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 Demonics of Terror & Bureaucracy, based on fieldwork with coun- terterrorism 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.

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