



Satire, critique and the place of Critical Management Studies: Exploring Zero Books

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review of

Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming (2012) *Dead man working*. Winchester: Zero Books (PB, pp. 83, £9.99, ISBN 1780991568)

Contextualization

Cederström and Fleming's *Dead Man Working*, published by Zero Books, is an interesting intervention that gives us a chance to ponder a question, which should be the guiding question for aspiring public intellectuals and academics of a critical bent: Who are we writing for? In the present context of UK business schools, where the pressure to maximize point scoring on the Association of Business Schools (ABS) journal ranking list (see Dunne and Harney, forthcoming; Willmott, 2011) has been increasingly enforced by university management, the profoundly important question of who our audience is, and who we should be aiming to articulate our ideas to, is precisely the question that gets lost. The question that needs to be posed here is who actually reads the material produced in elite, restricted access academic journals? And in addition to this, do these heavily confined forums ever present a serious opportunity to affect any kind of widespread radicalization or social change? In exploring the question of what the critical enterprise is, or should be, one is also faced with a set of issues surrounding the demise of the public intellectual (Jacoby, 2000). If we believe in critique – and some of us may not have entirely given up hope about believing in an alternative – then considering whom we are articulating

that critique to, and with, ought to be central to any meaningful critical enterprise.

My claim here is that Cederström and Fleming's book presents a significant alternative way of engaging with that question. *Dead Man Working* is a rip-roaring good read and an immensely entertaining short book. One of its contributions is to present a form of satire of work culture. In fact, it actually manages to be amusing in places, something not often achieved in the critical management studies (CMS) field with one or two exceptions (see for example Parker, 2009; Rhodes, 2002). It is unquestionable that there is something of a lack of humour in management journals, particularly highly ranked ones. Perhaps this arises from an inflated sense of importance amongst members of the academic community, the pervasive confinements of journal style, or simply because doing written humour well is difficult; I suspect that it arises from all three. The limitations of existing management scholarship mean that alternative publication outlets like Zero Books provide potentially promising opportunities for different styles of writing and reaching wider audiences.

Dead Man Working is the first critical management contribution in the Zero Books collection, a publishing house based around the idea of being 'intellectual without being academic' (Zero Books, 2012). While some of its authors, including Fleming and Cederström, are academics, Zero Books are written with the intention and expressed purpose of reaching wider audiences and a broader intellectual public. The founding statement of Zero Books bemoans the death of the public intellectual. It is a bit much to declare that Zero Books has reinvented the notion of the public intellectual but it has done something important in posing the question of what 'a making public of the intellectual' (Zero Books, 2012) would consist of. In this review I have two principal aims: first, to situate *Dead Man Working* in the context of the wider Zero Books phenomenon, which I hope will prompt some of us to reflect on why we became academics or social theorists (or whatever label you prefer) in the first place. Second, I think the book is at its strongest when it becomes a satire by blending together an amusing concoction of adult babies, little girls, and men who search for prostitutes for the purpose of pseudo-loving affection rather than sex. The satirical assemblage of oddities in the book is intended to critique corporate working life and self-help 'guide to success' manuals.

Zero Books and the public intellectual

The Zero Books collection is an interesting and an unusual one: its authors often do not come from the academic sphere and many of them write widely-read

blogs¹. Probably the most famous Zero book is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. Arguably the reason why this book in particular has assumed a sizable audience is that it engages with a central problem that critics of capitalism are faced with: the seeming impossibility of transcending capitalist social organization. That is, we live in a capitalist world governed according to false macroeconomic theories (Keen, 2011), unsustainable levels of private debt, stagnation, and wage contraction for the majority. It is an order that denies hope and opportunity to most of the world's population – remember that almost half of the global population earn less than \$2.50 a day (Global Issues, 2013) – but one that is increasingly difficult to think beyond. *Dead Man Working* follows the Zero Books trend of critiquing different aspects of contemporary capitalism. Many Zero Books have been based around providing critical accounts of different aspects of capitalism on social, cultural and political grounds, or some combination of all three (see for example Fisher, 2009; Power, 2009; Southwood, 2011). *Dead Man Working* mainly adopts a cultural form of critique: the early chapters are pre-occupied by the incorporation of 'cool' and radical chic within contemporary capitalism, which is also a theme in some of Fleming's earlier work (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2007).

