

ESSAI:

FROM IRON CAGES TO LIQUID MODERNITY IN ORGANIZATION ANALYSIS¹

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the metaphor of the iron cage, as a key component of Weber's sociological imagination, has played a central role in organization studies. It did so both in its initial role in the sociology of bureaucracy and in its reinterpretation in institutional terms. More recently, there have been claims that the metaphors should change. The implications of this for the analysis of organization are the subject of this paper. To address these changes we draw on debates that have been current in the sociology of consumption, where there is an emergent consensus that there has been a shift to an increasingly liquid modernity. We ask what are the implications of liquid modernity when viewed not solely in the sphere of consumption but when we shift focus back to the sphere of production – to organizations.

Keywords: iron cage, glass cage, liquid modernity, sociological imagination, emotional intelligence.

Like the novelist, the scientific student of society must project the sympathetic understanding which he has of people with motives, desires, and moral judgments into the subject he is treating. Neither the one nor the other can get along without this gift, this means of understanding.

(Redfield, 1948: 184–5)

We ought to come as close as the true poets do to the yet hidden human possibilities; and for that reason we need to pierce the walls of the obvious and self-evident, of that prevailing ideological fashion of the day whose commonality is taken for the proof of its sense. Demolishing such walls is as much the sociologist's as the poet's calling, and for the same reason: the walling-up of possibilities belies human potential while obstructing the disclosure of its bluff

(Bauman 2000: 203)

INTRODUCTION

One of Weber's (1978) most pervasive metaphors for organization studies has been the 'iron cage' (Clegg and Lounsbury 2009: 118). Actually, the better translation of the German phrase that Weber uses is 'steel-hardened shell or casing', but it has a less poetic ring than the iron cage. The reference to the 'iron cage' resonates with Christian's encounter with the man in the iron cage in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: the man who was 'once a fair and flourishing professor' now 'a man of despair . . . shut up in it, as in this iron cage'.

The metaphor of the iron cage framed the sociology of bureaucracy for much of the twentieth century (Clegg and Dunkerley 1980). Within the metaphor, bureaucratic organizations were represented initially as highly technically rational, and later as efficient, solutions to organizing; however, they had the unfortunate consequence of transforming human relations into dreary quasi-mechanized routines bereft of sensuality, spirit and culture (Gouldner 1955). Nonetheless, bureaucracy was always Janus-faced: while bureaucracy may have caged *The Organization Man* (Whyte 1956) its liberal values have also been repeatedly admired (Perrow 1986; du Gay 2000), especially in public sector management.

Weber has been much misappropriated. Weber's approach to bureaucracy was first and foremost through cultural theory rather than through contingency theory, as later accounts would have it (Pugh and Hickson 1976). More recently, institutional theory has abandoned the functional efficiency of contingency theory to interpret the metaphor of iron cages largely in terms of cultural values, if not cultural theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Irrespective of how they have been represented, Bauman has suggested that these cages have been seen to leave "the endemically whimsical and erratic passions strictly out of bounds and leave no room for any irrationality, that of human wishes included" (Bauman 2001: 15). Weber's supposed emphasis on efficiency and diminution of the passions has been vastly overstated. In fact, Weber does not speak of efficiency per se, but of the most formally rational mode of exercising political domination (see Derlien 1999: 64). Weber, a man in whom the passions ran deep, if repressed, did not see technical rationality as passionless, as an excuse for not having ethical commitments (Mitzman 1970).

The metaphor of the iron cage is increasingly found wanting in contemporary organization studies. Recently it has been suggested that the cage needs to be conceived in terms more transparent, but still rigid, as a glass cage (Gabriel 2005), or that it needs to be transmogrified into a mental cage (Courpasson 2000/2002), perhaps even reconceived as made of velvet or rubber: velvet metaphorically promises subjects the fulfilment of dreams while rubber is capable of being 'stretched to allow adequate means for escape' (Ritzer 1996: 177).

We wish to bend iron, smash glass, tear velvet, and slash rubber and mash up the results as metaphors for our modern times. In the remainder of this paper we will investigate the implications for organization studies of shifting from the metaphor of the iron cage to transparent liquidity. We will reorient the social theory of liquidity from consumption to organization. With the decline of the iron cage metaphor and the rise of that of liquid

modernity a gap has arisen between an extensive interest in the liquid conditions of consumer culture and relative lack of concern with what shapes the consumers of this culture in their working and organizational lives. We aim to fill this gap by redirecting concerns with liquidity to organizations. The contemporary metaphor of liquid modernity seeks to capture fluid representations much as the iron cage represented the age of rationalization and the glass cage the era of the Panopticon. While the shift in focus to consumption has corrected the past overemphasis on relations of production of many Marxian and other accounts, a key research question must be what happens to the consumers of liquid modernity when they go to work?

We argue that a key space in which the liquidly modern organizational self works is in project teams. In these teams, employees have to adjust to others with whom they are not necessarily familiar, yet with whom they are called on to develop swift trust. A specific technology of the self (Foucault 1988), emotional intelligence, addresses how such trust might be achieved. Rather than look at this technology as a technical tool, in terms of its efficacy and instrumental quality, we are concerned to analyze its effects. In doing so we seek to use a sociological imagination in the classical way that Mills (1959: 1) suggested: as a way of understanding ‘the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals’. Looked at thus, there are ethical, political, identity, organizational and disciplinary implications, which we address in the conclusion.

