

Books For Managers “From the Top Shelf”

Editors note: All scholars are aware of important books that have been overlooked when published, or were forgotten later, or are often cited without being really read, or were misunderstood, or simply deserve to be re-discovered.

Our purpose is not so much to give justice or repair history as to provide insights and relevant ideas for today's issues, extracting ourselves for one moment from the never-ending flow of information and publications. Rather than old wine in new bottles, new wine in old bottles, so to speak.

To the classical book review format, we wish to add supplementary information about the legacy of the book, an assessment of its relevance, possible continuations, and, wherever possible, comments from the author.

This is a first try. If this idea is appealing to authors, if readers find it helpful, it will become a regular feature of the EMJ.

Moral Mazes – The World of Corporate Managers

Robert JACKALL
Oxford University Press,
New York, 1988, 249 pages.

Moral Mazes – The world of corporate managers is the work of a sociologist with no connection to the academic field of management or organization studies. After completing this in-depth study of the business world, the author turned to quite different empirical fields and never came back to business. But there are many other reasons for management scholars to brush aside Jackall's book. First, it seems to deal with a restricted area of management research. If, as suggested by the title, morality is the main topic of the book, then it falls into the subfield of business ethics. And it is not a lovable book. It is disturbing, provocative, and more than once the reader is tempted to think the author is going too far. Though management studies have certainly developed a critical stream of research, such a merciless insistence on the dark side of organizations may be a little hard to take for those who, however uncompromising themselves, still make a living out of teaching to

actual or future managers. Nor is it an easy read. An accomplished writer, not afraid of utilizing the vast resources of the English language, the author develops dense paragraphs replete with long, complex – though carefully structured – sentences, and disregards the usual simplifications of scientific literature (e.g. lists, figures, tables, summaries). Non-native English speakers are likely to make heavy use of a dictionary. In short, you cannot have access to the substance of *Moral Mazes* by just flipping through the pages or reading the first chapter and a few figures. You have to read it the old-fashioned way, from page one to page 204.

The book is based mainly on an in-depth sociological investigation of two large companies – one in the textile industry and the other in chemicals (plus a study of a public relations firm). While the bulk of fieldwork data is impressive in quantity (143 interviews and significant observational data) and in quality, methodological issues are not the focus of the author's attention. By today's standards in mainstream management research, *Moral Mazes* would be likely to provoke severe criticism.

These preliminary remarks may seem a strange way to legitimize the somewhat bizarre endeavour of reviewing a book twenty years after its publication. However, the main motive for this undertaking is quite simple: there are ideas in *Moral Mazes*, a lot, and good ones. And many of them have not found significant echoes in management studies – at least not yet.

As acknowledged by the author, there is some ambiguity in the purpose of the book. The starting point was an investigation in how bureaucracy shapes moral consciousness, with a clear critical stance: “What rules do people fashion to interact with one another when they feel that, instead of ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self-promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats?” (p. 3). The project ended up in “an interpretive sociological account of how managers think the world works” (p. 6) with a specific focus on managers' rules for survival and success (p. 3–4). While the two themes are more different angles than distinct topics, the former certainly prevailed in the legacy of the book, if only because the main title explicitly refers to it.

How do managers think the world works, then? In a nutshell, they view their world as having no clear order. Contingencies of all sorts combined with shifting social judgments result in a deep sense of arbitrariness. In the conclusion, Jackall even goes as far as to characterize the corporate world as "a Calvinist world without a Calvinist god" (p. 193). Still, as in all social worlds there are constant efforts to impose and maintain some form of stability. The result is, according to Jackall, minimal: "Organizational moralities are contextual, situational, highly specific, and most often unarticulated" (p. 6).

The modern corporation is analyzed as a "hybrid bureaucracy", combining some of the rational features of the Weberian bureaucracy with some of the traits of "patrimonial bureaucracy", mostly loyalty to the king, lord, or, in the case of the corporation, to the superior. Being bosses as well as bossed (p. 12), managers are at the core of the corporate world. The impersonality of the Weberian type is to be forgotten. "Managers do not see or experience authority in any abstract way; instead, authority is embodied in their personal relationships with their immediate bosses and in their perceptions of similar links between other managers up and down the hierarchy" (p. 17).

Moral Mazes provides detailed and vivid descriptions of the workings of corporate managerial hierarchies. The central theme of the book is the ambiguity that managers constantly experience inside the organization. After decades of refinement in organizational design, information systems, and management tools, internal ambiguity remains so high that it is the primary factor that shapes managers' behaviour and decisions. While managers often pride themselves on being decision makers, in fact they avoid making decisions. When they have to, they tend to "look up and look around" (p. 77). Chance is a key player in the corporate world. In the eyes of managers, results are seldom directly linked to efforts, and attribution for responsibility

is even more contingent. Consequently, their main concern is to protect themselves from blame.

Ambiguity combined with high personal stakes and more or less overt internal competition makes managerial work "(...) an endless round of what might be called probationary crucibles. Together with the uncertainty and sense of contingency that mark managerial work, this constant state of probation produces a profound anxiety in managers, perhaps the key experience of managerial work" (p. 40).

