



## Glass Palaces and Glass Cages: Organizations in Times of Flexible Work, Fragmented Consumption and Fragile Selves\*

Yiannis Gabriel

### abstract

Max Weber's metaphor of 'the iron cage' has provided an abiding image of organizations during the high noon of modernity. But these organizations, rigid, rational and bureaucratic, may no longer be sustainable in our times. Instead of a pre-occupation with efficient production and rational administration, management today is increasingly turning to the consumer as the measure of all things, a consumer who seeks not merely the useful and the functional, but the magical, the fantastic and the alluring. Management of organizations thus finds itself increasingly preoccupied with the orchestration of collective fantasies and the venting of collective emotions through the power of image, in what Ritzer has named the cathedrals of consumption, such as shopping malls, tourist attractions, holiday resorts etc. The core thesis of this lecture is that the decline of Weber's iron cage of rationality has exposed us neither to the freedom of a garden of earthly delights nor to the desolation of the law of the jungle. Instead, I shall propose that the new experiences of work and consumption allow for greater ambivalence and nuance, for which I shall offer the twin metaphors of 'glass cages' and 'glass palaces'. As a material generating, distorting and disseminating images, glass seems uniquely able to evoke both the glitter and the fragility of organizations in late modernity.

As some of you know, this is my second stint at Imperial College. Way back in the 1970s, I came to this country straight out of Greek High School as an undergraduate in Mechanical Engineering. It was very gratifying to find myself thirty years later almost to the day, starting a second stint, as a Professor of Organizational Theory in the School of Management. My office on Princess Gate overlooks that mighty statement of the 1960s, the building which houses the Department of Mechanical Engineering, a building in which I had spent three formative years of my life as a student. This was the image that confronted me



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when I arrived at College for my first day. That concrete block, inaugurated a few years before my first arrival, had then looked to me supremely authoritative and imposing, thoroughly modern. The building does not seem quite so modern any more. Some of the shine may have gone from its tiled surfaces or, more likely, my eyes along with everybody else's are no longer so enamoured with modernity and its artifacts, the way they used to be. But we needn't worry! Even as I speak, a great project is afoot, one which will not only see a magnificent tower rise next to the concrete block, but one which, thanks to the vision of that most distinguished architect, Lord Foster, will see this entire structure encased in a mighty, glittering shell of glass. I am confident that the new glass structure will seem as authoritative in the twenty-first century as the concrete one did in the twentieth century.



Glass is, of course, the signature material of our times, just as concrete was the signature material of forty or fifty years ago. Concrete is a substance which preserves a distant memory of its origin as fluid, yet, a substance which solidifies forever into a rigid and immutable mass. Glass too may start its existence as fluid, but its defining property is optical rather than static – its ability to allow light to pass through it, even as it reflects, distorts or refracts it. It is a substance which generates changing images, a substance whose mere presence leaves us in no doubt that what it encases is worthy of attention. Glass then evokes image and movement, just as readily as concrete evokes structure and stability. Glass will be a main feature of my presentation today. In this presentation, I will examine some of the key social and organizational changes of the last half-century. I will argue that during this period, Western society has moved from a society of massive, concrete buildings and massive, concrete organizations to one of flexible but fragile work arrangements and flexible but fragile organizations, from a society driven by mechanism and production to a society preoccupied with spectacle, image and consumption. I will then seek to show how the nature of demands made upon us by our organizations has drastically changed over this period. The glass building, ambiguously

experienced, now as glittering palace, now as suffocating cage, will emerge as the guiding metaphor of my argument.

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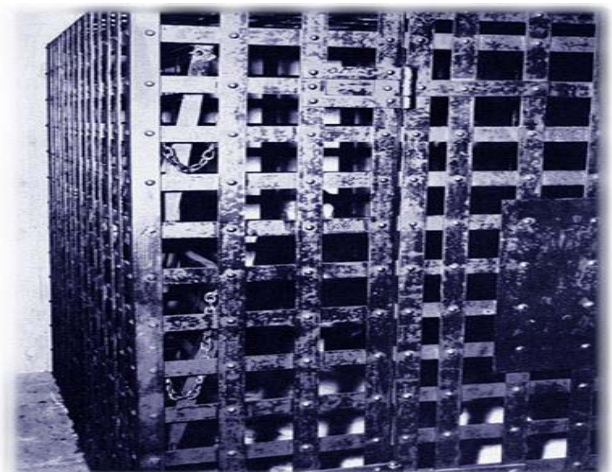


