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The Person As Object in Discourses In and Around Organizations

Natural persons (i.e., real people as opposed to "corporate or organizational persons") have come to be treated—often implicitly but sometimes quite explicitly—as mere objects (or in other cases not treated or mentioned at all) in some of the more popular and influential ways of talking about "doing business." Although we recognize that certain dimensions of this problem are not new, this article deliberately focuses on the dark side of the current push toward greater efficiency, competitiveness, and so-called customer responsiveness in the world of work by highlighting specific examples from public discourse in and about organizational life. We provide illustrations of the person as object in five categories of organizational activity: organizational operations, labor and employment, marketing and customer service, corporate governance and investor relations, and competition and market globalization.

If we ask you to put a price on your life, on your very being, you will probably respond that such cannot or will not be done. You might even be horrified by our suggestion. Yet, this is just the sort of calculus that major institutions (and their accompanying discourses) ask their people to employ with great regularity. In his eloquent and unusual critique of the U.S. economy, *The Gift,* Lewis Hyde (1983) offers this poignant case of how human worth is treated within the context of market value:

> In a classic example both of cost-benefit analysis and the confusion between worth and value, the Ford Motor Company had to decide if it should add an inexpensive safety device to its Pinto cars and trucks. The Pinto's gas tank was situated in such a way that it would rupture during a low-speed rear-end collision, spilling gasoline and risking a fire. Before putting the car on the market, Ford tested three different devices that would prevent the rupturing of the tank. One would have

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH, Vol. 24 No. 6, December 1997 593-630

> cost $1, another around $5, and the third, $11. In the end Ford decided that benefits did not justify costs, and no safety feature was added to the vehicle. According to Mark Dowie, between 1971, when the Pinto was introduced, and 1977, when the magazine *Mother Jones* printed Dowie's analysis of the case, at least five hundred people burned to death in Pinto crashes. (pp. 62-63)

You might respond to this example with sympathy for the victims of this corporate action, yet with a defense of the institutionalized procedures by which such organizational decisions are often made.

The Pinto example above may be an extreme one in degree, but its type is commonly recognized. To a great extent, the field of risk management has to calculate odds with respect to abstracted numbers and categories for persons. And as Perrow (1984) explains, "Risk-benefit analysis, with its monetarization of cultural goods and values, has been succeeded by cost-benefit analysis, with its more open concern with the dollar as the ultimate solvent for all things social" (p. 310). In a sense, this is the sort of reduction, commodification, or objectification of the person we find in many areas of organizational activity today.

Turner (1994) takes such an observation further when he writes, "The collapse of persuasion [in the sense of the substitution of market or market-like relations for more social ones] creates a social order wherein economic language . . . exhaustively describes our world, hence *becomes* our world" (p. 121). In a very real sense, this commentary expresses the tension between modernist and postmodernist readings of "the problem." That is, we recognize that any prescriptions offered to remedy the problem allow for possibilities for their own undoing, especially with the transformation of symbols over time and across social settings. In fact, many of the very problems we describe are the results of applying particular ideas of progress in organizational life overzealously. And this is precisely why the matter of praxis and pragmatic prescription for change must be approached carefully and self-reflectively. Nevertheless, as Hyde (1983) describes through his poignant example of the Pinto, the person—in a broad, holistic, and personalized sense—has become alienated or detached from basic concerns of human value when weighed or measured in terms of market value. Is this the kind of separation people really want from their institutions? Is there not a problem when the decisions and discourses of organizations become habitually distanced from the very people they are supposed to be about? And, is there anything that can or should be done about the common reduction of persons in such an economistic calculation, given the vagaries of language in use?

As Lane (1991) argues in his provocative critique, *The Market Experience*, "It normally takes little persuasion to convince people that it is the persons served by institutions, not the institutions themselves, that have the greater value" (p. 17). Yet, with many organizational discourses and practices, people behave otherwise. Ironically, today's discourses and practices surrounding organizations devalue the same individuals that society presumes to elevate (cf. Foucault, 1980). It is this predicament that we hope to address through our article, recognizing one's "a priori ethical value"—meaning a person's intrinsic value, feelings, and potential and actual contributions to the larger society.

We pose these questions even while recognizing that the very grammar and syntax of language in use often reflect or contribute to the forms of severance, detachment, or reductionism we critique here. Consider, for example, how organizational policy decisions are announced in the passive voice (e.g., "It has been decided that . . . "), partly to reflect the complex nature of collective action and partly to enhance the mystery and power of the organizational agent (Fairclough, 1989; Sennett, 1980). And, in a related sense, we can make a parallel observation about culture. As Geertz's (1973) catchy metaphor illustrates so well, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (p. 5). Culture, itself a product of human endeavor, in turn provides symbols, metaphors, and larger discourses for the construction, classification, and reduction of the person (Douglas, 1986).