However pervading, internal ambiguity is never to be acknowledged. The social definition of a good manager states that he/she should exhibit conformity, team spirit, and continual affability. More importantly, anxiety should never be expressed in any way. In an ambiguous world, managers, who are expected to master this ambiguity, have to demonstrate in the first place that they master themselves. "Self-scrutiny" and "a constant private monitoring of one's adaptation to socially defined criteria" are the components of a "self-rationalization" process that makes managers number "among the great actors of our time (...)" (p. 61).

Acting or pretending induces one of the main complexities of the corporate world. If such mastery is shared by a significant number of managers, we come to a paradox frankly stated by a manager quoted in *Moral Mazes*: "We lie all the time, but if everybody knows that we're lying, is a lie really a lie?" (p. 121). But "everybody" is not really everybody, rather a group of peers or a subpart of the hierarchy. In any event, it is enough of a lie to forge ties between those who master the paradox. On the one hand, they become part of the corporate social elite and differentiate themselves from managers with a lesser aura, confined to technical jobs. On the other hand, they are bound to a kind of authenticity among the initiated, as stated by another manager: "you don't play holier than thou" (p. 97).

When moral dilemmas occur, the lines between what is right and what is wrong are to be drawn within this group of initiates, on the basis of a current state of relationships rather than superordinate principles or internal convictions. "Since these relationships are always multiple, contingent, and in flux, managerial moralities are always situational, always relative" (p. 101). In other words, moral dilemmas lose their moral character for those who manage them: "Bureaucracy transforms all moral issues into immediately practical concerns" (p. 112–113).

This way of dealing with moral dilemmas is but one spectacular illustration of managerial pragmatism. At the core of pragmatism is the levelling down of all problems (including the manager's personal stakes) and all solutions to the same status. Jackall labels the corresponding managerial ability as "alertness to expediency" and sees it as a necessity of the job: "Managers are paid, and paid well, to bring rationality into irrational markets, to bring sometimes obdurate technology and always difficult people together to make money, to make difficult choices among unclear alternatives. Such uncompromising tasks demand continual compromises with conventional verities. Only those who make themselves alert to expediency can find their way through the ambiguities and dilemmas such compromises entail" (p. 118–119).

Managerial pragmatism requires another key ability: "dexterity with symbols". Dealing with a reality they are supposed to master but knowing how capricious, temporary this reality may be, managers have to avoid committing themselves while preserving their legitimacy. Linguistic strategies like seemingly neutral jargon, euphemisms or buzzwords provide opportunities for flexible meaning and protect managers from overt inconsistencies. Once again, this is an act that managers put on for outsiders. Inside the circle of initiates, according to Jackall, such

an "adeptness at inconsistency" (p. 146) is expected and positively assessed.

I propose two quotes as conclusions of this account, before discussing the legacy of the book. The first one is Jackall's. It is sociological in essence and societal in purpose. "The ethos that [successful corporate managers] fashion turns principles into guidelines, ethics into etiquette, values into tastes, personal responsibility into an adroitness at public relations, and notions of truth into credibility. (...) As it happens, given their pivotal institutional role in our epoch, they help create and re-create, as one unintended consequence of their personal striving, a society where morality becomes indistinguishable from the quest for one's own survival and advantage" (p. 204). These are the last words of the main text.

The other quotation – my choice for a conclusion – is organizational in essence and managerial in purpose. "The point is that managers have a sharply defined sense not only of the contingency but of the capriciousness of organizational life. (...) The upshot is that many managers decide that they can do little to influence external events in their favor. This does not mean that they stop working or worrying; indeed, as noted earlier, the uncertainty and anxiety at the core of managerial life often make the social requirements for long hours at the office personal compulsions as well. One must not, however, let tasks distract one from the main chance. Even in an irrational world, one can at least exert rational control over oneself. Above all, one must learn to streamline oneself shamelessly, learn to wear all the right masks, learn all the proper vocabularies of discourse, get to know all the right people, and cultivate the subtleties of the art of self-promotion. One can then sit tight and wait for things to happen" (p. 74).

The Legacy of *Moral Mazes*

In a managerial world that is assumed to face turbulence and

accelerated change, how relevant is a book written on the basis of investigation carried out in the early 80s (though it was published in 1988)? As the history of ideas or bibliometrics is not our primary interest, let us restrict our investigation to the last ten years. Searching for references to *Moral Mazes* (through Scopus) yields 351 results. Excluding reviews and other results leads to 276 articles in academic journals. Prestigious specialized journals published a good number of papers [*Journal of Business Ethics* (45), *Business Ethics Quarterly* (12)], while many contributions appeared in journals with a wider approach of the field of organization and management studies [*Journal of Management Studies* (20), *Human Relations* (10), *British Journal of Management* (8), *Organization Studies* (7), *Organization* (7)]. Many of these articles also address ethical issues, though it is not always the main focus of the paper.