A still earlier signature material, one that preceded both concrete and glass, and one forever identified with the great achievements of modernity, is iron. And iron is the starting point of my presentation today, and in particular one iron object which has a vibrant meaning for every student of organizations – the iron cage. The iron cage is an abiding image of modernity offered by one of its most

eminent explorers, admirers and critics, the great German sociologist Max Weber. As his famous essay on the origins of modern capitalism, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, moves towards its momentous denouement, Weber reflected on the triumph of Puritan values of thrift, hard work, future orientation and unyielding control over the passions of the soul and the temptations of the body. These values, he argued, had revolutionized economic order, by providing the moral justification for capital accumulation and rational planning and fueling the growth of industrial capitalism. And yet, as the destination point of unparalleled economic and social progress, Weber envisaged an image so dreadful that it has haunted students of modernity ever since:

The Puritan [in the 17<sup>th</sup> century] wanted to work for a calling; we [in the 20<sup>th</sup>] are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care of the external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (Weber, 1958: 181)

The image of the iron cage of modernity returns in another of Weber's works, *Economy and Society*, in which he argues that bureaucratic rationalization instigates a system of controls that trap the individual within



Manzanar, Circa 1942



an iron cage of subjugation and containment. (Weber, 1978). For Weber, it is instrumental rationality, accompanied by the rise of measurement and quantification,



regulations and procedures, accounting, efficiency and the gradual displacement of spontaneous feeling by careful calculation of costs and benefits, that entraps us all, in a world of ever increasing material standards, but vanishing magic, fantasy, meaning and emotion. Eventually, we all become trapped in the bureaucratic mechanism which turns us into impersonal functionaries or

cogs, passively following rules and procedures and relating to each other without feeling or passion. Its logic is as ineluctable as is its indifference to human feeling, suffering and desire. This mechanism, housed in solid concrete buildings, with partitioned offices, represents the hallmark of modernity, at least in the sphere of work and production. Within this bureaucratic mechanism

the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he can become a bigger cog. (Mayer, 1956: 126)





How well does our society, dominated by information, mass media, spectacle and the cult of the consumer, fit the image of mechanized human automata envisaged by Weber? Not so well, argue many commentators. In contrast to modernity's rationality and machine-like organization, many argue that we have entered a new historical period, post-modernity or late modernity. This transition is every bit as major as the transition from traditional to modern society and one which in many ways reverses some of the effects of modernity, by re-introducing feeling, emotion and fantasy in social life. In particular, within the sphere of consumption a dramatic re-enchantment of the world has been taking place, at least in the West, one in which consumers can indulge in diverse fancies and whims, collectively venting of emotions and seeking meaning and pleasure. Far from being exiled from contemporary culture by ever more rational processes, fantasy and emotion become the vital ingredients of a consumer-

driven capitalism, travelling across continents with the speed of electrons on the Internet. Indeed, fantasy and emotion have become driving forces in and out of organizations as individuals strive to attain precarious selfhoods in a society saturated with images, signs and information.

Organizations and management have undergone profound changes. The productivist orientation epitomized by Henry Ford's famous dictum 'They can have it any colour they like, as long as it is black', has given way to a new attitude, where organizations seek to please and flatter their customers, stimulating their fantasies and pampering their every desire and whim. Instead of continuous runs of uniform products allowing consumers little choice, a



