

Harry Levinson and his psychological man

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Introduction

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw management literature suggest that motivation of workers is one of the main tactics of successful leadership. Based on the support from sociology and psychology, management consolidated a monopoly in the production of knowledge inside and outside organizations. The McDonaldization of the world denounced by George Ritzer (1996: 2010) with its tendency to human depersonalization had already started long before. Studies from organizational experiments, such as Western Electric's Hawthorne factory, shed light on the psychological nature of human beings in work situations. Studies such as Hawthorne, instead of serving by the well being or enhancement of the human condition, were proffered to the lords of capital as ways of manipulating behavior, and exploiting workers as commodities. In this process, Harry Levinson along with many others such as Abraham Maslow, Michael Levine, Chris Argyris, and Michael Maccoby, contributed to a discipline aimed at fortifying the iron cage as described by Max Weber. The psychological man of Harry Levinson represents the advance of late capitalism over human nature. It is but a pseudo discipline whose goals are to legitimate the domain of capital world wide. The present essay-review explores Levinson's argument through one of his best-selling books, *Psychological Man* (1976). As the author put it, this book exhibits his most actualized point of view about how psychology may help organizational theory. Of course, motivation is a vital aspect of life in almost all organization, even those outside the hegemony of business and international corporations. The problem lies in the projection of psychological theories to help managers control their organizations.

The psychology under the lens of scrutiny

Karl Marx was a pioneer, in denouncing the cynical game of capital to monitor the workers. Unlike the medieval times, where the grain belonged to landlords, capital entails a circulation of different commodities which form a product. The labor and exchange value of commodities are not the property of workers who create them. It belongs to the owners of capital. Production of commodities entails separation of producers from consumers, as the market mediates between them. Commodity production also obscures the real

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relations between workers and owners of capital. Under market conditions, workers' human creativity, their ability to make commodities, is usurped by capital, but in a way that appears as a bargain among equals. It appears as a fair deal, but it is anything but. Workers must sell their labor to ensure their biophysical survival. Capitalists buy their labor. In this way human creative capacity itself becomes a commodity. The owners of capital sell the commodities for more than their fixed costs (raw materials and machinery) and for more than they pay workers. The capitalists thus secure the surplus value of human labor only by virtue of the socially and legally recognized status of property (capital) ownership. The deal between workers and capitalists is not fair because the capitalists hold all the cards and make the rules. Property, law, and capital are inextricably intertwined. This logic of asymmetry and injustice generates the condition of class struggle so that workers and managers fight to monopolize the means of production (Marx 1976).

In the United States, European migrants struggled with other ethnicities to satisfy the capital owners. The inter-ethnic conflicts, like those between white and black workers, prevented the unionization throughout the country. Historian Elizabeth Cohen says that the melting pot was organized following racial and ethnic asymmetries and status differences among workers. In the latter quarter of the nineteenth century Chicago was at the center of struggles for the eight hour day. The red scare coupled with incitement of ethnic antagonisms balked the unionization of workers. If some workers organized a strike, management brought in lower status ethnic groups as strike breakers. For example, many blacks and Mexicans were employed to replace striking white immigrants. Factory owners fired those workers who complained of labor conditions. The sudden end of First World War left many people unemployed. Promptly, Cohen adds, "the fragmentation of the workforce in steel gradually helped erode the strike" (Cohen, 1995: 42).

One of the best works denouncing the use of psychology to create homo- consumerus is *The Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch (1999). He describes how the traditional family unit would be broken up into new forms of organization, which produces a radical change in the character of people. The symptoms of narcissism that characterize the daily life in modern capitalism are legitimized by modern psychiatry and psychology which empower the individual desires instead of the attachment to tradition.

