nihilism. The promises had not been kept; staff were not being treated fairly; there was overt favouritism; certain areas of work and staff were being very well looked after at the cost of the vast majority of the remainder of the staff; staff morale had hit rock bottom. 'Unity of purpose and value' had not been delivered. And neither, by and by, had the pizzas! At the 'end point' the majority of staff were still at the 'radical' level. By this time Lenny's bosses could see that the relationship between him and the Section was irretrievably broken. So, just towards the end of the second year, another re-organization was announced and Lenny was moving on to another role within the organisation, his next promotion achieved!

While, we don't want to speculate too much on the implications of why Lenny was promoted, it is fair to say that there was a clear 'tradition' within the institution of staff like Lenny being moved to other roles rather than those responsible for appointing them in the first place grasping the pricklier nettle of having to admit that perhaps they hadn't made such a good decision. We also have to accept that perhaps Lenny's bosses thought the Section needed a 'bit of a going over' and that Lenny was just the man for such a job.

Lenny's departure led fairly quickly to an upbeat mood developing among the Section staff. Was that 'old time religious' nihilism waiting just around the corner? But there is a paradox here because having just had a pretty horrible experience, the existential need for unity of purpose and value seems ever more pressing. This also might be reflected in the way that the trade union became an important vehicle for the staff - not merely procedurally but helping to fill the (organisational) existential void. Unity of purpose and value - all for only £9.50 a month (which was the monthly subscription of the trade union at the time of these events)! The scenario can be summarised thus:

Table 1: Level of Nihilism

Time	Predominant level of nihilism	Outlook
'Early days'	Religious	Optimistic
'Mid-term'	Radical	Pessimistic
'End-point'	Resurgent religious	Increasingly optimistic

The relationship between the level of nihilism and the associated outlook is perhaps enlightening in terms of understanding some of the operant conditions impacting on social action within organisations. It may be tempting to conclude that, as long as they can maintain even a small degree of 'religious' fervour, this should provide a good foundation for management to work from. Re-organise regularly; keep the message upbeat; keep senior managers on-message etc. But what levels of resources are necessary to maintain the effect? How long can management continue to turn the water into wine? Organisational miracles seem few and far between and, in our experience, even the most enthusiastic employee will eventually come to tire of change initiative upon change initiative. Disillusionment and discontent set in and far from inspiring action, the approach leads to increasing dysfunction.

We need to acknowledge, that rather than demonstrating the philosophical lacking of the Excellence approach, we might simply have highlighted the idiocy of one manager. However, over an extended period of time engaging with mainly middle managers on a number of postgraduate management courses, we have shared early drafts of this paper with many of them and there is a high degree of resonance that the events we have highlighted here are very familiar to them in their many and varied organisations.

If the big management idea of the moment is sustainability, the Big Society and if that idea is itself truly sustainable, then ought we not be seeking more satisfactory, sustainable ways of managing rather than facilitating this see-sawing backwards and forwards between religious and radical nihilism; between optimism and pessimism? We return to this below.

During the two years under Lenny's leadership, the rebellious outpourings of staff on a variety of notice boards became the highlight of the day for the majority 'out' group. Much energy was directed to this sort of activity as staff attempted to bolster themselves in the battle for survival. The 'rebellious sub-culture' was now the predominant culture within the Section. Paradoxically, a previously disparate group became incredibly united. So, it is fair to say that Lenny's actions led to a level of solidarity and unity within the vast majority of the Section staff. But it is clear that this was far from Lenny's intent. The response of the staff in resisting Lenny is testament to the potential for emerging sub-cultures to oppose what is perceived to be the coercive imposition of an apparently benign managerial regime, which slowly but surely came to be seen as little more than a vehicle for the promotion of Lenny's self interest.

The 'Excellence' literature has been well critiqued in terms of the methodological shortcomings of the original research. But set this criticism aside for the moment and suppose that Peters and Waterman actually observed what they claim to have observed in their excellent companies; let us suppose that 'culture' actually was being managed in those organisations at the time. How many of them could still be thought of as excellent? Not many. Perhaps in this paper we have given a philosophical insight into why they are no longer excellent - because it is well nigh impossible to maintain a critical mass of staff in a religiously nihilistic state. People start to see through the rhetoric - no matter how much they may be coerced into toeing the company line, no matter how much they might want to believe the rhetoric. People do eventually recognise the growing pervasiveness of instrumental reason. Indeed, as our two private sector examples (Case Study 1; Illustration 1) show, there is a chain of coercion as managers coerce their staff who in turn coerce their staff, and so forth on a downwardly coercive spiral. Crucially, people start to notice that as, for example, the organisation is being 'downsized' to ensure 'economic survival', the executives implementing such programmes either get massive bonuses for their achievement or, worse still, get a handsome pay-off for their failure. They notice that within this united whole, all are not treated equally; a select few are valued much more highly. Indeed, they need look no further than the recent catastrophic bank collapses and the ongoing furore over payoffs and pensions to the high-ranking personnel responsible

for the failures. They come to recognise the instrumentality of organizational relations and in that process of commodification they become a little less human.