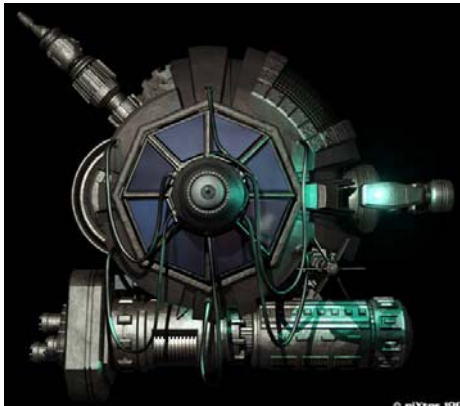
bewildering array of products, many of them customized and unique is on offer. Image, glamour, uniqueness and the alignment with the changing whims of fashion, fancy and taste become all important for organizational success. Thus, flexibility, along with flux, fluidity and flow, has emerged as one of the much-vaunted qualities of our times. It applies to individuals, organizations and even entire societies, suggesting an ability and a willingness not merely to adapt and change but to radically redefine themselves, to metamorphose into new entities. Flexibility stands at the opposite end of rigidity, the chief quality of Weberian bureaucracy. The flexible organization (variously referred to as network, post-modern, post-Fordist, post-bureaucratic, shamrock etc.) has emerged as the antidote to Weberian bureaucracy, a concept of organization which does away with rigid hierarchies, procedures, products and boundaries, in favour of constant and continuous reinvention, redefinition and mobility. Success, for such organizations, is not a state of perfect stable equilibrium, but a process of irregularity, innovation and disorder, where temporary triumphs occur at the edge of the abyss and can never be regularized into blissful routine.

The flexible organization is currently hailed as an ideal organization type for today, as Weberian bureaucracy was held to be fifty years ago. Its characteristics are well described by Clegg:

Where the modernist organization was rigid, postmodern organization is flexible. Where modernist consumption was premised on mass forms, postmodernist consumption is premised on niches.... Where modernist organization and jobs were highly differentiated, demarcated and de-skilled, postmodernist organization and jobs are highly de-differentiated, de-demarcated and multiskilled. (1990: 181)

Many theorists have taken up the implications of flexible organizations for individuals at work. One of the most acute analyses has been offered by Richard Sennett (1998) in his book *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. Sennett argues that new flexible work arrangements promote a short-term, opportunistic outlook among employees, one that undermines trust and loyalty. Insecurity and fear of being on the edge of losing control are endemic. Careers become





spasmodic and fragmented, their different steps failing to generate cohesive or integrated life-stories. Exposed to intrusive monitoring of performance, employees feel constantly on trial, yet they are never sure of the goals at which they are aiming. There are no objective measures of what it means to do a good job, and those celebrated for their achievements one day easily find themselves on the receiving end of redundancy packages the next. Showing eagerness,

being willing to play any game by any rules, looking attractive and involved, while at the same time maintaining a psychological distance and looking for better prospects elsewhere, these are the chameleon-like qualities of the new economy. Constant job moves, preoccupation with image and the look of CVs, absence of commitments and sacrifices, these stand in opposition with traditional family values of duty, commitment, constancy and caring.



The result is a corrosion of moral character, which in times past provided both a sense of continuity and constancy to the individual as well as anchoring him or her to a set of reciprocal relations of caring, obligation and interdependence. Dependence comes to be seen as shameful, evidence of personal failure, in a society where individuals need no one and are needed by no one.

Sennett illustrates his arguments with a few well-chosen case studies. Wherever he focuses, Sennett observes different elements of the same picture – flexibility, dictated by global markets and ever-changing technologies, promoting opportunism, short-termism and insecurity while destroying values, trust, community and caring. A deep anxiety and insecurity permeates workplaces. This, by itself is not new. Earlier generations of employees worried; they worried because of the vagaries of the labor markets, social injustice and lack of control over their fate. Today's employees, however, perceive themselves as having choices, which can make the difference between success and



Today's employees, however, perceive themselves as having choices, which can make the difference between success and

failure. “I make my own choices; I take full responsibility for moving around so much” (1998: 29), says one of his protagonists, who seems to abhor dependency above all else.

Sennett offers a perceptive account of Weber’s views on the Protestant work ethic, capturing the tragic predicament of its archetypal character – the ‘driven man’ engaged in a ceaseless, yet ultimately futile, struggle of proving his moral worth through hard work against the immutable rigor of predestination. Against this, he sets the superficiality of present-day workplaces, with teams of employees engaged in furtive pursuits of value through the power of images, signs and symbols. Salesmanship, showmanship and acting are the essential virtues of the flexible individual whose essential quality is to respond to the corporate call for flexibility by denying him/herself an inner core.