FROM IRON THROUGH GLASS TO LIQUIDITY

The progenitor of the glass cage concept, Gabriel (2008: 312), explicitly links the metaphor to that of the Panopticon; however, as we shall go on to argue, the characteristic of liquid modernity may be less the singularity of panoptical practices and more their supplementation by those that we may term synoptical – the experience of watching the watchers as much as

being watched by them. Gabriel explicitly links the metaphor to the importance of emotional displays and management of the conflicted, contradictory and ambivalent self, one seeking to keep ‘some sense of order in potentially chaotic emotional states’ (Gabriel 2008: 313). We wish to focus on this element also but shall argue that the appropriate metaphors for doing so are more viscous than rigid; nonetheless, the contours of containment are clearly changing and with them, the metaphors.

Unlike an iron cage, which frustrates all attempts at escape with its brutish and inflexible force, a glass cage is discreet, unobtrusive, at times even invisible—it seeks to hide the reality of entrapment rather than display it, always inviting the idea or the fantasy that it may be breached, even if at the cost of serious potential injury. The image of such a cage suggests that it may not be a cage at all, but a wrapping box, a glass palace, a container aimed at highlighting the uniqueness of what it contains rather than constraining or oppressing it. Glass, then, is a medium perfectly suited to a society of spectacle, just as steel was perfectly suited to a society of mechanism (Gabriel 2008: 314).

Glass is not shape shifting but containing; moreover, it is not necessarily transparent. While glass can hold liquid it is neither porous nor viscous when formed. Whatever subject lies behind the glass may be on view but is separate from whatever is on the other side of the glass. By contrast, liquidity coats, smears and makes the subject slippery but still visible beneath the surface and so for that reason – the creation of slippery and elusive rather than transparent subjectivity – we prefer to explore the liquid metaphor rather than that of the container.

Liquidity, as a metaphor, emerges in the context of a larger historical scene (Mills 1959), with definite contours, the analysis of which, in broad terms, we find in Bauman’s work. In

Globalization: The Human Consequences (Bauman, 1998), the rise of liquid capital is discussed, meaning the free movement of capital and money. As liquid capital flowed in all directions, labour was seen to take on more flexibility in relation to unpredictable market forces. (Labour, even when flexible, was always more nationally contained than free-ranging capital: hence the desperate plight of the many asylum seekers and illegal immigrants that strive to make barriers to the mobility of labour more porous.) A world of increasingly liquid capital and more flexible labour was reshaping modernity, melting those semblances of solid modernity that had been dedicated to order and progress, ensured by rules and rationality, irrespective of the ethos served (Bauman 1989).

The social change being wrought by an increasingly liquid modernity produces a tendency towards accepting that new values underlay our conception of existence. For Bauman, ‘Transience has replaced durability at the top of the value table. What is valued today (by choice as much as by unchosen necessity) is the ability to be on the move, to travel light and at short notice. *Power is measured by the speed with which responsibilities can be escaped.* Who accelerates, wins; who stays put, loses’ (Bauman and Tester, 2001: 95: our emphasis). In the consumer society, transience privileges novelty, the search for new things to be admired, possessed, consumed, and exhausted, given ‘the plenitude of consumer choice’ (Bauman, 2000: 89).

The power of the panopticon recedes in liquid modernity. Power becomes more liquid:

Instead of the art of surveillance, liquid power is defined by the art of escape and disengagement from all forms of social responsibility. Liquidity marks the disintegration of social networks and institutions of collective action such as the state and democratic party politics. The current rigidity of social systems consists of the paradoxically stable imperative to get rid of all social bonds and networks that may

prevent the processes of the ever-growing liquidity of modern society. It is the world of 'togetherness dismantled' (Bauman 2003a: 119).

Domination focuses on the possibility of keeping one's own actions unbound, uncertain and unpredictable while stripping those dominated of their ability to control their moves.

Instantaneity is the hallmark.

People who move and act faster, who come nearest to the momentariness of movement, are now people who rule. And it is the people who cannot move as quickly and more conspicuously yet the category of people who cannot at will leave their place at all, who are ruled. ... The contemporary battle of domination is waged between forces armed, respectively, with the weapons of acceleration and procrastination (Bauman 2000: 119–20).

Bauman deploys the metaphor of liquidity (on his use of metaphor, see Jacobsen and Marshman 2008), overwhelmingly, in the world of consumption and, suggests Davis (2009: 164), is cavalier about the evidence he adduces. From the perspective of readers of this journal what is significant is the relative absence of any extended discussion about organizations. Even recent edited and thematically arranged texts that are devoted to critical address of his work do not address the implications for organizations of his theses, which seems a lacuna of some distinction (see, for example, Jacobsen and Poder 2008). Bauman's emphasis largely leaves the sphere of production and organization to one side, only occasionally touching on organizations. For Bauman, we increasingly live in a 'society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines' (Bauman 2005: 1).