It is our position that this type of managerialism causes many to live their organisational existence in a radical nihilistic state - a state of pessimism at best, despair at worst. Yes, we've shown that employees may become united but not in any sense in the ways in which Lenny and his ilk would wish. In short, far from providing a unifying focus for concerted collective action, the 'Excellence' approach may actually contain the very seeds of organisational annihilation. We suppose that 'In Search of Nihilism' may not have appeared quite such an appealing read on airport bookshelves!

Implications for management action and learning

We want to focus on two key aspects arising from our analysis: the implications for management action, and the implications for management learning.

1) Management Action

The rhetoric of managerialism remains a prominent part of the organizational narratives of chief executives and other organizational leaders across the public and private sectors, at least in the UK. This is evident from the responses from current MBA students who quickly relate to the scenarios discussed in this paper. Has the message of managerialism/neo-unitarism been internalised as a dominant narrative and become the leadership and management rhetoric of choice? If our analysis is persuasive, the implications are that we might speculate that many organizational members become caught in a vicious cycle of:

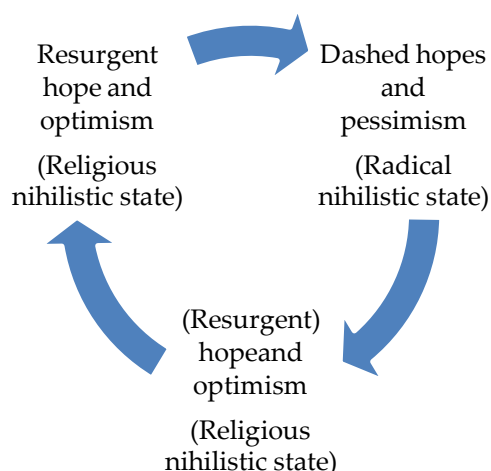


Fig 1 A Cycle of Nihilism

Much like the adapted story of Sisyphus, in Camus (1975) (they may be condemned to this for all eternity. If we are now in an age where sustainability is an overarching concern in all facets of existence should this not also be applied to the means by which we enact leadership and management? To this end we may be required to address the philosophical, moral and ethical elements that are lacking from most mainstream functional accounts of management, which find their apotheosis in the 'Excellence' literature.

Illustration 2: 'There must be something better than this?'

Following a presentation of an early draft of this paper at an academic conference, a member of the audience approached us. He was a 'practitioner' and had been attending conferences and summer schools for twenty years in his quest for knowledge and understanding about management. His first comment was that it was the first time at any such event where an explicit link had been made between a philosophical concept and management practice.

He went on to say that he had previously been a Chief Executive and Managing Director in several organisations, large and small and could really relate to the scenarios described in the two case studies. He felt it was what had been expected of him in his senior position - to give direction and provide clarity. He had tried all the sticks and carrots and recognised that he had become very instrumental in his relationships with others. He had found this a far from

satisfying way of being and was seeking to find more co-operative, authentic ways of being and managing.

2) Management Learning

The following illustration may serve to demonstrate some of the tensions management/manager developers experience when working with practising managers, in relation to choices about which theories to explore and which to ignore.

Illustration 3: Do we want a critical perspective?

At a very recent MBA residential workshop, we were criticised for introducing the latest cohort of recruits to some elements of 'critical' management theory mainly around Labour Process Theory. Some found the analysis depressing and we were accused of de-motivating them – and we hadn't even touched on nihilism! They were much more concerned with the 'practical' aspects of management. As one MBA student expressed it:

'I'm far too busy with the practical concerns of managing to be bothered with philosophy.'

Some of the cohort even hinted at an element of malpractice on our part, that we were not addressing their needs but rather we were providing them with unhelpful theoretical concepts rather than the practical solutions they required. There appeared to be an emerging consensus around it being our responsibility to motivate not de-motivate them in their role as managers. This was despite emphasising over and over again that this was a management development and educational programme, not a training event and having spent some considerable time with them explaining our approach to learning.

Such events are far from isolated on these programmes. Students come to us with expectations that we have the 'secrets', the magic solutions, and it becomes tempting to provide that which is sought. This pressure from students increases the pressure from within the institution to deliver low cost, 'disciplinary' programmes (Legge 2004). So while we agree with Currie and Knights (2003) and with Grey et al (1996, cited in Legge, 2004) that a critical approach to management development is 'an antidote to the development of an unquestioning managerialism', it would be naïve not to acknowledge the pressures from within our own institutions and from students alike. Legge (ibid) identifies a third pressure point in terms of the special circumstances surrounding Corporate MBA programmes (Illustration 3 is derived from just such a programme), where the interests of the corporate client also have to be taken into account.

These 'thorny' issues may be more than enough reason to point to why 'disciplinary' based programmes remain to the fore of management development programmes. Such programmes continue to provide management students with what they think they want, rather than what they need i.e. a more critical approach. Such programmes provide what Burrell has termed 'Heathrow Organization Theory' and avoid confronting the, mainly absent, philosophical, moral and ethical dimensions of management theory and practice.

So, although our encounter with the ex-CEO in illustration 2, above, is anecdotal, there may well be something important here about how critical theorists engage with management practice. In the main they probably avoid engaging with managers and management directly but rather view management as a carcass from which they may feast at will without ever having to worry about what managers might think. As management developers, engaging directly with managers on MBA and other management programmes we must be concerned with more than simply deconstructing management and be prepared, as suggested by Legge (ibid), to work critically with managers in emerging communities of practice.

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