

MANAGEMENT
IN A LIQUID
MODERN WORLD



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Management in a Liquid Modern World

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polity

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Preface

Management has been most often applied to formal organizations such as businesses, governments, hospitals and so on. In these settings, management unsurprisingly carries connotations of control and organization ('Anna is responsible for managing 10,000 employees'). But management can also refer to coping or muddling through ('Carl managed to provide for his family in spite of losing his job'). Sometimes we manage others, sometimes ourselves; sometimes we manage to change things, sometimes to adjust to what we cannot change. Since most of life involves influence and adjustment, controlling and coping, changing and accepting what does not change, organization theory and management practice may be more broadly applicable than is generally recognized. The authors of *Management in a Liquid Modern World* will focus your attention on problems that characterize the biggest challenges we face in the world today – climate change, unsustainable levels of resource depletion, poverty, joblessness, and the natural, economic, political and

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social disasters to which these conditions contribute – and they will ask you to join them in imagining what sort of management will help us to address and resolve these problems.

You will find many interesting ideas discussed here, not least of which comes from structuring the book as a series of conversations. The points of agreement and disagreement that appear as Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, Zygmunt Bauman, Irena Bauman and Monika Kostera converse are both instructive and demonstrative. That is, at the same time participants present their varied views about the world's problems and options for solving them, they enact many of the ideas and suggestions presented. Consider heterotopia as one example. The participants discuss this idea as an alternative to both utopia and dystopia, which have both been used to seduce or shock people into changing how they live to conform to an ethic that is represented in either positive (utopian) or negative (dystopian) terms. Unlike both utopia and dystopia, a heterotopia embraces not one but many moralities and visions for the future and thereby encourages acceptance of paradox, irony and contradiction, making them into common ground on which to rebuild society in a pluralistic world. Intriguingly the wide-ranging conversations this book presents offer an example of heterotopia in action, showing how, when effectively managed, different visions for the world and the ethical and aesthetic values they imply can lead to solidarity (i.e., a form of cooperation based on accepting equality among humans rather than attempting to normalize their behaviour, which suppresses or denies the differences by which they make their unique valuable contributions to the whole).

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The conversations begin with Zygmunt framing his approach to the world's problems with the idea of interregnum, 'a time-span of yet unknown length, stretching between a social setting which has run its course and another, as yet under-defined and most certainly under-determined, which we expect or suspect will replace it.' Interregnum offers a chance to stop and consider possible futures, which might be the most desirable, and how to realize them. It also suggests one way of reading this book, that is as a momentary stopping point that will give you the opportunity to listen in on a conversation that can deepen your understanding of the world's problems and give you a change to act according to the ethics this book will also encourage you to craft out of concern for yourself and others.

Another powerful idea you will meet in this book is the growing need worldwide to trust the level of social organization that lies between constructing a massive global authority to control everything and everyone (often operating under the rubric of systems theory, which assumes that some small group is either smart enough or powerful enough to maintain this authority) and a conflict-generating individuality formed from self-serving choice. This in-between level is arising, our authors suggest, in organizations like cities – though cities, Zygmunt notes, are not 'conflict-trouble-and-worry-free zones . . . only . . . they are the sites providing relatively better – more realistic and promising – chances of confronting and tackling conflicts, troubles and worries pestering the present-day human condition at all levels of social integration'. Cities may not be the 'solutions', he argues, 'but [they offer] the best toolboxes available to produce them . . . they are means, not goals

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– not the prospective destinations of the voyage, but the agencies capable of servicing the travellers’. Each participant in the conversation, in his or her own terms, pins hopes on this meso level, where management knowledge is most readily applicable, though managing management knowledge itself requires management. Lying between global institutions and self-serving individuals, in cities and small to medium-sized organizations, humans are better able to care for one another and thereby discover ways to cooperate to mutual advantage.

Pragmatism is discussed as one explanation for why cooperation at the meso level of the city can work where international-level efforts often fail. At the city level, one can experiment to discover what works and then adopt that solution *because* it works. By contrast, at the national or international level such pragmatic action is often frustrated by the inability to act and then learn from the outcomes of taking action. On such a large scale, mistakes are too costly, so learning based on experimentation is avoided, whereas cities and other meso-level organizations could be used as laboratories for experimentation. What this sensible position leaves out, however, is a view of how to manage the competitiveness that arises between meso-level assemblages of humanity. Returning us to the contradiction heterotopia embraces, Irena points out: ‘It is likely that, as we discover the benefits of the city state, we will also come to remember why these did not survive as distinct units of management.’

I personally found it thought-provoking that three of the authors have resided for portions of their lives in Poland, a place where, having lived under the rule of Russian communism until 1989, many people are still

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relatively new to the effects of capitalist competition. This geographical and historical positioning allows Zygmunt, Jerzy and Monika to speak about revolution and solidarity as solutions to the problems of the world that might in Western contexts evoke suspicion, if not outright disbelief. Thus, when they decry and propose overthrowing the underlying assumptions of modern management, including competitiveness as well as hierarchical structure and the ethos perpetuated by top-down control, I can almost see them reaching for what might be characterized in the West as an overly romanticized past. Yes, there certainly are things about cooperation, about self-management, about solidarity, about the crafted life that, as the authors maintain, are worth reintegrating into the driven lives we lead today – that is, if we are lucky enough to have a job, or motivated enough to work hard to make our living without the benefit of paid employment. And yes, some of the problems and possible solutions presented here can be usefully framed as having a moral imperative. I have few doubts that more cooperation and community, more caring for others as much as we care for ourselves, could help us produce better responses to the crises we face no matter which way we turn. But I also feel compelled to ask: isn't a search for solutions pointless in a world where, as the authors readily admit, no agreement on problem definition is likely (i.e., in the heterotopia)? Why not ask instead: what happens if we stop thinking in terms of problems and solutions? Problem/solution thinking is itself deeply embedded in the mainstream management consciousness they criticize as one of the many problems we face. As Einstein pointed out some time ago, we cannot solve our problems with the same kinds

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of thinking we used to create them. Analysing problems and mentally rehearsing alternative solutions, while an interesting occupation (that of the academic as much as the mainstream manager), continues the sort of thinking that got us into this mess in the first place.