Sennett’s deeply pessimistic book does not offer any prescriptions for the future nor does it identify any dynamic for change. Yet the discontents which he describes, and in particular the chronic inability to form coherent identity narratives, are so profound that one wonders how societies, and especially North American society, have survived thus far without collapsing. George Ritzer’s latest thesis offers a clear answer to this question. Ritzer, well-known for his McDonaldization thesis, is, in *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (1999), as single-mindedly focused on consumption as Sennett is on work. Consumption, argues Ritzer, plays an ever-increasing role in the lives of individuals, as a source of meaning, pleasure and identity. It takes place in settings that “allow, encourage, and even compel us to consume so many of those goods and services” (1999: 2). These settings, which include theme parks, cruise ships, casinos, tourist resorts, sports venues, theaters, hotels, restaurants and above all shopping malls, are referred to as ‘cathedrals of consumption’ to indicate their quasi-religious, enchanted qualities. They are part of a process called by some ‘Disneyization’. Thanks to TV and internet-shopping, this now extends to the home, which is converted from an arena of interpersonal relations into a highly privatized consumption outpost.





Ritzer's central thesis is that today's management sets its eyes firmly not on the toiling worker, but on the fantasizing consumer. What management does is to furnish, in a highly rationalized manner, an endless stream of consumable fantasies inviting consumers to pick and choose, thus creating the possibility of re-enchanting a disenchanted world through mass festivals in the new cathedrals of consumption. Ritzer offers prodigious illustrations of the ways in which consumption is constantly promoted, enhanced and controlled in these new settings, not so much through direct advertising, as through indirect means such as spatial arrangements, uses of language, images, signs, festivals, simulations and extravaganzas, as well as the cross-fertilization through merchandizing of products and images. Above all, consumption gradually colonizes every public and private domain of social life, which become saturated with fantasizing, spending and discarding opportunities. Even schools, universities and hospitals are converted from sober, utilitarian institutions into main terrains of consumption, treating their constituents as customers, offering them a profusion of merchandise and indulging their fantasies and caprices. Hyper-consumption is a state of affairs where every mediated by market social experience is mechanisms.

In a strange way particular work, oblivious to the workplace as does apparent consolations But ultimately the by each author could complement each



of the frustrations of contemporary flexible workplaces that individuals turn to consumption for meaning, identity and fulfilment. And it is because of the corrosion of character that a culture of narcissism dominated by image, fantasy and superficiality, is on the ascendant. Viewers of the award-winning film *American Beauty* will have no difficulty in recognizing both sides of the argument in the symbolically impoverished, image-dominated lives of its suburban characters. The film vividly portrays the precarious work identities of its adult protagonists, the generational gulf between parents and children, which is only transcended through sexual fantasy, as well as the universal obsessions with house interiors, video images and the physical body.

Where both approaches stop short is in recognizing forces that run counter to their main theses. Work flexibility (for which read insecurity and impoverishment) and hyper-consumption march on, uncontested, feeding off each other. The accounts of employees and consumers presented by both Sennett and Ritzer are thoroughly monochromatic, and the reader longs for a discussion of ambivalence, conflict, resistance and variation. Identity and character may be fashioned not only through submission to the dominant forces of the workplace or the shopping mall well described in these two books, but also in opposition to such forces. Today's employees, like today's consumers, may be managed, prodded, seduced and controlled. Yet, their response cannot be taken for granted. As Tim Lang and I have shown in *The Unmanageable Consumer*, consumers are unpredictable, contrary and inconsistent. They often follow fashion blindly, yet they also can and do, in every-day practices, dodge, subvert or evade the controlling

strategies of manufacturers, planners and advertisers. Employees, for their part, display a bewildering range of responses to managerial calls for flexibility; at times they comply willingly or ritualistically, at other times fear and insecurity dominate their responses, but frequently they show ingenuity in supplanting and contesting management discourses, turning them into objects of amusement, cynicism or confrontation.

In contrast to Sennett's view that today's workplace denies employees a voice, that it simply mutes their hopes and their discontents depriving them of a life-story, an alternative approach would suggest that in spite of the forces intent on silencing them, individuals and groups in today's organizations strive and eventually discover *voices* of their own. Using Hirschman's (1970) concept of *voice*, Smelser (1998: 180) argues that individuals acknowledge the shortcomings and frustrations of such bonds, working out their ambivalence in public and trying to influence or change their environments, rather than chameleon-like adapting to them.