Fast capitalism may be fuelled by fast consumption but surely there are some forms of organization producing all that stuff that is consumed? Bryant (2007: 127) suggests that the key meaning of the liquid metaphor is ‘the idea of flow, constant movement, of change’, yet, as critics suggest, the condition of liquidity that Bauman describes is hardly likely to be totalizing, universal or one-dimensional (Atkinson 2008; Elliott 2007). Nor is it likely to be a hermetically sealed sphere of consumption – consumers express their subjectivity not just in what they consume but also in their being in work. Lee (2006: 362; 363) notes the omission of any theory of resistance in the thesis; the overarching Western orientation of the theory, and its failure to engage with the rest of the world not West, as does Chesnaux (1992). Ray (2007) distrusts the metaphoricality and lack of empirical specification. Elliot (2009) observes the lack of attention to embedded traditions.

Researchers in organizations have found Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity useful but more in passing than as the central object of analysis. Dale (2005) sets the scene by mentioning the metaphor in passing; Knox, O’Doherty, Vurdubakis and Westrup (2008) find airports to be emblematic of liquid modernity; Yerba, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis and Sabelis (2009) see one of the symptoms of individualism in liquid modernity to be the search for ‘identity’ while Hollinshead and Maclean (2008) see signs of liquid modernity in Serbian enterprise. As far as one can see, no one has addressed the implications for organizations as their central focus.

Writing about analysts of consumer society, although not addressing Bauman, Granter’s (2009: 159) observation that ‘rising levels of consumption appear to necessitate the intensification, rather than the elimination, of work’, appears pertinent. Consumption is premised on production and production is organized. Consumption goods flow from organizations. What you can consume, in terms of quantity and quality, depends to a large

extent on where you slot in to organizational hierarchies. The ability to consume in an increasing frenzy, with an increasing velocity, is only possible where there are solid infrastructures of credit and organization vital to the movement of capital:

A high degree of solidity is evident in the institutional set-up that occasions consumption. Banks and credit companies in collusion with government institutions and shopping centres provide the larger framework solidly perceived by consumers as the avenue to the expression and fulfilment of their wishes. The liquidity of spending and shopping cannot be realized without the solid reality of modern structures first being available for any business transaction to occur (Lee 2005: 72).

As Lee recognises, the precise enablers of liquidity in organizational terms are left underspecified in Bauman's work. Taken literally, Bauman's thesis might be seen to imply an end of organization; however, in a broader context it should be seen to recognize both continuity and a certain change in organization formation. If the classical organization gave us the character of a bureaucrat secure in routines, imbued in the spirit of living an ethos of vocation, the liquidly modern organization is embedded not in such a stable character but in one rapidly mutating. The mutation is dialectical: organizations are becoming increasingly liquid toward individuals (e.g. short term contracts) and individuals are becoming increasingly liquid toward organizations (e.g. experts can move elsewhere so organizations need to seduce them to stay).

It is not a question of replacement, of the traditional with the liquid organization, so much as the

Decentralization and segmentation of the organization ... autonomization of its unities and marketization of their internal relations, increased self-organization of the unities

and of the sub-unities, introduction of modes of financial calculation and budgetary obligations, translation of programmes into costs and benefits that can be given an accounting value, orientation towards shareholders' value, all those structural transformations that accompany the introduction of the principles of exchange, competition and calculation in what was heretofore a hierarchical-monocratic-bureaucratic organization effectively convert the organization into a flexible and profitable network of enterprises pursuing a common project of sustainable capitalization (Vandenberghe 2008: 882).

Modern organizational forms are not likely to be replaced, overcome or defeated but their solidity can be eroded by changing liquidity, weakening their structures, penetrating them with new forms of social relations. In these relations global elites move lightly over the terrains they command (Bauman 2003b) Bauman describes the metaphor of liquid modernity in terms of an 'era of deregulation, individualization, frailty of human bonds, of fluidity of solidarities and of seduction replacing normative regulation' (Bauman 2007: 313, in Jacobsen and Tester). Turner (2003) follows this line in analyzing liquid differentiation as a societal level process in dialectical tension with regulation, standardization and linearity. The latter produce predictability and routine while deregulation, differentiation and liquidity produce flexibility, uncertainty and undecideability, eroding seemingly solid structures as we have seen in the recent global financial crisis.

Haugaard (in Bauman and Haugaard 2008) suggests that the dualism between 'rationality' on the one side and 'liquidity' on the other is actually relatively more continuous than Bauman allows. It is a duality less of epochalism and more of structure. du Gay (2003: 670) notes of the 'tyranny of the epochal' that it creates 'sets of dualities and oppositions in which the discontinuity between past and future is highlighted'. Bauman, not unaware of the

implications of epochal thinking, sought to escape these charges by seeing the direction in which liquidity takes us in terms of a ‘question that cannot be answered and should not even be posed’ (Bryant 2007: 127); thus, liquidity’s essence is positioned as openness to the future rather than a specific future as an outcome. We shall follow Bauman in this agnosticism.

Metaphors of liquidity and liquidation are already well established in organizations and one can illuminate the liquid metaphor further by borrowing from finance and accounting, where more liquid organizations are those that have the greater share of their assets in the form of short-term, current or fluid assets. They have few long-term investments that are difficult to disinvest. Hence, liquid organizations in Bauman’s sense will be those in which *investments in people* are very largely liquid, easily liquidated, and carry no long-term investment implications. As Odih (2003: 306) suggests, there are likely to be dysfunctional consequences of such liquidity. Emotional and psychological well being will be undermined by ‘a seemingly irascible presentism, which steadily erodes narrative meaning and value’ as narrative time is ‘sliced into episodes dealt with one at a time’ (Bauman 2000: 137), a process of liquid differentiation.