From this rough analysis, one can infer that the field where the book had most of its echo is ethics. Another interesting feature is that the book, outside the field of business ethics, received little attention in North American journals, despite an article in the *Harvard Business Review* (1983) and an award by McKinsey. More specifically, citations are scarce in the most prestigious North American journals, e.g. *Academy of Management Journal* (5), *Academy of Management Review* (3), *Academy of Management Executive* (3), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (3), or *Organization Science* (2). Obviously one should be cautious interpreting these figures because the origins of the authors or of their institutions should be factored in to allow possible inferences.

Few authors appear to frequently include references to *Moral Mazes* in their work. One enthusiast (or so it seems) is Mat Alvesson (with 12 citations), but other researchers limit their referrals to 3 or 4 (Hales, Watson). The flow of references, on

the other hand, is rather steady from year to year, indicating that *Moral Mazes* is on its way to becoming a classic, if it is not so already. The question is: what kind of a classic? The portrait of the legacy of the book that one might infer from the citations is quite mixed. Surely it did a lot to raise the issue of the moral ambiguities of the managerial world, and it would seem that this message – an important one – has been unambiguously received. What is less clear, though, is how organization and management studies really benefited from the input to develop original contributions to the knowledge.

We might have a clue about this by noting that subsequent in-depth monographs of middle managers made little use of Jackall's inputs, if any. Scase and Goffee (1989) coined the expression "reluctant managers" to depict the state of mind of British managers in the end of the 1980s. They make no reference to *Moral Mazes*, not even to the 1983 article published in *Harvard Business Review*. Watson's ethnographic study of the work of managers in a British manufacturing company in the 1990s only briefly alludes to *Moral Mazes* on the restricted topic of morality (Watson, 1994: 203; 204). And it is only to oppose Jackall's amorality thesis. Obviously Watson thinks Jackall is going much too far.

As noted above, there is an ambiguity in the purpose of the book, which is reflected in the contrast between the main title and the subtitle. The ambition of *Moral Mazes* is to describe the managerial ethos ("the particular habits of mind and accompanying social behaviour that corporate bureaucracies foster by placing premiums on some attitudes and actions, and not on others") and to analyze its consequences and implications for individuals and for society as a whole. Being a sociologist, Robert Jackall is not specifically interested in the management of organizations. The evolution of society is the intellectual horizon of his research projects. Still, as Robert Jackall suggests in the following interview,

focusing exclusively on the ethical issues does not give credit to his work and misses the point he tries to make. His very harsh words about ethics specialists point to a very important problem. Ethics is not something you add to management. Management of business organizations implies ethical issues not just because of the possibilities that unethical behaviour may occur, but much more fundamentally because organizations and management shape cognition and behaviour in a certain way (the "managerial ethos"). Consequently, reflections on management have to include an ethical dimension, and symmetrically reflecting on ethics in business has to question the foundations of management practices and discourses. To put it in one word, management is not "ethic-free". However critical this idea might appear at first sight (and it is critical), one strength of Robert Jackall's work is to demonstrate that separating management from ethics is intellectually flawed and leads to the perpetuation, or to an increase, of moral ambiguity.

Certainly such a conception might be at best an academic distortion resulting from the hyper specialization of scholars, research areas, and corresponding academic publications. But Jackall goes much farther by pointing at "Ethics, inc." as a practice aiming to protect the business world from its critics by elevating a fake wall of ethical discourse without reconsidering the practices embedded in management systems and organizational designs. In other words, "ethical management" becomes part of the very management practices that raise the ethical issues they are supposed to deal with.

Collaborating on such a dubious undertaking is certainly a matter of academic ethics. But let us not follow this line too far and rather concentrate on what is – or what could be – the contribution of *Moral Mazes* to the field of management studies. Management scholars could take more out of the accurate, insightful depiction of the managerial world provided by *Moral Mazes* by focusing on the

components and articulations of the "managerial ethos" rather than focusing on ethical issues. In other words, if we take ethics as a "downstream" topic, scholars might gain a lot of insights by going "upstream".

Some scholars – a significant but small number – did move "upstream"; or, more likely, while researching upstream, they encountered the book and found in it some relevance for their work. A rough thematic analysis of the publications citing *Moral Mazes* provide the following list:

- ❖ The nature of managerial work, the identities and social status of managers and management are intertwined themes and certainly the most prominent ones (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, 2004; Carroll and Teo, 1996; Grey, 1999; Hales, 1998; Hales and Tamangani, 1996; Hendry, 2006; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003; Reynolds, 2000; Sveningson and Alvesson, 2003; Turnbull, 2001; Watson, 1994, 1996, 2001; Willmott, 1997).
- ❖ Closely linked, but framed differently within the field of leadership studies, the political behaviour of managers comes next, studied either as a question of political skills or as an issue of perceived political behaviour (Ahearn & alii, 2004; Alvesson, 1996; Dutton & alii, 2001; Ferris & alii, 1996; Ferris, Fedor, & King, 1994; Georges and Romme, 1999; Grover, 2005; Morand, 1996; Nelson and Dyck, 2005).
- ❖ Jackall's acute description of the social theatre of upper corporate echelons has found numerous echoes in works addressing the issues of emotions, humor and conformity at work (Collinson, 2002; Fineman, 1997; Hewlin, 2003; Huy, 2002; Grugulis, 2002; Raelin, 2001).
- ❖ The analysis of the world of corporate managers as a rather closed society relates to works about corporate governance (Ocasio, 1999; Ocasio and Hyosun, 1999; Shen and Cannella, 2002; Swanson, 1996), mostly

focused on the reproduction of the dominant coalitions in top management. This is not surprising, though in the huge mass of work about this theme the reference to Jackall's book appears marginal.

- ❖ What is less expected is that studies about gender and diversity have also found inspiration in Jackall's book (Chen and Van Velsor, 1996; Collinson and Collinson, 1997; Lauterbach and Weiner, 1996; Linstead, Brewis & Linstead, 2005; Martin, 2001).
- ❖ Also, because *Moral Mazes* include excellent pages consultancy, it has inspired the growing field of studies about consulting firms or so-called knowledge-intensive organizations (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Karreman, 2001; Alvesson and Sveningson, 2003; Armbrüster, 2004; Fincham, 1999; Ram, 2000; Sturdy, 1997).
- ❖ It must be noted also that methodological debates have found food for thought in the in-depth, "embedded" anthropological approach followed and advocated by Robert Jackall (not only for this specific field of studies, as his work with the New York City police demonstrated) (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Sturdy, 2003).

Concluding Thoughts

From my own upstream expedition and other related travelling, I came back with the following set of assumptions:

- ❖ Managers are managed as well as managing. They are managed by managers who are also managed (at least in large organizations and up to a certain level).
- ❖ Alongside external or environmental ambiguity, managers face high internal ambiguity. Management tools and organizational designs are supposed to remove or channel this internal ambiguity, but the extent to which they achieve this ambition is not to be presumed. Hierarchies certainly do not remove ambiguity, even if superiors are honest (see also Hendry, 2002).

- ❖ Managers manage meanings. In no way is this equivalent to manipulating information, building consensus or sharing vision (Ferris, Fedor & King, 1994; Malan and Kriger, 1998).
- ❖ Managers constantly face social judgments. Social judgments are not limited to formal assessments. They pervade the everyday action of managers (Tsui and Ashford, 1994). Managing judgments is not only a necessity for self-protection; it is part of the manager's job, because managers manage meanings.
- ❖ Managers manage themselves. This is also part of their job. They are themselves the symbols of what they are doing, because what they do is not visible and most of the time has no beginning and no end (Watson and Harris, 1999).
- ❖ Managers are constantly in danger of losing contact with the external reality – external to the organization but also external to the restricted circle of peers and superiors that sets their social scene.

In the end, studying managers from this angle will go far beyond the issues of morality. It raises the issue of management as a legitimate way of handling human affairs and gaining control over our destiny. Management has spread widely since the 1980s. The corporate world and its claim for rationality and efficiency strongly influenced the purposes and methods of public policy making and deeply penetrated non-profit organizations. To sum it up: Are the foundations and the workings of the corporate world as they appear in *Moral Mazes* an accurate depiction of the much wider organizational and managerial society that is ours today, across geographical frontiers? The reason behind this somewhat odd project of reviewing a book twenty years after its publication – a personal opinion – is that the answers to this question would be a resounding "yes". If so, it is worth interrogating ourselves about the kind of world we inherited from the "true revolutionaries of our age" that managers are, according to Robert Jackall (see interview). As a

conclusion, in a surprising but telling echo to Jackall's thesis, we can meditate on the words of the now famous socio-psychologist Karl E. Weick:

"One of the cruelest things about organizations today is that they hold executives to standards of rationality, clarity, and foresight that are unobtainable. Most leaders can't meet such standards because they're only human, facing a huge amount of unpredictability and all the fallible analyses that we have in this world. Unfortunately, the result is that many executives feel they just can't measure up. That triggers a vicious psychological circle: Managers have rotten experiences because they keep coming up short, which reinforces low self-esteem. In the end, they get completely demoralized and don't contribute what they actually could – and otherwise would.

But if you tried telling today's leaders to accept the fact that they're not quite as rational, deliberate, and intentional as they claim to be – and that that's okay, because that's the way humans are – I think most executives wouldn't understand. They've internalized the pressure to be perfect. Caught in a nasty circle of insecurity that is covered up by hubris, many executives place a lot of hope in unrealistic goals. Meanwhile, it is the people further down in the organization who are actually doing all the improvising and patching and scrambling to make plans work. And the people at the top don't have any idea how much the people in the middle are breaking their backs to keep the organization going." (Coutu, 2003: 89)

Hervé Laroche
EMJ Editor

References

- Ahearn, K.K., Ferris, G.R., Hochwarter, W.A., Douglas, C. and Ammeter, A.P. (2004) Leader political skill and team performance. *Journal of Management* 30(3), 309–327.
- Alvesson, M. (1996) Leadership studies: From procedure and abstraction to reflexivity and situation. *Leadership Quarterly* 7(4), 455–485.