Zygmunt Bauman (2007) argued convincingly that the classic formula proposed by Marx has been inverted. Workers now have been commoditized to be part of the consumed products they fabricate. Bauman points out that modern consumers and workers are being self-commoditized as goods which are consumed by capital. The net of consumers has pushed the citizenry out of public life. The market has invaded the public sphere, blurring the jurisprudence and the presence of state, and it has changed the rules of the game to benefit capital. Throughout consumer society, humans become valorized by their purchasing power alone. Social trust is undermined, triggering a degree of instability the West has not known in many decades.

Richard Schmitt (1995) recently has shown how psychology colluded with the logic of capitalism by creating the need for professional life advisers instead of people delving into

their own inner worlds. If medieval peasants acknowledged their instincts, modern citizens believe that the assistance of a therapist is a better option than their own sentiments. Because psychologists convinced lay people that their emotions are very complex and they are surrounded by a hostile external world, their patients voluntarily subject their autonomy to the hands of experts. Human nature has always been a product politically determined social contexts.

The needs of leadership

Psychological Man begins as follows: “an executive, whether man or woman, is a leader of people” (Levinson, 1976: p. 1). The destiny of the work force depends on the decision making processes of the top management. This message confers on corporation executives total authority on which workers depend because their future is in executives’ hands.

In the first chapter, Levinson asserts that people who are better educated are less interested by money alone. This is the reason why psychology should bend to the study of worker motivation. Management theory would serve workers by protecting them from management’s greed. Since the employment of thousands of workers are subject to efficient decisions by executives, Levinson adds, the best way of contributing to common well being is by giving to executives the necessary instrument to guide the work force. Psychology and psychoanalysis are of paramount importance to understand workers’ minds, to delineate their fears, hopes, and expectancies within organization.

Levinson goes on to argue that psychological theory is necessary to predict subordinate’s behavior and provide supervisors with efficient means for rapid intervention in cases of deviation. The tactics should be designed in keeping with the interaction of self, environment, and rules. The success of organizations and their managers depend on how exact and secure are the methods of intervention to solve problems. To give scientific gloss to his ideological message, Levinson presents the division of psychological mind into id, super-ego and ego. The ability to supervise the desires of ego and id, super-ego should manage a set of values and norms to achieve a happy adaptation to environment. This happens because,

“The superego incorporates the moral and spiritual value of culture in which a person lives, the rules and regulation within the family, and the attitudes toward himself which the person has acquired from those around him. Thus the superego is at a policeman, a judge, and a preceptor. The superego represents the law, telling us what we should or should not do. It represents the judiciary, in judging how well we conform to the rules which it has set up, and it represents the preceptor, incorporating values and aspirations and goals” (p. 11).

An implication is the emphasis placed on the role of rules as necessary mediators between the self, portrayed as chaotic, and organizational goals, which are presented as ideals to follow. Secondly, Levinson relies on the archetype of family, in which the love and power of parents are transferred emulated to a business organization. The fallacy

seems obvious: a family is not a business organization. Although there are exceptions, family units are based on biological ties where tradition plays a crucial role. The status of a father is not changed when the psychological contract among members breaks down. This stable relationship has nothing to do with the logic of organizations where subordinates adhere or reject a managerial leader to protect their own interests.

To fix this contradiction, Levinson alludes to the figure of ego-ideal, which can be defined as our own image or the roadmap in our life that sheds light on working ends. Once again, Levinson employs psychological models to legitimate the exploitation of modern business corporations over their workforce. Unless the self achieves its goals, self-esteem is depressed and the person is condemned to depression and pain. The demands for ego-ideals always should be fulfilled, no matter the context and ethical situation. The better the ego-ideal, happier the worker becomes. The obverse corollary is that people learn to hate themselves if goals are not correctly addressed and reached.

“An important part of superego is the ego-ideal, or our own image of ourselves at our future best...A person’s wish to meet the demands of his ego ideal, to be able to like himself, is the most powerful of all motivational forces” (p. 12). Nonetheless, this poses an ethical dilemma ignored by author up to this point. If anyone, in this case workers, respects and follow their own ego-ideal, does this mean a situation of eternal competence?