LIQUID IDENTITY, ORGANIZATION AND EMOTION

Experience is individually enacted even as it is collectively, structurally and organizationally shaped, if only because people rarely make histories in circumstances of their own choosing. As Bauman (1982) proposed in *Memories of Class* it is those individuals who have been most loosed from the bonds of concentrated surveillance, whether in the hamlet, village or organization, who are best able to chart their own imaginings of possible histories. A highly differentiated individual, disembedded from the institutions of tradition, should be able to negotiate liquid modernity most effectively. Being liquid depends on a continuum of mobility

from the emotional mobility of the deepest core of the self through to the social mobility afforded by pragmatic affluence and the consumer culture on which Bauman focuses.

Demographics are always particular, never general. It should be acknowledged that the relevance of the liquidity thesis is limited, globally and historically. For the vast majority of humankind, living outside privileged spaces, liquid differentiation is not an option, as they scramble to survive. The new rhetoric about liquidity repeats old societal divides such as capitalist and worker, white collar and blue collar, the haves and have-nots, but focuses only on one side of the divide. Given its birthplace in a concern with consumption this is hardly surprising: effective demand dictates neglect of the have-nots. The dynamics of having and not having are noticeably uneven. While Fraser (2003: 169) has argued that stratification in the advanced societies is segmented increasingly between the well-educated, flexible and sophisticated population and a 'marginal sector of excluded low-achievers', Granter (2009: 176), referring to the former as the 'new respectable classes', notes that they

live in an atmosphere of high anxiety, an anomic world of constant organizational restructuring, short term contracts, and uncertainty. By now even the well educated service sector worker with a portfolio of flexible skills knows that the vicissitudes of the global economy mean that they are never too far away from the next crash; from redundancy, foreclosure, indignity.

Just as the dynamics of political economy trace through liquid modernity so do those of demographics. Organizationally, demographic generational structure is overlain on structures of social relations (Hill and Stephens 2005). One consequence will be a particular sedimentation of contemporary organizations in which the upper echelons of more mature employees will still be engaged with familiar characteristics of the cage metaphors while the younger and lower ranks seem altogether closer to Bauman's liquid condition, not only in

their affirmation of identity through consumption propensities but also in the everyday production of their working lives. Their liquidity as subjects will likely be framed by the managerialism of the structures designed by the upper echelons: individualistic self-maximizing budgeting and performance systems constituting the core of contemporary managerialism (see Parker 2009) within which their identity at work has to find expression.

Flexibility, uncertainty and undecideability do not spread liquidly across all organizations. For those in the advanced societies still consigned to the state bureaucracies of schools, hospitals, and the welfare sector, the private sector bureaucracies of the call centre, or the declining branches of industrial capitalism, far more regulation, standardization and linearity will be on offer than is hyped in the liquid world, even as it presents itself in simulacra of the markets taken to characterise liquidity. Hypothetically, liquid differentiation, as it is organizationally framed but experienced at the individual level, is most likely to apply selectively to certain spheres of organizational life in the advanced societies. We would expect to find it, hypothetically especially amongst the spheres of young urban professionals, working in the new organizations of the creative and knowledge-based industries, involved in innovation and creative projects (Palmer, Benveniste, and Dunford 2007). Their memories are shortest, their experience of class solidarity least, as Thatcher's and Reagan's children, happy to consume where they can and others cannot (Blackshaw 2008: 125).

Humphreys and Brown (2002) suggest that identity, both individual and collective, and the processes of identification which bind people to organizations, are constituted in both personal and shared narratives and those 'other' narratives that they create. Liquidity (as in the Northern Rock example) encouraged contemporary managers to embrace narrative dreams promising 'the 'utopia' of 'deregulated', 'privatized' and 'individualized' versions of the old-style visions of good society, society hospitable to the humanity of its members'

(Bauman 2007: 319, in Jacobsen and Tester). Becoming entrepreneurs of their selves as well as their organizations, managers who might once have been expected to be good bureaucrats are now exhorted to manage with enthusiasm and passion and to share an ethos of immediacy, playfulness, subjectivity and performativity (Bauman and Haugaard 2008; Hjorth and Kostera 2007), switching from ‘normative regulation’ to ‘seduction’, from day-to-day policing to PR, and from the stolid, overregulated, routine-based panoptical mode of power to ‘domination through diffuse, unfocused, uncertainty, *précarité* and a ceaseless haphazard disruption of routines’ (Bauman 2005: 57). With these switches it is predicted there will develop narratives of organization that ‘dream of making uncertainty less daunting and happiness more plausible’ (Bauman 2007: 319, in Jacobsen and Tester).

The tolerance for uncertainty has been seen to be a classical characteristic of more organic organizations (Burns and Stalker 1962). In recent years the major organizational mechanism for delivering more flexible organization has been the rise of contracts and markets, devices for chipping away at hierarchy and bureaucracy. Rather than internalize all organizational needs within the envelope of bureaucracy, projects are bid for, worked on, negotiated and shared with other similarly mobile and flexible people working on temporary assignments with high levels of self-responsibility, unclear boundaries, and insecure incomes. Time-bound and specific disaggregated projects require individuals to be flexible and adaptable – to be constantly ready and willing to change tactics at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability (see Courpasson and Dany 2009).