So where do we go from here? The authors – somewhat ironically, given the downbeat character of their conversation at many points – offer hope as a good place from which to face the future as we emerge from the current interregnum. In the midst of clarifying and analysing problems of such enormity as those addressed here, hope might seem a bit too optimistic. Yet hope threads its way through the conversations in this book. Though clearly not a rational option, and possibly not sustainable, on a moment-by-moment basis hope renews us, raises our spirits, keeps us going in the face of what can seem insurmountable odds. What might we do if hope were sustained for however long we can manage it? Note that here I use the word ‘manage’ deliberately in the light of the book’s major premise that management, at least in the ways it is newly defined by these conversations, offers us a reason to hope.

One pressing question remains: what should we hope *for*? The participants in these conversations offer several answers:

- Management without managers
- Cities as proving grounds in the search for *pragmatic* solutions to the world’s ills
- A *new* socialist revolution based in the collective commons, heterotopia, sharing and collaboration
- Craftsmanship or making supported by Toffler’s ‘prosumers’ who buy and sell on the Internet of Things

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- Moving from sociality to cooperation and ultimately to solidarity.

While none of the items on the list is an altogether new idea, together they begin to suggest a vision of the world that breaks with what the authors decry as outmoded solutions. What else belongs on the list? As you read, I hope you will formulate your own contributions to these conversations and begin to take actions to realize them.

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I

On interregnum, meso-level organizing and the city

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz I am really grateful to all three of you for agreeing to partake in this conversation-to-be, while at the same time giddy about the range of topics open for us to cover, as the task we are setting ourselves is by no means small, and we are unlikely to arrive at any definite answers in the course of this exchange. For while you, Zygmunt, have explored the consequences of your diagnosis of the current situation as liquid modernity for various and divergent aspects of our lives, the topic of management and organization in liquid modern times has remained relatively unexplored.

At the same time, your writings and ideas have served as an inspiration for, by now, generations of management scholars,¹ and you yourself have repeatedly touched upon issues of managing and organizing in your writings (perhaps most notably in *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*²); you have also lectured extensively in management and business schools. As yet, though, you have not collated these insights in a dedicated publication. This, then, is the task before us: to examine

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the need for and the possibility of managing in a liquid modern society, to investigate the continued viability of management ideas, and to explore the alternative viewpoints and seeds of change already around us.

You have written of the managerial revolution Mark II,³ the process in which the managers are increasingly freed from the burdens of (but not the remuneration for) performing managerial duties, shifting the responsibility for the workers' performance onto the shoulders of the workers themselves. Self-assessment, peer-reviews and the general need to demonstrate one's own usefulness to one's superiors greatly streamline the processes of control.

In our own world of academia, researchers are now expected not only to be able to demonstrate the quality and the worth of their work (according to ever-changing but increasingly quantitative criteria – after all, comparison of quantitative data is much easier and less burdensome than the comparison of qualities irreducible to numbers) and to show the economic (again, hopefully quantitative) impact of their activities, but also to acquire the funds to pay for their research themselves without burdening their university with the unnecessary cost of their employment. And employment becomes an ever more elusive and temporary state. Universities – particularly, but by no means exclusively, American ones – are relying more and more on low-paid temporary staff who need continually to provide fresh rationale for their own employment.

Of course, universities serve here just as a convenient example, particularly striking because of the high educational requirements demanded of academic staff. The same processes can be seen in practically all other walks

of life, where job security becomes an ever-more-distant, though still strongly coveted, prospect. The term ‘precariat’, popularized by Guy Standing⁴ to describe the social class primarily defined by the precariousness of its work arrangements and social position, has gained widespread acceptance to the point of being included in a BBC-led survey study of the social classes of contemporary Britain (where it was claimed to comprise 15 per cent of the population).⁵ All this seems like a bitter after-image of the celebrated management scholar Charles Handy’s⁶ vision of the portfolio worker, unfettered by traditional organizational structures, accumulating experiences and knowledge, and working only on projects that seem particularly interesting or stimulating.

You have also argued that this arrangement is not a sustainable one and, indeed, calling on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of interregnum,⁷ you have described the current organizational and management regime as undergoing a profound crisis – if not an outright failure – of legitimization. There are indeed widespread signs of its continuing failure. The worldwide recession which is still very much with us was largely brought about by the banks’ institutionalized irresponsibility⁸ all over the globe. There are continuing (and ever more frequently publicized) cases of neglect and outright exploitation (which should be called criminal if not for the fact that perpetrators are still very rarely brought to account) of workers by Western companies’ subcontractors, not just in the increasingly ironically sounding developing countries, but also in the more affluent areas including the European Union.⁹ Last year, various beef and pork products sold in UK supermarkets were found to contain horsemeat. The subsequent investigation was