Voice ... is intermediate; some degree of loyalty is presupposed, and some degree of alienation and opposition – a wish to exit, as it were – is acknowledged. Some arena is established for 'working out' public ambivalence and conflict – with varying effectiveness – and 'working it into' institutional arrangements. (Smelser, 1998b: 188)



Voice, then, is not a consequence of dependence (as Sennett's analysis might lead us to believe), but a means for expressing and working through ambivalence, and for instigating some social and organizational change. This may not be a confident voice narrating a simple tale of achievement, success, survival and sacrifice, but it is a voice which allows different constructions of identity to be experimented with, developed, modified, rejected and reconstructed.

To be sure, today's organizations deploy more subtle, pervasive and invasive strategies of control than they did a generation ago. If those organizations relied on Weberian controls, i.e., bureaucratic rules and procedures, today's organizations use cultural and emotional controls (emphasizing the importance of customer service, quality and image; affirming the business enterprise as an arena for heroic or spiritual accomplishments etc.), structural controls (continuous measurements and benchmarking, flatter organizational hierarchies etc.), technological (electronic surveillance of unimaginable sophistication), spatial controls (open-plan offices, controlled accesses) and so forth. Those influenced by the work of Foucault have developed the idea of social controls that operate through language, labelling, classification, and so forth, which are invisible, but far-reaching.

In spite of such controlling mechanisms, today's workplace creates, if anything, even more possibilities of voice, with employees displaying a bewildering range of responses which qualify, subvert, disregard or resist managerial calls for flexibility; at times they comply willingly, grudgingly or ritualistically, at other times fear and insecurity dominate their responses, but frequently they show ingenuity in supplanting and

contesting management discourses, turning them into objects of amusement, cynicism or confrontation. At other times, they subvert organizational images and claims directly, for example by turning whistle-blowers or by using the organization's own machinery against itself, for instance by spreading computer viruses or rumours. Thus within formal organizations, there are spaces which are hard to manage and control, spaces that are *unmanaged* and *unmanageable*; in these spaces, individuals can fashion identities, which may amount neither to conformity nor to rebellion, but are infinitely more complex and rich than those deriving from official organizational practices.

What we have here is a picture where traditional rational/bureaucratic controls, i.e., rigid and rational rules and procedures, are being replaced by an array of controls which operate through language, emotion, space and exposure. The demise of the iron cage of rationality can be seen as leading to a different form of entrapment, an entrapment not as rigid as that effected by traditional bureaucracy but one which affords greater ambiguity and irony, a *glass cage* perhaps, an enclosure which is characterized by total exposure to the eye of the customer, the fellow-employee, the manager.



The very visibility of the glass cage to the unforgiving gaze places severe limits to the overt control that managers are able to exercise, with employees frequently finding themselves in the position of children capable of embarrassing their parents in the presence of strangers. Why glass cage? Undoubtedly, the glass cage suggests the chief quality of Foucault's Panopticon, that curious combination of Catholic obsession with the omnipotent eye of God and Protestant pre-occupation with clean efficiency. Like the Panopticon, the glass cage acts as a metaphor for the formidable machinery of contemporary surveillance, one which deploys all kinds of technologies, electronic, spatial, psychological and cultural. Appearances are paramount; image is what people



are constantly judged by. But unlike the Panopticon, it also suggests that the modern employee is part of a cast of actors exposed to the admiring and, occasionally, lustful gaze of the customer with all the kicks and excitements that this implies. Glass then turns the workplace into a show, evoking an element of exhibitionism and display, the employee becomes a part of the organizational brand on show, a brand that is easily tarnished or contaminated by the activities of a few whistle-blowers or disenchanted employees, but a brand which ennobles and uplifts all who are part of it. It also evokes the fundamental ambivalence in the nature of much contemporary work – an ambivalence between the anxiety of continuous exposure and the narcissistic self-satisfaction of being part of a winning team or formula. The glass cage, then, at times comes to be experienced as a shining container, conferring status, glamour and beauty to its inhabitants, whose smiling faces become a part of the organization's image as the wide open spaces of its geography.