- Alvesson, M. (2001) Knowledge work: Ambiguity, image and identity. *Human Relations* 54(7), 863–886.
- Alvesson, M. (2003) Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review* 28(1), 13–33.
- Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2000) Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis. *Human Relations* 53(9), 1125–1149.
- Alvesson, M. and Karreman, D. (2001) Odd couple: Making sense of the curious concept of knowledge management. *Journal of Management Studies* 38(7), 994–1018.
- Alvesson, M. and Sveningsson, S. (2003) Good visions, bad micro-management and ugly ambiguity: Contradictions of (non-)leadership in a knowledge-intensive organization. *Organization Studies* 24(6), 961–988.
- Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002) Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(5), 619–644.
- Armbrüster, T. (2004) Rationality and its symbols: Signalling effects and subjectification in management consulting. *Journal of Management Studies* 41(8), 1247–1269.
- Carroll, G.R. and Teo, A.C. (1996) On the social networks of managers. *Academy of Management Journal* 39(2), 421–440.
- Chen, C.C. and Van Velsor, E. (1996) New directions for research and practice in diversity leadership. *Leadership Quarterly* 7(2), 285–302.
- Clark, T. and Salaman, G. (1998) Telling tales: Management gurus' narratives and the construction of managerial identity. *Journal of Management Studies* 35(2), 137–161.
- Collinson, D.L. (2002) Managing humour. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(3), 269–288.
- Collinson, D.L. and Collinson, M. (1997) 'Delaying managers': Time-space surveillance and its gendered effects. *Organization* 4(3), 375–407.
- Coutu, D. (2003) Karl E. Weick, Sense and Reliability: A Conversation with Celebrated Psychologist Karl E. Weick. *Harvard Business Review*(April), 84–90.
- Dutton, J.E., Ashford, S.J., O'Neill, R.M. and Lawrence, K.A. (2001) Moves that matter: Issue selling and organizational change. *Academy of Management Journal* 44(4), 716–736.
- Ferris, G.R., Fedor, D.B. and King, T.R. (1994) A political conceptualization of managerial behavior.