Small, flexible, autonomous organizations that profit from securing contracts differ greatly from traditional organizations. For instance, fellow travellers on a bureaucratic career escalator, such as in Japanese corporations (Kono and Clegg 2001) or those who are

colleagues in a traditional organization, such as an Oxbridge college of old, know that their social relationships at work, however they may be strained by local politics (McCall Smith [2003: 49-61] offers a familiar characterization), will have to coexist for a long time. Where bureaucratic careers have morphed into self-managed projects, the conditions of existence for the containment *and* assertion of individual autonomy, as well as the trust and commitment contingent on it, change. In contemporary work organized around contracts, markets and projects, managers tend to shift focus from project to project, for which the criteria of success and failure are very much project-specific, with the project leader serving as an emblematic figure, often working with teams of outsourced professionals.

Typically, there is an organizational market in projects in which they function as testing grounds for succession to the organizational elite. Those who have become the elite are relatively remote from everyday scenes of organizational activity. They have to manage their selves and careers through the series of projects in which they engage and can only blame themselves for any failure or disappointments that might occur (Grey 2001). The proponents of projects and the project-based organisation expect temporary members, as well as organizational managers in projects, to identify themselves with the project during its unfolding while at the same time expecting them to move on as soon as the project is finished to new opportunities, new projects, and new markets. Projects test the mettle of aspirants to elite roles (Clegg and Courpasson 2004). Such aspirants act as project managers who are both expected to shelter their team from the imperatives of organization as well as answer to them. Their success in doing so will likely be a basis for subsequent executive preferment.

In circumstances where members meet in projects it has been suggested that 'swift-trust' comes into play. The idea of swift-trust was conceived by Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) and refers to virtual teams formed around a clear project purpose, common task and a

finite life span. An essential aspect of swift trust in such project teams is the necessity for members to suspend doubt about others in the team. For swift-trust to work in ensuring that members remain part of the team the expectation that the outcomes will be beneficial to the members and that members are active and responsive are key requirements. To maintain their involvement, members need both emotional reassurance and investment in the projective identification process.

Emotional investment creates frictional drag in human affairs: organizations exploit drag by positioning their collective soul as a *Gemeinschaft* in which people are invited to invest emotionally in order to overcome perceived risk and uncertainty, whether real or imagined. Members are invited to invest part of themselves emotionally in the community of practice at work if it provides emotional ‘value’, an idea that resonates with Knights and Willmott’s (1989) treatment of subjectivity, in which modern discourse and practice produce fragile, sovereign, individualized selves. In the past these effects were achieved through discursive practices that allowed hierarchical observation and normalization (Foucault 1977). In liquid conditions, the self is assumed to be less observed and more observing, as we shall see.

In liquidity, external management does not melt away, however. Above the managers of the project teams sit the upper echelons, those who have made their way to the boardrooms with a view and directorships with stock options, those who frame the strategies and reporting schedules and police the projects in terms of their contribution to overall organizational value. Beneath these elites are the upper echelon aspirants, for whom careers can be reinvented, constraints overcome, and organization boundaries fluidly negotiated, while below them are the contingent employees and, relating to the managers, the contracting agencies and organizations and their members.

We have noted that it is likely to be highly differentiated individuals, those who are most disembedded from the institutions of tradition, who should be able to negotiate liquid modernity most effectively. In such individuals the propensity to manage the emotional mobility of the deepest core of the self will be most developed. That dexterity on the part of the individual employee seeking to manage their emotions may entail a degree of what a recent writer on emotional labour terms ‘deceit’ (Theodosius 2008: 75), or what Goffman (1956) called ‘impression management’, has been formally recognised in the psychological literature. The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI), which emphasises subjects controlling or manipulating emotions, which was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990) but popularized by Goleman (1995), has become widely used in the last decade. Goleman argues that, nowadays, skill and expertise are not the only yardsticks that individuals are judged by. Increasingly important is “how we handle ourselves and each other” (Goleman 1998: 3), especially in uncertain and insecure situations. According to Goleman (1998: 3), EI is especially important for on-the-job success because it is the key to successful impression management. At first sight, EI seems to be a value-free mental training technique; however, Goleman’s transformation of the concept into emotional competencies in the workplace sheds light on its normative construction. Emotional competence is defined as a learned capability for outstanding and highly flexible work performance that can be derived from the analysis of EI (Goleman 1998: 24). Landen (2002) argues that EI shapes appropriate identities through employees’ absorption of a self-disciplining corporate ‘script’ where the internalisation of Emotional Intelligence rules and values is facilitated through the Foucauldian self-technologies of EI profiles. Landen notes that EI attempts to align the individual with a set of categories determined by the organisation and this is achieved by self-examination and correction (self-disciplining techniques). Hatcher (2008) highlights how EI helps to produce the idealised corporate character through the measurement of emotion to allow ‘fine-grained

disciplining, dividing, ranking, and tracking of improvements’, thus constituting a type of control of the self.