While formal rationality is the chief force behind Weber's iron cage, the glass cage emphasizes the importance of emotional displays and appearances. In particular, it highlights the fact that much of the work being done is neither intellectual nor manual, but emotional and aesthetic. Impressing the customer or the casual on-looker requires more than solid service and impeccable competence. It requires the display of the right emotional attitude and the right appearance, the 'smile', the 'look', which have become part of the work of ever increasing segments of the workforce, from waiters and waitresses to shop-assistants, from social workers to nurses and from flight attendants to bank tellers (Hochschild, 1983). 'Looking good and sounding right' is something for which many employees are rewarded, especially in those places, like pizza parlours, bars, cafes etc. where the attractiveness of the employee and the attractiveness of the décor is more important than the attractiveness of the pizzas or the beverages.



The glass cage suggests both the rhetorical 'transparency' and 'openness' of the contemporary workplace and its open plan offices, but also the discretion and fragility of contemporary control systems. Unlike an iron cage which frustrates all attempts of 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 container aimed at highlighting the uniqueness of what it contains rather than constraining or oppressing it. A palace!



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Smelser's work also prefigures some of Ritzer's arguments. Reading his essay 'Collective myths and fantasies: The myth of the good life in California' (1984, 1998a), one swiftly realizes that what Smelser calls 'the myth of California' has become a generic fantasy of consumer society. California, Smelser argues, represents a land to which people 'escape'; it stands for what is new, for gold, for plenty, and the good life;



like all myths, the myth of California is a collective fantasy, and a key feature of this fantasy (in contrast to the rigors of the old country, neediness, ugliness and hard work) is that California is a place where 'success comes easy' (Smelser, 1998a: 117). In California, success is no longer the product of hard work, achievement and heroism as it was for the Puritans; instead, success is brought by the magic of 'being discovered', which involves luck, self-

presentation, image and finding oneself at the right place at the right time. This recalls the 'chameleon-qualities' highlighted by Sennett, only in reverse – where the chameleon blends with its environment, the star, like gold in the eye of the prospector, shines persistently. This dilemma between displaying chameleon-like flexibility (willingness to play any part, to do any job, to work any patch) while also boasting unique star qualities seems to define the predicament of the individual under the sway of the Hollywood myth.

This brings us exactly to Ritzer's cathedrals of consumption, those glass palaces of fantasy, fun and display; California may have been their spiritual birthplace, but they are now ubiquitous globally. The palaces of consumption, like the workplace cages, are made of glass.





Glass is a hard and providing an invisible insider to see outside see inside. As we said distorting medium in reflected and refracted, false images. Looking sometimes easy to reflection as the image Finally, glass is a



fragile medium, barrier, allowing the and the outsider to earlier, it is also a which light is creating illusions and into glass, it is mistake your own facing from behind. framing medium – its

mere presence defines that which lies behind it as something worthy of attention, protection and display. The glass palace of consumption revolves around deliberate display; it is a place where the gaze of the prospector meets the look of the prospect. In this glass palace, new fashion trends can be spotted, new badges can be identified, new lifestyles can be explored and new identities can be experimented with. Within such palaces, there are subtle forms of coercion, enticement and control exercised over the consumer under the illusion of choice and freedom. Like the docile queues of Disneyland, once enticed into the cathedrals of consumption, consumers are captive. They have no choice but to observe, to look, to desire, to choose and to buy. As Ritzer argues, “people are lured to the cathedrals of consumption by the fantasies they promise to fulfill and then kept there by a variety of rewards and constraints” (1999: 28). Glass palaces of consumption can all too easily be mistaken for glass cages. Of course, glass cages look quite different to those outside; they look glamorous and full of enticing objects. Those denied access, through their lack of resources, mobility, looks or whatever, feel truly excommunicated. To them, being inside the cage represents real freedom. As Bauman (1988) has forcibly argued, the new poor are those ‘failed consumers’ who end up outside the world of consumption, having the welfare state make choices on their behalf. For those inside the glass, on the other hand, the hungry faces of those outside is a constant reminder that there are far worse places in which to be. Inside too, consumers are frequently separated from objects which they cherish by invisible barriers created by the limits of their buying powers – there are cages within the palaces and palaces within the cages.

The myth of California has become commodified, a managed fantasy, like those which Ritzer has highlighted in his work. But the hegemony of such fantasies is not unopposed. Once again, the concept of voice suggests a way of looking at the dynamics of the glass palaces of consumption in a richer light. The cathedrals of consumption are frequently defaced, modified, redefined or ignored just as workplaces are (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Gabriel & Lang, 1995). As my own work with Tim Lang highlights, consumers are becoming ever more unmanageable, eccentric and paradoxical. Casualization of work and career reinforces casualization of consumption. Consumers increasingly lead precarious and uneven existences, one day enjoying unexpected boons and the next sinking to bare subsistence. Consumption itself becomes fragmented, spasmodic and episodic.