Many of the most notable contributions in the Zero Books series are about rethinking the position of the left in light of concrete social realities and experiences. My favourite book in the series is probably *Non-Stop Inertia*, Ivor Southwood's lived analysis of precarious labour and the privatized coercion that characterizes UK Job Centres. It is his expression of the reality of Job Centre life in contemporary capitalist society that provides some of the most powerful pieces of writing that frame the analysis. This is a feature of some of the best books in the series, offering us a succinct and immensely readable critical commentary on a particular pervasive cultural or social phenomenon that many people living in contemporary capitalist society are faced with. From a different perspective, but one that also connects at times with issues around employment precarity, Nina Power offers a powerful analysis of contemporary feminism and the ways in which certain variants of feminism have been constructed to be congruent with,

1 To give a few selective examples, Ivor Southwood posts on 'Screened Out' (<http://screened-out.blogspot.co.uk/>), Owen Hatherley has the wonderfully titled blog 'Sit Down Man, You're a Bloody Tragedy' (named after the Scottish Independent Labour Party leader James Maxton's riposte to Ramsey MacDonald's final parliamentary speech in 1935) (http://nastybrutalandshort.blogspot.co.uk), Mark Fisher is the author of 'K-Punk' (http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org), Evan Calder Williams blogs on 'Socialism and/or Barbarism' (http://socialismandorbarbarism.blogspot.co.uk), Adam Koksco writes on 'The Weblog: Home for the Heteronomous' (<http://heteronomy.wordpress.com/>), and Laurie Penny writes at 'Penny Red' (http://www.penny-red.com).

indeed complimentary to, 'the logic of the market' (Power, 2009: 15). Take Sarah Palin or the attempt to reconstruct wars against certain nations, like Afghanistan, into feminist liberations from the Hijab (Power, 2009: 11). As Power (2009: 10) notes, Palin – who she describes as a 'terminator hockey-mom who calls herself a feminist' – was a member of the pro-life advocacy organization 'Feminists for Life'.

Like all the best contributions in the Zero Books series, these authors engage with social problems and conditions by taking a perspective that is rarely ever voiced in the mainstream media. There is a spirit of the public about these enquiries, by which I mean these books are highly readable and accessible. It is important to not overstate the case for Zero Books succeeding as a public endeavour, but what I think this publishing house has done is offer a range of significant cultural and political critiques and theoretical engagements in a way that is relevant and important. Perhaps its readers are most often postgraduate students across different disciplines that are critically minded and interested in contemporary social life. I say this mainly on the basis of anecdotal and conversational evidence: in my own experience books in the series are frequently mentioned in café and bar conversations with postgraduate students from different disciplines, but one rarely finds them cited in academic journal articles. However, whatever the limitations of the reach of Zero books, they are at least more engaging for a broader public than the vast majority of restricted access academic journal articles.

Satire and social critique

Cederström and Fleming opt for an alternative kind of social critique of contemporary working life, as the book subverts the tradition of corporate self-help manuals though selecting cultural extremities and redeploying them as satire. In this respect the authors signal an interesting shift in the style of CMS critiques by employing humour and satire. Satire is a significant form of social critique, which is memorable because it conjures up great stories and startling images. Satire is principally the use of ridicule, irony and sarcasm to expose and deride vices and follies, usually in a form that is critical and aggressive (Hodgart, 2009: 10). In the best examples of satire it can spark the indignation of some and the contemptuous laughter of others, although the extent to which we laugh is dependent on the context in which the satire is received. The great satires of the 18th century are unlikely to produce belly laughter for most readers in our present context.

One of the most interesting examples of satire is Baum's (2000) *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which Graeber (2011) draws on in his excellent history of debt. In Graeber's detailed and politically important anthropological history of debt, he mentions that *The Wizard of Oz* was originally intended as a parable of the Populist campaign of Williams Jennings Bryan who ran for the presidency on a Free Silver Platform (a campaign to replace the gold system with a bimetallic one that would allow the free creation of silver money). As Graeber (2011: 52-53) notes, 'according to the Populist reading, the Wicked Witches of the East and West represent the East and West Coast bankers (promoters and benefactors of the tight money supply)'. Graeber goes on to note that 'the Scarecrow represented the farmers (who did not have the brains to avoid the debt trap)' and the Tin Woodsman was the industrial proletariat. The yellow brick road and the silver slippers (which became ruby slippers in the movie) presumably speak for themselves, and the Wizard of Oz, who turns out not to be a wizard at all but rather a hapless man hidden behind a curtain, represents appropriately enough, the US treasury. This example of satire points to its strengths and limitations, since *The Wizard of Oz* has essentially become a famous children's story. Yet the original object of critique seems to have been lost in popular consciousness; however Graeber's history of debt may help to bring the satirical aspects of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* back into focus.