Emotional intelligence is especially suited to the conditions of liquid modernity, just as, during the Second World War, measurement of intelligence quotients was widely used by psychologists to slot troops into appropriate combat and administrative slots in the US armed forces, a formidable bureaucracy. Today, emotional intelligence has become a widely popular technology designed as appropriate for choosing and training individuals to cope with situations of swift trust in an uncertain and insecure world in which rapid accommodations to environments, issues and others have to be made. In a world of swift trust and short-term contracts managing emotion has been ‘defined as a valuable, and instrumental, ‘item’ for commercial success’ (Fineman 2004: 724). Emotional expression is rooted in claims to identity: discursively we position our identities not only through the words we use but also the emotions we invest in them as others judge them. Emotional identity at work is a topic much discussed in the organization studies literature (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Grey 1994; Ibarra 1999; Knights and McCabe 2003; Markus and Nurius 1986). Identity, anchored through discursively available narratives traditionally forms, repairs, maintains, strengthens and revises a continuing sense of emotional ‘coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003: 1165). However, the conditions for such emotional coherence are far more evident in bureaucratic rather than liquidly modern organizations. In the former, career long tenure supports deep structural control of the self and its emotionality displayed. Under conditions of high intensity work in discontinuous projects followed in highly competitive conditions different opportunities for self-development present themselves. Bureaucracies, as key sites for the provision and embeddedness of identity narratives, were relatively stable, given shape by the notion of a career made visible in a single organization, or relatively few, for the ‘locals’. For the fewer ‘cosmopolitans’ who became visible to each other through an

invisible college of professionalism (Gouldner 1957; 1958) careers were different. Today, fifty years later, the 'privilege' of cosmopolitan experience is far more widely distributed as project-based modes of organization and delivery become widespread. Where organizational life is increasingly subject to liquid differentiation people move rapidly from project to project, assuming and making new identities as they shift. The opportunities for coherence are both more difficult as projects present discontinuity of places, people and problems and more challenging for those who seek to escape upwards from the demands of the peripatetic project life.

Life in projects offers chances for escape into gilded, if still base metaphorical metal, cages. Aspirants who would join the managerial elites inside the gilded cages need to be able to show their mettle in the management and delivery of projects. To do so they will need to be able both to build swift trust with project members in specific project episodes as well as demonstrate their ability to meet simultaneous demands for innovation and conformance, and creativity and control, in project leadership. Individuals will be actively selecting, resisting, constructing and achieving possible versions of their identity in order to frame, guide and evaluate behaviours and outcomes (Thornborrow and Brown 2009: 357, especially those who aspire to escape liquidity for more solid bearings. Such actors will work on their identities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002), 'play' at trying out possibilities (Sartre 1969), and seek out what is available to be 'conferred' (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Thus, those who aspire to become managerial elites in gilded cages will be sophisticated agents whose 'choices' are made 'within frameworks ... which both enable and restrict their scope for discursive manoeuvre' (Thornborrow and Brown 2009: 356). These frameworks, however, are not simply those disciplined by power, as we shall suggest.

DISCUSSION

Looking at liquid modernity alone, because of the emphasis on consumption, we would miss the organizational implications; similarly, looking at EI alone, we would miss its synergy with the likely organizational projects of this liquid modernity. It would appear to be merely another piece of popular psychology. The critical implications of EI have been well examined (Fineman 2004; Fineman 2004; Fineman, 2006b: 681; Hughes 2005; Lindebaum 2009). What have not been researched are the political implications of EI in terms of power relations in specifically liquid modern organizational contexts. Liquid modernity poses a new challenge to management: if direct hierarchical supervision is reduced to promote creativity and individual entrepreneurship, how can management be sure that the employee is committed? In the recent past discussion of power relations in organizations have been extensively focused on variants of Foucauldian-influenced theses of surveillance and disciplinary power. At the centre of the frame has been a particular architecture and spatial relations of power: panoptical centres exercising visual surveillance, more or less mediated by technologies, enforcing discipline on resistant subjects at a distance from and peripheral to these centres.

Panoptical surveillance can be more distributed. There have been discussions of the role that teams can play as peer-surveillance (Barker 1993) and that technologies can play as a reverse panopticon (Gordon, Clegg and Kornberger 2009). Team discipline has been identified as in many ways more demanding on members than hierarchical controls (Barker 1993). Patterned behaviour in the team is less subject to external management and is more an act of 'choice' by self-managing subjects faced with a precarious world of projects for whose continuing flow there are no guarantees (Willmott 1993). Team members will not be told what to do or how to do it but they are expected to perform, despite whatever insecurities, anxiety or fearfulness they might experience as subjects liberated from rules (Jackall 1988). In a project-based organization team members are less subject to external discipline and control, which is

absorbed by the project leader, and more engaged in observing fellow members as significant others with whom emotionally to engage, emulate or conflict.

Our hypothesis is that being able to present the self as one with positive EI is the corollary of organizational success in liquidly modern organizations. If enterprising, flexible commitment is what organizations require then displaying one's self as one equipped with a well-developed emotional intelligence helps one to match these requirements, a finding that recent work seems to support. On the basis of a content analysis of French management literature, Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, see also Sennett 1998) identified that contemporary employees are expected to be multi-taskers, innovative, mobile, venturesome and have the ability to cooperate with people of various backgrounds and cultures. They will be expected to be autonomous, informed, spontaneous, creative, and able to adapt to different work tasks. Additionally, they will be expected to have a talent for communication and be capable of relating to others. Moreover, ideal productive subjects will be active in continuing education and enthusiastic. Because of rising job insecurity, they will need to accumulate social capital and cultivate expanding contact networks, which help secure continuing employment in changing fields of work. They will be capable of building and switching emotional investments in a mode of swift-trust as they move from project to project. In the words of pop psychology, they learn how to become 'emotionally intelligent' by being trained to attend not only to the emotionality of self but also that of others.