The argument then is that, like today’s producers, today’s consumers do not find it easy to discover their voice; and when they discover it, it is often a voice that talks in paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions. Their life-stories are not fixed (a constant

pilgrimage to the cathedrals of consumption) nor are they as simple as the California myth would have it. As Bauman has argued,

In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short – so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones.... To keep the game short means to beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be ‘fixed’ one way or the other. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one’s life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. Not to *control* the future, but to *refuse to mortgage* it: to take care that the consequences of the game do not outlive the past to bear on the present. (Bauman, 1996: 24)

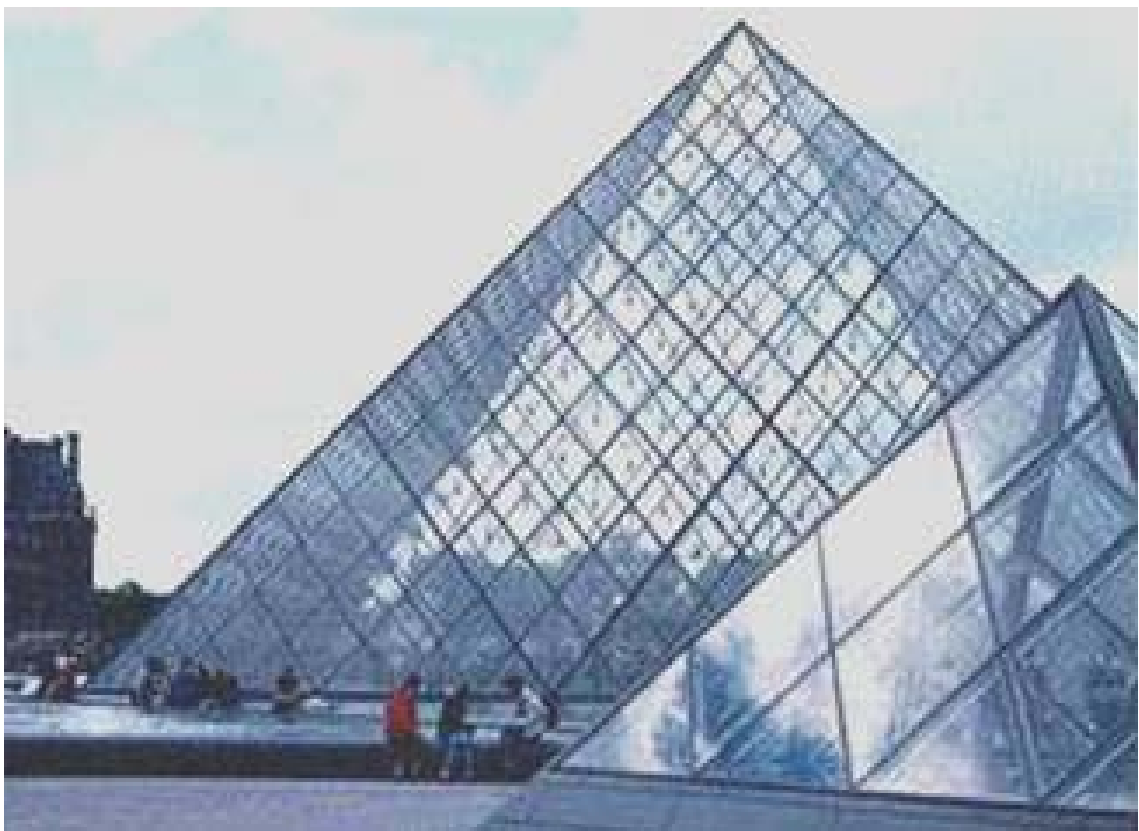
This then seems to parallel the life-game of postmodern workers, whose strategies are summed up as entailing flexibility, reinvention and movement, in short as amounting to tactics. Tactics are not planned in advance, nor do they serve an overall design, but they unravel as life does, with its accidents, misfortunes, boons and breaks. It is out of such episodes that all of us construct and reconstruct our fragile selves, moving from glass palace to glass cage, at times feeling anxiously trapped by it, at others feeling energised and appreciated, and at others depressed and despondent.