In the realm of social-scientific discourses, we find a parallel problem where theorists from Marx (Kamenka, 1983) to Giddens (1984) grapple with how to posit an individual agent without so constraining him or her by social-structural forces as to render a mere caricature of personhood. We recognize the somewhat paradoxical nature of *positing* the person as an active "subject" at the same time we are criticizing the making of her or him into a common "object" (see Smith, 1988).

Dimensions of the Problem

We observe that, in a number and variety of ways, the people of society are being discussed implicitly or explicitly as mere objects. By saying this we mean to include the following symbolic constructions: (a) organizational or work-related practices where individual persons are largely or completely absent, (b) individual persons as merely subjected to forces beyond their control (the deprivation of agency), (c) individual persons as being clearly and consistently less important than organizational policies or strategies, (d) individual persons simply as instrumentalities or means to accomplishing organizational ends, and (e) individual persons as commodities, products, or resources of monetary value.

For example, in a widely cited definition, Storey (1992) describes human resources management as "strategic, integrated interventions designed to elicit commitment and to develop resourceful humans." Nowhere do formulations such as this one suggest that there are real persons involved—to allude to a Kantian ethic—that people are "ends in themselves" rather than simply being "constructed" as means (see Johannesen, 1996, for an application of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative to communication situations and to human relations). At the same time, though, we wish to avoid a type of critical "leveling" in which every aspect of the problem is considered to have gravity equal to that of every other. But if one theme unites such discursive formulations, it is a narrowly technical rationality applied to the role of the human being in the organization, along with the techniques and choices associated with the broader "rational-methodical life style" (cf. Habermas, 1984; Lash & Whimster, 1987). The dominance of this same rationality has been one of the most penetrating observations of the Frankfurt Critical Theory tradition in this century, from Horkheimer to Habermas: the ways the individual has been molded, reshaped, and reconstructed by the major institutions of modern society—for example, capitalism, bureaucracy, and mass-mediated reality (see the excellent overview in Fay, 1987). Technical rationality is often privileged in organizational discourse, even when its practical or pragmatic merits, in terms of concrete positive outcomes, cannot be empirically substantiated (cf. Feldman & March, 1981; Jehenson, 1984). But, as we aim to show, there have emerged in recent years new twists on the problem—adding yet more possibilities for the alienation of the person, even as there exist more freedoms of various kinds (for example, in terms of new choices for the consumer, flexibility in terms of choosing one's place of work, the development of "virtual communities," transformations in individual and organizational identities, etc.).

In no way do we mean to adopt a one-sided treatment of modern institutions as thoroughly oppressive, however. Organizational life requires a certain degree of subordination of the self—coordination of efforts demands it (cf. Barnard, 1938/1968; Denhardt, 1989). Also, in many situations of everyday life, the sheer complexity of social relations and the necessary economy of expression leads social institutions to depart from Kant's dictum never to treat people as means but rather as ends only. No one expects, for example, that in making every purchase a consumer will focus on the complete humanness of the seller. But, on the other hand, we hope that reasonable levels of mutual respect and civility will be part of such a relationship. Furthermore, Giddens (1991) explains clearly that "it is wrong to see the world 'out there' as intrinsically alienating and oppressive to the degree to which social systems are either large in scale or spatially distant from the individual." And, he concludes, "Such phenomena may often be drawn on to supply unifying influences; they are not just fragmenting in their impact on the self" (p. 189). This view represents one way in which social structures can be simultaneously enabling and constraining. To this perspective, we would add (although only briefly for now) that the creative resources of language make such dialectical trends both possible and inevitable.

In addition, whether the phenomenon of the person as object is primarily a reflection of a deeper social problem or is a cause of the problem itself is not the central issue for us here, although it remains an important question. Our central issue is that through a variety of separate and intermingling discourses about the person-to-organization relationship, the person-as-object metaphor recurs as a common denominator (although by no means the sole important symbol), revealing a troubling placement of people in relation to the market, economy, business, and society in general. This "people-less" talk linguistically elevates the organization, the market, and the economy as points of reference over the individuals whom the institutions are designed to serve (in their various stakeholding groups and as "unorganized," unaffiliated, and nonidentified individuals). So, by examining even in an exploratory way the cluster of issues we have identified, we hope to foster greater awareness of the power of, the limitations to, and the potential alternatives for discourses on the person as object. In the remainder of this article, we (a) speculate on some broad societal (and theory-based) reasons for the person-as-object problem, along the way acknowledging some important prior analyses of related issues and trying to isolate some contemporary features of the problem. We then (b) try to illuminate the predicament by identifying examples from a variety of literatures, experiences, and vantage points, considering, in particular, trends from several different arenas of organizational activity. Finally, we (c) underscore the importance of restoring the "place" of the person in organizational discourse but at the same time take some critical distance on the possibilities for specific interventions.