Positive EI matches the types of conditions that Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) identify, as Baumeler (2008) suggests. It includes traits that match the analysis of Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) such as innovation (being open to new ideas, approaches and information), commitment (readily making sacrifices to meet a larger organizational goal), adaptability (flexibility in handling change), and achievement drive (striving to meet or improve a

standard of excellence). Having emotions, and expressing them at work, as long as they are the right, approved emotions, is no longer seen as a barrier to rational decision-making as might have been the case in the iron cage. The committed employee is an enthusiastic employee, a person in whom the passion of (the) enterprise is expected to run deep.

While the management of emotions has become a symbol of a new kind of rationality in the work place (Fineman 2004) it is one that does not range freely. Openly demonstrated anger about an incompetent manager is hardly seen as ‘emotional intelligence’, for example; also, ‘love’ or warm feelings or empathy for a colleague who doesn’t perform as expected would be regarded as unprofessional. Emotions must be disciplined: expressions of fear, anger, or anxiety, and other disruptive emotions are not so acceptable. In fact, they have to be controlled in the service of organizational needs. The regulation of emotions in the self includes the channelling of negative emotions and the intentional activation of pleasant (e.g. enthusiastic) and unpleasant (e.g. angry) feelings (Matthews, Zeidner and Roberts. 2002: 472), however difficult it is to separate positive and negative emotions as ‘two sides of the same coin, inextricably welded and mutually informative’ (Fineman 2006a: 274).

It could also be hypothesised that working to demonstrate one’s emotional intelligence is likely to be heightened at times of recession. The bursting of the consumer bubble both narrows down the opportunities for identity formation through being what one consumes and concentrates the minds of those in work on staying the organization in order to continue partaking of liquidly modern consumption. Hypothetically, one would anticipate that under such conditions the individual consciousness becomes evermore emotionally adept at signifying performativity in positive terms.

CONCLUSION

For Mills (1959), an important element of the sociological imagination is to ask what varieties of men and women prevail in society and what varieties are coming to prevail; to consider how they are selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted; to ask what is the 'human nature' revealed in the conduct and character observed as well as the meaning for 'human nature' of the society framing it. We shall consider these questions through five types of imagination, asking 'what are their implications?'

The *ethical* imagination focuses on the varieties of men and women coming into being and the human nature that is being moulded; the *political* imagination focuses on the practices of power that are shaping this nature; the *identity* imagination focuses on the implications of changing human natures for the subjects thus conceived; the *organizational* imagination concentrates on the meaning for this nature of the society framing it, and finally, there is a *disciplinary* imagination in which one enquires what are the implications of the changing metaphors charted in the paper for our field of organization studies?

First, what are the *ethical* implications of liquidity in the modern organizational world? Liquidly modern managers have to be perpetually constructing and reconstructing themselves; they are forever reassembling the pieces of their own identity, redefining themselves day after day through their consumption (Bauman 2005). Inadequacy in this new liquidity involves an inability to acquire the desired identity aspired to. The ability required is to be, simultaneously, both the plastic subject, sculptor, and object of one's self in a shifting organizational context framed by discontinuous projects. For future research agendas, we would suggest that there is a great deal of work to be done that connects the claims made by consulting, coaching and other organizations offering EI training, with analysis of the sociological effects of this training, in terms of its effects not only on subjects but also on organizations. The implications of making of each member a personal Pygmalion-project

through EI training in which self-management and the display of appropriate commitment cues are rehearsed, practiced, and enacted as authentic are not clear. Liquidly modern subjects may become superior organization actors, with more flexible scripts than their bureaucratic forebears and superiors. Nonetheless, acute and stubborn worries might still haunt truly liquid subjects, especially the fear of not being in the moment, of not being sufficiently emotionally intelligent to deal with the shifting liquidity encountered. New stresses, anxieties and uncertainties may be unfolding. If what is of increasing importance is “how we handle ourselves and each other” (Goleman 1998: 3) in uncertain and insecure situations, then liquidly modern subjects will avoid commitment other than to the presence of the moment. Identity will be defined neither by vocation, game playing nor historical biography: games shift rapidly, commitment is only ever expected to be to the game in process, and the past is reconfigured constantly as the career résumé is honed to today’s opportunities for tomorrow. Time, in the immediate sense, becomes an arbitrary sequence of present moments oriented to idealized futures. An ongoing present emphasises the person’s identity in terms of their public image rather than moral feeling. Mirroring their image, identity is sought through the approval of others rather than through feeling a sense of duty. Life in projects makes identity particularly susceptible to mirrored imagery because one is striving to conform to emergent norms of becoming (Bjørkeng et al 2009). In such circumstances identity may be expected to find expression in voyeuristically watching self watching other watching self (Stanghellini 2004) in a process of ‘identification’ whereby ‘a member defines him-herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization’ (Dutton et al. 1994: 239). These preferred versions of the self are effects of power created through discursive processes engaged in by individuals’ ‘projects of the self’ (Grey 1994) ‘wedded to an aspirational and self-conscious subjectivity’ (Webb 2006: 189; Kornberger and Brown, 2007), which, conventionally, have been allied to notions of

disciplinary power. While this may be true of the iron and glass cage it is not as appropriate for liquid modernity.