- Human Resource Management Review* 4(1), 1–34.
- Ferris, G.R., Frink, D.D., Bhawuk, D.P.S., Zhou, J. and Gilmore, D.C. (1996) Reactions of diverse groups to politics in the workplace. *Journal of Management* 22(1), 23–44.
- Fincham, R. (1999) The consultant-client relationship: Critical perspectives on the management of organizational change. *Journal of Management Studies* 36(3), 335–351.
- Fineman, S. (1997) Emotion and management learning. *Management Learning* 28(1), 13–25.
- Georges, A. and Romme, L. (1999) Domination, self-determination and circular organizing. *Organization Studies* 20(5), 801–831.
- Grey, C. (1999) 'We are all managers now'; 'we always were': On the development and demise of management. *Journal of Management Studies* 36(5), X-585.
- Grover, S.L. (2005) The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: The causes and management of workplace lying. *Academy of Management Executive* 19(2), 148–157.
- Grugulis, I. (2002) Nothing serious? candidates' use of humour in management training. *Human Relations* 55(4), 387–406.
- Hales, C. (1998) Why do managers do what they do? Reconciling evidence and theory in accounts of managerial work. *British Journal of Management* 9(4), 335–350.
- Hales, C. and Tamangani, Z. (1996) An investigation of the relationship between organizational structure, managerial role expectations and managers' work activities. *Journal of Management Studies* 33(6), 731–756.
- Hendry, J. (2002) The principal's other problems: Honest incompetence and the specification of objectives. *Academy of Management Review* 27, 98–113.
- Hendry, J. (2006) Educating managers for post-bureaucracy: The role of the humanities. *Management Learning* 37(3), 267–281.
- Hewlin, P.F. (2003) And the award for best actor goes to ...: Facades of conformity in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review* 28(4), 633–642.
- Huy, Q.N. (2002) Emotional balancing of organizational continuity and radical change: The contribution of middle managers. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 47(1), 31–69.
- Kärreman, D. and Alvesson, M. (2001) Making newsmakers: Conversational identity at work. *Organization Studies* 22(1), 59–89.
- Kärreman, D. and Alvesson, M. (2004) Cages in tandem: Management control, social identity, and identification in a knowledge-intensive firm. *Organization* 11(1), 149–175.
- Lauterbach, K.E. and Weiner, B.J. (1996) Dynamics of upward influence: How male and female managers get their way. *Leadership Quarterly* 7(1), 87–107.
- Linstead, S., Brewis, J. and Linstead, A. (2005) Gender in change: Gendering change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 18(6), 542–560.
- Malan, L.C. and Kriger, M.P. (1998) Making sense of managerial wisdom. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 7(3), 242–251.
- Martin, P.Y. (2001) 'Mobilizing masculinities': Women's experiences of men at work. *Organization* 8(4), 587–618.
- Morand, D.A. (1996) Dominance, deference, and egalitarianism in organizational interaction: A sociolinguistic analysis of power and politeness. *Organization Science* 7(5), 544–556.
- Nelson, G. and Dyck, J. (2005) Forbearance in leadership: Opportunities and risks involved in cutting followers some slack. *Leadership Quarterly* 16(1), 53–70.
- Ocasio, W. (1999) Institutionalized action and corporate governance: The reliance on rules of CEO succession. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(2), 384–416.
- Ocasio, W. and Hyosun, K. (1999) The circulation of corporate control: Selection of functional backgrounds of new CEOs in large U.S. manufacturing firms, 1981–1992. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(3), 532–562.
- Ogbonna, E. and Wilkinson, B. (2003) The false promise of organizational culture change: A case study of middle managers in grocery retailing. *Journal of Management Studies* 40(5), 1151–1178.
- Raelin, J.A. (2001) Public reflection as the basis of learning. *Management Learning* 32(1), 11–30.
- Ram, M. (2000) Hustling, hassling and making it happen: Researching consultants in a small firm context. *Organization* 7(4), 657–677.
- Reynolds, M. (2000) Bright lights and the pastoral idyll: Ideas of community underlying management education methodologies. *Management Learning* 31(1), 67–81.
- Scase, R. and Goffee, R. (1989) *Reluctant managers. Their work and lifestyles*. Routledge, London.
- Shen, W. and Cannella, A.A., Jr. (2002) Revisiting the performance consequences of CEO succession: The impacts of successor type, postsuccession senior executive turnover, and departing CEO tenure. *Academy of Management Journal* 45(4), 717–733.
- Sturdy, A. (1997) The consultancy process – an insecure business? *Journal of Management Studies* 34(3), 399–413.
- Sturdy, A. (2003) Knowing the unknowable? A discussion of methodological and theoretical issues in emotion research and organizational studies. *Organization* 10(1), 81–105.
- Sveningsson, S. and Alvesson, M. (2003) Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations* 56(10), 1163–1193.
- Swanson, D.L. (1996) Neoclassical economic theory, executive control, and organizational outcomes. *Human Relations* 49(6), 735–756. Retrieved October 17, 2006, from Scopus database.
- Tsui, A.S. and Ashford, S.J. (1994) Adaptive Self-regulation: A Process View of Managerial Effectiveness. *Journal of Management* 20(1), 93–121.
- Turnbull, S. (2001) Corporate ideology – meanings and contradictions for middle managers. *British Journal of Management* 12(3), 231–242.
- Watson, T. and Harris, P. (1999) *The emergent manager*. Sage, London.
- Watson, T. (1994) *In Search of Management*. Thomson Learning, London.
- Watson, T.J. (1996) How do managers think? identity, morality and pragmatism in managerial theory and practice. *Management Learning* 27(3), 323–341.
- Watson, T.J. (2001) The emergent manager and processes of management pre-learning. *Management Learning* 32(2), 221–235.
- Willmott, H. (1997) Rethinking management and managerial work: Capitalism, control, and subjectivity. *Human Relations* 50(11), 1329–1358.

An interview with Robert Jackall, author of *Moral Mazes*

Interviewer: Hervé Laroche. EMJ, Editor

Robert Jackall is the Class of 1956 Professor of Sociology & Public Affairs at Williams College and the founding Director of the Williams in New York program (www.williams.edu/go/newyork). He is the author of *Workers in a Labyrinth* (1978); *Moral Mazes: the World of Corporate Managers* (1988); *Wild Cowboys: Urban Marauders & the Forces of Order* (1997); *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Advocacy* (2000, with Janice M. Hirota); *Street Stories: the World of Police Detectives* (2005), and many essays and reviews, including "Moral Mazes: Bureaucracy and Managerial Work" (1983), which received a McKinsey Award from the Harvard Business Review. He is the editor of *Worker Cooperatives in America* (1984, with Henry M. Levin), *Propaganda* (1995), the book series *Main Trends of the Modern World* (1995—present, with the late Arthur J. Vidich), and of the forthcoming collection of essays by German émigré Hans Speier, *Intellektuelle und moderne Gesellschaft* (2007). He is currently working on a book entitled *The Demons of Terror & Bureaucracy*, based on fieldwork with counterterrorism experts. His undergraduate syllabus on Violence won an international competition sponsored by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation in 1998.

1. What is it that corporate managers do?

Although managers' specific tasks vary depending on the industries in which they work, managers are always administrative experts whose essential functions are to coordinate substantive experts whose knowledge and skills create value and to direct interpretive experts whose expertise with symbols makes that value publicly known, both inside and outside an organization.

2. You study occupational communities. In addition to this book on managers, you've written about men and women in advertising and public relations; police detectives; public prosecutors and judges. Why did you choose to study managers and what's particularly important about their world?