This then is the argument. Using Sennett and Ritzer as our guides, we took two paths that deviate from long-standing Weberian themes. Sennett argues that the Protestant work ethic has dissolved under the regime of the flexible workplace with its demands for adaptable, quiescent employees, its replacement of visible, tangible work with manipulation of images and signs and its supplanting of traditional values of



loyalty, sacrifice and long-term commitment. The result is a corrosion of character, with an attendant inability to construct meaningful life narratives and identities. Ritzer, for his part, highlights the continuous shift from work to consumption as a source of meaning and identity, identifying the cathedrals of consumption as spaces where consumers are lured and enticed with a profusion of well-orchestrated and minutely managed fantasies. He argues that this represents a re-enchantment of the world, thus undoing the disenchantment brought about by rationalizing modernity. This re-enchantment encourages individuals to express themselves by embracing life-styles, icons and signs. It is itself the product of rationalization, albeit one in which rational calculation and planning are applied to spectacle, image and experience. I argued that both of these approaches, compelling as they are, tend to present too monochromatic accounts of contemporary organizations and culture. Using the concepts of voice and ambivalence, as developed by Smelser, I argued that both flexible workplaces and

cathedrals of consumption represent more fragile, contestable and multi-valent terrains than anticipated. Using the twin metaphors of glass cage and glass palace, I suggested that both pose certain unique constraints (quite distinct from those we encounter at the high noon of modernity), generate a distinct malaise and afford certain unique consolations. They also present distinct possibilities of contestation and challenge. Shared features of glass cage and glass palace include an emphasis on display, an invisibility of constraints, a powerful illusion of choice, a glamorization of image and an ironic question-mark as to whether freedom lies this side or that side of the glass. Above all, there is an ambiguity as to whether the glass is a medium of entrapment or a beautifying frame and a constant reminder of the fragility and brittleness of all that surrounds us.



It is premature to argue that all of modernity's iron cages have been dismantled and displaced by postmodern glass substitutes. For every celebrity trapped in a glass cage and for every employee dreaming of a glass palace, there are many people in every part of the globe struggle in sweat-shops, offices without air-conditioning and factories hidden from view. Yet, a video camera surreptitiously smuggled into a sweat-shop can shatter a company's image and undo the work of millions of dollars worth of advertising, a leaked internal memo can virtually demolish a corporate colossus or a government, and a small band of environmental activists acting tactically in front of television cameras can bring a multinational corporation to its feet. When the goings-on in the Oval Office of the White House can be rehearsed in minuscule detail in front of an entire nation, it may well be that the era of the iron cage has finally given way to the era of glass.



This then is the message with which I would like to conclude my presentation – as we move from modernity into the great unknown that lies ahead, old prisons and old chimeras are losing their grip. Old forms of entrapment and suffering do not appear so threatening any more. But ambivalence, confusion and anxiety are features of our age as they have been of previous ones. In the last resort, the fragility of human experience is not the result of the flexible workplaces and fragmented consumptions of our age, but rather the product of its confrontation with different cages across historical eras.

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#### the author

Yiannis Gabriel is Professor in Organizational Theory, School of Management, Imperial College, having taught previously at Thames Polytechnic and Bath University. He has a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Imperial College London, where he also carried out post-graduate studies in industrial sociology. He has a PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. His main research interests are in organizational and psychoanalytic theories, consumer studies, storytelling, folklore and culture. Gabriel is author of *Freud and Society*, *Working Lives in Catering* (Routledge) and *Organizations in Depth* (Sage), co-author of *Organizing and Organizations*, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentation* and *Experiencing Organizations* (Sage). Oxford University Press published his latest book *Storytelling in Organizations* in April 2000. Other publications include articles on computer folklore, organizational nostalgia, chaos and complexity in organizations, fantasies of organizational members about their leaders, organizational insults and research methodology using stories and narratives. He has been Editor of the journal *Management Learning* and is Associate Editor of *Human Relations*.

Address: The Business School, Imperial College, South Kensington Campus, London SW7 2AZ.

E-mail: y.gabriel@imperial.ac.uk