What satire does in literary form is to create a story. At its best, satire is a story that sticks. Yet, how a story is appropriated and fashioned for critique is subject to the particular social and political context and the 'passage of time'. The closest thing we have to a great contemporary satirist is probably Chris Morris who brings a certain black comedy, with a more than healthy dose of contempt, to a range of topics in the UK. Over the years Morris's critiques have been consistently venomous (I mean that in an entirely complimentary sense) and often directed at different aspects of the media. His critiques have included the portrayal of the September 11th attacks, attitudes towards drugs, the grotesque stupidity of celebrities, the media obsession with paedophilia and numerous other phenomena that are in a sense read through and partly constructed by the popular media. Perhaps Chris Morris's most powerful piece of satire was his *Brass Eye* series. A central piece of *Brass Eye* was the succession of B to D list celebrities who would appear (on what they thought was a genuine news programme) in order to read out a series of bizarre and ludicrous news pieces, believing them to be real. What was so profoundly damaging about this was the extent to which it destabilized the position of celebrities into one in which they actually had to think about the material they were reading out. This device also presented a serious challenge to the viewer's perception of newsreaders and celebrities. In short, it suggested that many of these figures of authority were empty conduits of information. Probably the best example of how satire can still

prompt silly indignation in recent years was the response to the episode of *Brass Eye* about paedophiles, which included the pop DJ, Jonathan Fox, announcing that a paedophile has more genes in common with crabs than other human beings, and a young television presenter, declaring ‘we even have footage of a penis shaped internet sound wave generated by an online paedophile’².

In a rather more modest and transitory fashion, Cederström and Fleming use contemporary cultural extremities as reference points to send up working life, always somehow anchored by the notion of death. The book explores this theme of death in dramatic fashion in Chapter 6 by opening with Anjool Malde, a stockbroker at Deutsche Bank, who at the age of 24 jumped out off an eight-story restaurant rooftop with a designer suit and glass of champagne in hand (55). The drama and the satirical irony in this instance is reflected in the detail given about the character’s smart attire; the fact that Anjool M. possesses many features of an archetype of corporate success – champagne and Hugo Boss suit – as he jumps to his death.

The question of whether this is actually humorous is certainly a contentious one. Indeed, there are few topics more likely to divide audiences than the question of whether something is funny. Yet the purpose of satire, I think, is primarily to provoke reflection and possibly unease. Indeed, often humour divides; what some see as comedic, others may simply see as unpleasant. The approach of *Dead Man Working* is to make a critique of capitalist working life through satirical irony and ridicule – often mixed with a healthy dose of contempt – to highlight the absurdities and the profound social problems that capitalism creates. Perhaps the most serious example in the book is the fourteen tragic suicides at Foxconn in China, the Apple Macintosh producer (58). Apple has recently been named the most valuable company of all time. It has become a corporate archetype for the generation of capitalist value by creating an enormously profitable high-end production model that leaves skilled Chinese workers overworked and, in some cases, driven to suicide. It should be noted that in response to these suicides Apple has pushed Foxconn International³ to raise wages by around 30% for the majority of workers ‘without apparently offering any leeway on contract prices to accommodate the rising costs’ (Froud et al., 2012: 8); thus further exacerbating the pressures on workers to produce. In an

2 This powerful contemporary satire on the media obsession with paedophiles, *Brass Eye* ‘Paedogeddon’, is available online here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLyLGrbKokI>.

3 Foxconn International manufactures electronics (like the iPhone) and is one of three separate companies. The other two are Foxconn that manufactures computers and consumer electronics and Foxconn Technology who are a light metal thermal manufacturer and assembler (Froud et al, 2012: 7; Financial Times, 2011).

attempt to minimize the destructive tendency of employees to commit suicide, Cederström and Fleming go into great detail about the efforts Apple has made to reduce this suicide rate. Foxconn have undertaken a variety of measures such as establishing stress rooms, erecting safety nets between buildings and summoning some Buddhist monks to 'release the suicide souls from purgatory' (59). This leads Cederström and Fleming to declare that 'Foxconn are now leading innovators of a new field of management...suicide management' (59).