All of my studies are part of a larger project. This is a long-term examination of the social, institutional, cultural, moral, and epistemological foundations of modern American society, seen through

ethnographic studies of occupations and professions. Each study focuses on a different piece of the larger puzzle. The study of managers explores how bureaucracy shapes moral consciousness by examining corporate managers' occupational moral rules-in-use, that is, their occupational ethics. Managers constitute the quintessential bureaucratic work group in modern society because they both create bureaucratic rules and are bound by them. To the extent that bureaucracy is a key organizational form of modernity, to that extent managerial work yields insights into today's experience of human affairs in general.

3. What is the "managerial ethos?" What are the key forces within the corporation that form it?

By "managerial ethos," I mean the particular habits of mind and accompanying social behaviour that corporate bureaucracies foster by placing premiums on some attitudes and actions, and not on others. Corporations want men and women who are smart, quick-witted, well-dressed, cool under pressure, ambitious, team players willing to subordinate themselves to their bosses' judgments, capable of discerning 'what has to be done' in particular situations, adroit enough to avoid trouble or to extricate themselves from it quickly, and morally flexible, able and willing to live with constant ambiguity. Corporations generally get lots of those kinds of people precisely because of how they are structured, that is, as hierarchical, but interlinked, layers of men and women bound to each other through personal and social ties, common work experiences, and political alliances. In corporations, people look up and they look around for cues on what to think and how to behave. If you don't do that, you don't get very far and, generally, you don't last very long. It's important to note that this is an entirely voluntary process. People submit themselves to such a regimen and internalize the managerial ethos because they want to get ahead and reap the rewards that come with that.

4. You say that the "world of corporate managers" is marked by, among other traits, "self-rationalization, emotional aridity, psychic asceticism, and narcissism." Can you comment on the development of such traits?

This follows on the remarks I just made. Self-rationalization, Karl Mannheim's conceptual extension of Max Weber's larger treatment of rationalization as the key process of modern society, means simply

self-streamlining. One looks for, recognizes, and internalizes the premiums stressed in a given organization or situation. Then one moulds one's public face, external behaviour, and projection of attitudes, all to fit the expectations embedded in those premiums in the hopes of garnering the rewards promised. Not everybody wants to or can do this. Some drop out entirely or accept a fixed role in an organization that doesn't require this kind of relentless subjection of self to others' expectations. But there are always some people who do respond to organizational premiums for self-rationalization and they make themselves into the men and women that their organizations desire and require. It's my observation that those who persevere in such self-rationalization are generally highly self-conscious men and women who are used to guarding their emotions and expressions of sentiment. Generally speaking, they shield themselves from others. And they see themselves as lead actors in a drama, even as they simultaneously watch that drama from front-row seats.

5. Would you see the Enron case or similar scandals as a consequence of the moral mazes that managers get lost in?

I gave a talk at the University of Notre Dame right after the Enron story broke. The talk was entitled "Take the Money En Ron". There are a few key recurring observations in *Moral Mazes* that speak to what happened at Enron and at many other corporations caught up in public scandals. First, corporations foster in their managers a short-term mentality, best characterized by the old joke among salesmen: "I know what you did for me yesterday, but what have you done for me lately?" Or, as one manager said to me, "Our horizon is today's lunch." There's no mystery to this. People think in the short term because their bosses expect short-term, immediate results.

Second, there is no tracking system for credit or blame in the big corporation, none whatsoever. Credit or blame depends on where one happens to be located when something good or bad happens. So one has the phenomenon of "being in the right place at the right time" or, its sad opposite, of "being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Third, when there is short-term pressure and no measurable accountability for one's actions, one might as well "take the money and run" when money is there to be taken. So, with few exceptions, one doesn't think of the long-run needs of the organization or, even less, of the world outside of the organization that might be affected by one's actions. One comes to focus on the here and now. Within such a framework, even smart, well meaning people lose track of things.

Looking closely at the Enron catastrophe, one can argue that anyone with any inside knowledge of the corporation's operations either knew or should have known that something was terribly wrong. Instead, it took a young journalist, Bethany McLean, a 1992 alumna of Williams College, to say after a quick review: "Wait, the numbers simply don't add up." How could so many smart, talented people preside for so long over what was in the end an elaborate Ponzi scheme? Well, if people are judged only by quick returns, if they are not held accountable for the long-run consequences of their actions, then "take the money and run" becomes an occupational virtue.

6. Today's organizations are highly preoccupied with ethics. What do you think of the efforts they make and widely advertise?

Ethics Incorporated, as I call it, became big business in the aftermath of the 1980s' Wall Street scandals. The ethics industry provides a lot of work for underemployed moral philosophers and for some lawyers with a philosophical bent. One whole wing of Ethics Incorporated specializes in writing codes of ethics for corporations. Another wing specializes in giving ethics seminars and courses to ombudsmen or compliance officers in corporations. Still another wing works closely with established business advocacy groups such as the Business Roundtable to institute simultaneously "ethical standards" for different sectors of the business community and, of course, to convince lawmakers, regulators, United States attorneys, and other major players in the business world that business is regulating itself and needs no help from outside authorities.