Second, what are the *political* implications of liquidity in the modern organizational world? Applications of Foucault's (1977) view of the organizational effects of power have largely emphasized the exercise of power over other, resistant subjects. In large part, these relations of power have been framed within organizationally bounded and embedded relations in metaphorical cages, whether of glass or iron. Liquid organizations find that '[t]he key to achieving liquidity boils down to visibility and transparency' combined with an opportunistic attitude towards the building and abandonment of partnerships (The Launch Factory 2005). A 'new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive power' (Bauman, 2000: 14) is the hallmark. One would expect a decline in the use of negative forms of panoptical, surveillance power over and a shift to more positive regimes of power to. Liquidly modern organization can be expected to become less normalized, less hierarchical, and less tightly governed by surveillance and display more signs of synoptical power (Mathiesen 1997) to supplement panoptical power. In panoptical power it is apparent that the few watch the many. In synoptical power, we hypothesize that the many will be watching the few watching them, and constantly adjust their self accordingly: that is how the authentic self becomes viscous, made up in mirrored imagery of the sense of the appropriate self seen in the significant others transferred to the surface of one's subjectivity. Mathiesen suggests that panoptical pressures make us afraid to break with that which is taken for granted. In the terms of the Launch Factory (2005) a self-proclaimed liquid organization, panoptical pressures make us hang on to old habits and identities while synoptical pressures enable us to see what significant others desire, or at least what we think they might desire. They encourage new habits, new identities, even if these are only to be consumed, used up and spat out as other, more desirable habits and identities appear, to be consumed in turn.

Third, what are the *identity* implications of synoptical power relations being entangled with those more panoptical? How far do synoptical power relations penetrate the bulwarks of modernity's solidity, those bureaucratic organizations that remain? What are the impacts of these power relations on networks of flexible organizations and the identity of those within them? We might hypothesize that external surveillance, discipline and power over selves can be expected to diminish as liquidity erodes the edges of solidity and new islands of flexibility are created from that solidity's eroded detritus, and around its diminishing core. Compared to the experience of bureaucratic power this might appear as freedom. Yet, recall Bauman's words: *Power is measured by the speed with which responsibilities can be escaped*. The appearance of freedom is an even more insidious power because it is now dependent more wholly on a self insecurely anchored in organizational identity, not a self understood as being oriented to some panoptical other, some metaphorical Big Brother (Orwell 1948) whose gaze constitutes the frame of rationalized existence within the iron or glass cage but a self self-managed in interaction with all those significant others with whom it interacts. Liquidity is marked by care for the other as primarily mediated through the immediate self in the moment. It marks an extreme privatization of ideologies of work adapted to local circumstances.

Fourth, what are the *organizational* implications of liquidity for its subjects? Experience in discontinuous projects discontinuously prepares for a series of new beginnings while simultaneously creating anxieties about swift and painless endings if one project fails to morph into another, as one contract expires and another fails to materialize (Bauman 2005). Becoming liquid means taking on that identity assumed to be desired, required, or needed in the here-and-now of presence. The skills needed to move freely and liquidly require an understanding of dramaturgy as not merely a theatrical technique but as a survival tool (Cohen 2004). Liquid modernity produces organizations no longer akin to repertory theatre: directorial supervision and surveillance is lacking, roles not well rehearsed, scripts

improvised, and performances unpredictable. Individuals must act, plan actions, and calculate the likely gains and losses of acting (or failing to act) under conditions of endemic uncertainty. Organization no longer persists in any comprehensibly stable way as given forms for any significant period of time; network relationships, premised on contracting and markets, erode stable bureaucracies in both public and private sectors. In organizations such as Northern Rock longer term thinking and planning were increasingly surrendered to the moment.

Fifth, what are the *disciplinary* implications of liquidity for organization studies? Some central questions emerge concerning the key metaphors deployed in the field. It is evident that liquidity is not everywhere; it is equally evident that iron cages are still to be found, as are glass cages. Do we need separate and successive metaphors? No – because epochal thinking poses dichotomies that are too sharp, too distinctively different, too accentuated in order to make the ‘post’ case. Cannot the iron and steel, the glass and the liquid, be mixed up together? Anti-epochal thinking that stresses the sedimentation of organizations (Clegg 1981) would suggest so. To what extent do we need to nest metaphors: perceive liquidity within glass cages lodged with iron cages and so on? To what extent do we need to sinter the iron cage, make it a more porous metaphor, allow liquid to pour through it, and gaze through its glass windows as well as its iron bars? Why the desire for mono-metaphoricalism?

In conclusion, this paper has interrogated the nature of liquid modernity; related the specificity of this society to the transformation of a main theme in the sociology of organizations – the iron (and other) cages – and sought to show the ethical, political, identity, organizational and disciplinary implications for the men and women who inhabit the changing liquid world of organizations. Finally, we have proposed an agenda for further enquiry.

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