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Management as purity apostle

Abstract

Trials to intersect management and organization studies with the concepts of culture are by no way new. The most popular of them, stemming from 1970's and 1980's (e.g. Smircich 1983), underline the instrumental function of management. Management has been seen as symbolic activity (e.g. Pfeffer 1981), managers as myth makers (Mitroff/Pondy 1979). The idea of management as a persuasive institution was prevailing here, considering managers as actors owing symbolical-cultural-mythical instruments and directing them primarily, but not exclusively, towards subordinates. In the present proposal, I will try to develop an alternative cultural perspective on management by focusing on "purity" functions carried out by managers. Mainly inspired and informed by Douglas' (1966) concept of purity rituals, the idea of modern rationality offered by Bauman (1988) and the cultural notion of "cleaning" developed by Fayet (2003), this proposal presents an analytical attempt to conceptualize organizations as project of modernity, thus, management as an "apostle" of this project trying to realize the modern impetus of organizational "purity" in discursive as well as practical ways.

In his work, Bauman (1988) challenges the myth of the 'civilizing process' by arguing that the Holocaust should be considered as a genuine result of the modernity or its culmination, since it epitomizes the modern instrumental mode of rationalization and demonstrates the "ethically blind [...] bureaucratic pursuit of efficiency" (Bauman 1988: 482).

The modern notions of *rationality and efficiency* are deeply interwoven with the notion of *organization*. It is barely a coincidence that the department in the SS Headquarters authorized to eliminate European Jews "was officially designated as the section of *Administration and Economy*" (Bauman 1988: 481).

Bauman (1988) as well as Fayet (2003) demonstrate that the concepts of “purity” and “impurity”, one of the core concepts of the modernity according to Fayet (2003), play crucial role in legitimizing societal exclusion of, or, saying in Bauman’s terms, in producing social indifference. It was Douglas (1966) who argued - in an universalistic manner - that the concern for purity represents a key theme at the heart of every society, whereby she considers dirt not as a hygienic-concept, but particularly as a symbolic category, representing social order of a given group.

Given the high societal coexistence between the modern notions of rationality and efficiency on the one side and the concepts of “purity” on the other side, in the remaining part of the paper I will deal with the question how the notions of “efficiency” and “purity” are coexisting in modern organizations, yet another project of modernity. In reference to Fayet (2003) who describes several ways of “purification” (dt.: Reinigungen), such as “destroying”, “ignoring”, “washing” or “composting”, I will explore managerial “purifying” discursive strategies and practices regarding employees’ resistance in organizations.

References

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