It's important to note that Enron, along with virtually every other major corporation, had an elaborate and well publicized "code of ethics" long before the company fell apart. Such corporate codes of ethics can demonstrate how skilled the corporation's advisers or public relations personnel are. But there's no necessary connection between a corporation's public pronouncements of its virtuousness and the day-to-day moral rules-in-use of its executives and managers.

7. You described the modern corporation as a hybrid bureaucracy – that is, a combination of rationalized structures and personalized ties. It is often taken for granted that business organizations have changed a lot in the last 20 years: decentralized, flattened, downsized, reengineered, streamlined, computerized, outsourced. What do you think about these transformations and to what extent have they actually affected the nature of the corporation?

My primary field sites—a major chemical company that was a subsidiary of an industrial conglomerate, a major United States textile firm, and a major public relations firm—all exemplified the kind of “patrimonial bureaucracy” that I describe. By this term, I mean a hierarchical structure permeated by close personal ties. The most important of these was shared occupational experiences in the same organization. Cohorts of managers who came up through the same divisions in an organization and who shared similar views of what the organization was and should become constituted the primary networks of affiliation that determined organizational fates. If one member of a particular cohort prevailed in the struggle for ascendancy in a corporation, he—and these organizations had almost entirely male managerial hierarchies—almost always reached back to the cohort from which he came for colleagues in the new order that he established. The saying was: “He feels comfortable with these guys.” Members of other cohorts were expendable, especially in a time of upheaval and cutbacks.

I’ve not done extensive fieldwork in newly decentralized organizations. So it’s an empirical question to be investigated as to whether occupationally shaped personal ties are as salient in decentralized organizations as those I observed in hierarchical organizations. But on the basis of many conversations with men and women in such decentralized organizations, I’d say that personal ties might be even more important than they are in big hierarchies.

It’s also important to note that “decentralization” may be more apparent than real. I am a close observer of one supposedly decentralized, self-governing organization whose workforce consists almost entirely of highly trained professionals. There the CEO continually launches new initiatives in response to needs articulated by some faction in the organization. He establishes elaborate new committees to carry out those initiatives. Those committees work long and hard to produce reports and recommendations. The CEO receives these with acclaim and appreciation, and then promptly moves on to address new crises with yet new committees. The years pass by and the reports on different subjects pile up into small mountains. The recommendations are passed on to still other committees for consultation. Most recommendations die quietly and in a few years become distant memories. The constant turmoil of committee work makes outsiders, and most newcomers to the organization, think that the organization is actually democratic and decentralized. In fact, the “decentralization” cloaks the CEO’s and his coterie’s centralized direction of the organization.

8. Do you think that female managers are different or do they behave differently?

We don’t have a lot of data about female managers in large industrial corporations so this too remains an empirical question to be investigated. But some businesses, in particular publishing, public relations, and increasingly advertising, are now thoroughly feminized. On the basis of my own close observation of those worlds, women’s behaviour there is no different from the behaviour described in *Moral Mazes*.

Moreover, one need look no further than American colleges and universities, all now as thoroughly bureaucratized as the corporations, to explore in depth the question of how female managers/professionals behave in organizations. Because women were largely excluded from the upper levels of corporations until fairly recently, they entered the academy in great numbers and became a powerful force there, especially in the humanities and social sciences divisions and in various deans’ offices. What does one find in the academy? One sees identical patterns to those described in *Moral Mazes*. Particularly apt examples are internal political struggles involving, say, gender or sexual orientation study programs or promotion of colleagues who specialize in these matters. In such cases, one can readily observe: cronyism based on personal affinities and shared perspectives; the consequent abandonment of universalistic criteria for judging the work of colleagues, including the approbation of specious scholarship provided that it conforms to requisite “progressive” norms; the mobilizing of bloc voting to enforce one’s group’s will and destroy perceived enemies; adeptness at inconsistency, particularly the use of moralistic rhetoric to keep opponents off balance and on the defensive; and, of course, the requisite ruthlessness necessary to triumph in organizational struggles. The behaviour of managers/professionals does not turn on gender or, for that matter, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. Instead, it turns on the extent to which managers/professionals, driven by personal ambitions, subject themselves to the exigencies of their particular organizations. Such ambitious people are always alert to the precariousness of organizational life and they surround themselves with others who, they think, will support them, especially when things go awry.

9. In *Moral Mazes*, you write that “managerial moralities are always situational, always relative.” Isn’t this a more general characteristic of modern societies?

Corporate managers are the true revolutionaries of our age, despite their modest, well-mannered, well-dressed, outwardly conservative demeanours and quietly expressed views. They are the shapers, harbingers, and principal carriers of the situational, relativistic moral ethos that defines the modern epoch.



ROBERT JACKALL,
*Williams College,
Williamstown, MA,
USA. E-mail: robert.
jackall@williams.edu*