Levinson responds to this by saying that competence is needed for society to select the best elements to head their organizations. The lack of competition leads people to problems in adaptation and finally death. He enlists examples from history to show that sometimes the interests of society are in some contexts opposite to individuals, such as in slave systems. Therefore, Levinson explains that for competence to prosper, individuals should exploit themselves by distancing themselves from tradition and their own societal order. And this only can be done where every person must deal with situational obstacles, problems, and threats.

“The Enviroment may also stimulate aggression: anger, jealousy, exploitation, competition for various advantages, economic reverses, wars and so on. Every person must deal with realities of his Enviroment – the necessity of earning of livelihood, the frustration of an unsolved problem, the achievement of personal goals, or the development of satisfying relationships with other people” (p. 31)

The managerial discourse, extolled by Harry Levinson, is not only ethnocentric, but it also gives a blueprint of how human feelings can be tergiversated and manipulated to exert an all encompassing control over the workforce. Psychology should be examined to provide managers real guidelines to solve discrepancies in the stage of supervision and control. Neither the function of greed in top management nor the unethical policies are placed under the lens of scrutiny in Levinson’s guidebook. Another factor interesting element in his discourse is the idea of relativism as a form of social relation. The self, instead of sensing reality as it is, elaborates particular views of the world. Underpinning

this proposition is that people can see the world only as far their internal defenses allow. The importance to adapt overcomes to the needs of discovery. To put this in other terms, since we have no accurate picture of the world as we perceive it, we need the assistance of experts (therapists and psychologists) to be sure of our sentiments and of external reality. That way, Levinson assumes that the autonomy of self must be transferred to the “producers of psychological knowledge”.

“For some, the world is made up of kind and friendly people and there is much to learn and do. For others, the world is comprised of people who are hostile and unfriendly and nothing new or stimulating or adventuresome ever happens. By the use of his defenses, as well as his capacities, each person actively shapes his world; he is not merely shaped by it as if he were malleable blob of clay” (p. 39)

Since work is a main activity of persons, competence can guide the self in the struggle for looking at reality. Levinson upends classical Freudian formula of the reality principle to turn it into a type of radical, modern nihilism, where the principle of reality has been internalized by everyone.

Conclusion

Managerial specialized literature commemorates Levinson for his legacy in studying the psychological contracts in organizations. To understand this better, one might imagine a net of transactions which are not always palpable. Organizations are formed by the combination of bonds and tacit contracts among workers and managers. This type of customary law is very powerful force of motivation. If some people feel their rights have been violated, or there was not sufficient contract reciprocations, they may respond with hostility to the detriment of the interests of the organization. This is the reason why the workers and managers should be put in constant movement. The psychological contracts not only are subject to change, but also grant a continual renegotiation if the organization is to remain viable.

“The implications of this are that the process of change is ideally a process of continually renegotiating that psychological contract. That is, employees and management together should be continuously changing environmental requirement and demands” (p. 92)

To manage the future, top management should understand, in Levinson’s terms, that all will change. People who cannot cooperate with others, like the organization, will not be suitable for competition and will die. This is good for workers because it instills a flexible mind, and makes a more adapted personality. Managers should understand the concepts of psychology of motivation to enhance the proficiency of the company. Understanding how people move is a way of controlling them. What surely Levinson ignores, is the promise of development and social change has accelerated the conditions of capital reproduction pauperizing the workforce to create an atmosphere of radical instability as never before. We have explored the ideological pseudo-scientific discourse of Harry

Levinson and part of motivational psychology to understand the elements that form the managerial monopoly at disposal of capitalist production. Undoubtedly, the dreams and hopes of Levinson respecting capitalism as well as his insistence on comparing the family with a corporation has been diluted since the last financial collapse of Wall Street in the United States, which showed once more the unethical nature of capitalism. At this stage, psychology and Levinson especially, has much to say. Psychology of motivation applied to business and managerial literature not only contradicts the essence of science, which is not based on desired goals, but on the study of reality, but it also paves the way for a new kind of colonization, emotional colonization.

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