In terms of satire, the book finds points of reference in the here and now that render visible the obscene underpinnings of capitalist corporate life. One of the most memorable examples of this is the striking reference to the ironically named Humping Hank, a character from a US brothel who appears in a Louis Theroux documentary⁴. Hank, who bears a partial resemblance to Bill Gates, visits the brothel not seeking sex but rather the experience of pseudo-emotional intimacy, described as 'the girlfriend experience'. Cederström and Fleming suggest that Humping Hank 'captures the spirit of the modern corporation with almost perfect precision' (36). In his search for a prostitute pseudo-girlfriend who he can eat popcorn with, he reflects the desire of the modern corporation to establish an emotional intimacy with employees, for the worker to invest one's life and soul in work.

Humping Hank is certainly a memorable personification of the demands for emotional entanglement in the modern corporation, but one of the highlights of the book is undoubtedly the analysis of adult babies. Adult babies are individuals, primarily but not exclusively men, who enjoy dressing in diapers and other forms of baby clothing. Also known as paraphilic infantilism, this behaviour is often associated with some form of sexual fetish although this is not necessarily always the case, it involves role-playing a return to an infant or baby like state. There are a range of adult baby events that are advertised on the adult baby website 'Daily Diapers'; these include what are known as 'munches'. Adult babies present a beautiful satirical embodiment of the fashion for eternal youth: they serve as a grotesque personification of the desire to capture and preserve the state of being young. This craving for youthfulness is of course pervasive in the present cultural milieu of contemporary capitalism. Cederström and Fleming argue that adult babies are a counterweight to cynical distance, that is, they are not deliberately ironic in the sense of adopting a bit of pseudo-radical cool or anti-capitalist chic, such as a poster of Lenin giving the finger. Instead, they note, 'with no signs of

4 This excruciating piece of footage is on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpHS7ksGR78>.

irony, they fully and openly play out the secret fantasy of becoming a child' (48)⁵. Perhaps what makes the adult baby such a powerful image is that it is a perfect obverse of the working man or woman in smart attire.

In terms of criticisms that may be directed at the book, one might take issue with its rather nihilistic ethos, which seems to preclude the possibility of a positive alternative. However, this would be to mistake the purpose of satire, since it requires us to continuously question any social reality for its ludicrousness, pomposity and hypocrisy. To suggest an alternative that is not subject to the same forms of critique, and the potential for a comedic dagger, would be a timid, in fact a failed, form of satire. One limitation of the book however is that it does not draw out and render explicit its enemies enough; in my view, *Dead Man Working* would be enhanced by a chapter or at least a few pages that ridicule a particular paradigmatic corporate self-help book. One of the things that makes Willmott's (1993) classic, perhaps even defining, CMS article 'Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom' so memorable and rhetorically effective is its grounding in a critique of a popular corporate self-help manual, Peters and Waterman's (1982) *In Search of Excellence*. Such grounding might have given *Dead Man Working* a clearer sense of critical intent, which would have increased its force.

Conclusion

Cederström and Fleming's book is an immensely readable piece of satire and pastiche. The book serves up parody and critique in unexpected and sometimes unsettling ways. It also gives us an opportunity to stand back and reflect on how critical management and organization studies might seek to become more readable and address a broader, cross-disciplinary, audience. Popularizing critique is a profoundly important task, and it is one that the Zero Books project brings into view by daring to ask how we might create an 'idea of publishing as a making public of the intellectual'. As I noted above, this is an ideal that CMS consistently fails to live up to. Now more than ever in a time of economic crisis, we at least need the courage to pose the problem. By selecting a satirical pastiche of oddities that constitute an underbelly of corporate life, *Dead Man Working* at its best engages in that task.

5 The book may even be acquiring some recognition amongst the adult baby community. For example, it receives a reference on one adult baby website in-between another post for a book entitled *There's A Baby in My Bed!: Learning to Live Happily with the Adult Baby in your Relationship* and an advert for a Cherry Baby Romper: <http://just-clothes.com/Rompers/Adult-Baby-Romper-217/>.

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