Theoretical Background

There are a number of important writers whose work helps to give depth to our historical and theoretical understandings of the person-as-object metaphor in organizational discourse. Adam Smith advocated market operation with prudence and sympathy to temper self-interest; moreover, he felt that markets should remain relatively localized and personalized (Werhane, 1991). Werhane's provocative exegesis shows that Smith was preoccupied much more than has been typically assumed with the human side of enterprise, believing firmly that market and economic relations should never be presented as complete substitutes for the wider array of human bonds.

Karl Marx, of course, presaged the rampant commodification that would be entailed by capitalist development. Although he could not foresee the extent to which consumerism (in several senses, including ironic ones) would become, as it now is, the main engine of capitalism (or, in connection with that, the full-scale substitution of *consumer* for *citizen* in public discourse), Marx (e.g., Kamenka, 1983) did understand well how capitalism would tend toward redefining everything in its path as a simple commodity (the term *reification* suggesting something as "thing-like") while constantly creating new commodities for consumption. Braverman's (1974) critique of industrial relations in the 20th century echoes Marx's concerns and updates the critique of corporate capitalism by explaining how market relations have gradually become substitutes for employee, family, and community relations—featuring consumption as perhaps the preeminent activity for persons in the contemporary industrialized world.

As the acknowledged founder of modern organizational studies, Max Weber both celebrated and feared the rise of bureaucracy. And, he essentialized bureaucratic mechanisms in the matter of control: control over work processes, control over organizational structure, and control over people. Replaceability became a key element in Weber's (1978) model of bureaucracy, privileging a system of roles and responsibilities over the involvement of any particular persons—in part to assure that the system be preserved. In Weber's view, bureaucracy is necessary to manage far-flung and complex affairs, minimize arbitrariness in the use of power within a rational order, and make everything as systematic as possible. At the same time, Weber rightly feared that depersonalization would result from the march of bureaucracy. As an example, what has often been well intentioned in terms of promoting "fair treatment," through rational standards applied to all, has simultaneously undermined possibilities for individual expression (see, e.g., Hummel, 1994). In the kind of mass democracy that would, in Weber's view, almost inevitably accompany the further development of bureaucracy, the leveling of the governed in all sectors of society could ironically lead to a lack of meaningful individual involvement in decision making and the setting of policy. Weber feared "overorganization, a future sterilized of the informal and the use-and-wonts contexts from which personality takes on the stuff of resistance to mass-mindedness and cultural uniformity" (Nisbet, 1966, p. 297).

In Western industrialized societies, Frederick Taylor's (1914/1967) scientific management may well have left the rhetorical legacy that privileges the calculations of collective or individual efficiency over such values as individual or collective happiness. Taylor and his followers were significantly responsible for inculcating efficiency as a "master" value premise in U.S. culture, especially by binding it to the confident and socially responsible image of Progressivism (see, e.g., Cheney & Brancato, 1992; Simon, 1947/1997). Scientific management's ethos of systematic control over work activities and relations, its devaluation of intuition and lessons of "local" experience on the job, its seeming value neutrality, and its goal of ever-expanding production fit well with the increasingly solidified norms of bureaucratic society in the early part of the 20th century.

We add at this point that the concepts and trends discussed do not respect organizational boundaries. That is to say, many of so-called internal organizational affairs—such as employee relations or work design—are strongly linked (especially today) to external organizational activities, such as customer service (Cheney, 1997a; Cheney & Christensen, in press). Today, the efficiency of production is usually directed toward the service of the customer or the consumer. Customer- or market-driven firms now announce themselves in all sectors of society and the economy, even when many organizational policy makers have a hard time pinpointing just what the popular label really means (Jaworski & Kohli, 1996). But, so prevalent is such discourse and such redefinition that employees are converted into customers for one another, all working within what is called the internal markets of the organization (Halal, 1996). In terms of what this means for the employee, we can imagine possibilities for both creativity and constraint in terms of how the employee's activities are framed and evaluated. In terms of the goals and shape of work activity, formulations of the employee are increasingly linked to the consumer "out there"—in the next department or beyond the confines of the organization—as a point of reference (Cheney, 1997a). The popularity of the consumer as a way of describing not only people's use of things but also their use of one another has now infused many industrialized societies, just as Williams (1960/1980) predicted it would nearly four decades ago. And this is the second dimension of the person-as-object problem that we feature as relatively new. Allow us to explain further.

The mention of the consumer is crucial because the marketing ethos has come to be an important—perhaps the most popular—contemporary translation of democracy and the society's featured means of achieving the satisfaction of individual wants. The mythos of the marketing discipline proclaims the activity of marketing as the culmination of the succession from the production-and-quantity orientation to a product-quality orientation to the development of market niches that fit consumers' presumed needs and desires (see, e.g., Kotler, 1991). The idea of bending organizational activities and products to the will of the consumer is indeed very appealing for its interactive, democratic character: giving people what they presumably want (cf. Cheney & Christensen, in press; Laufer & Paradeise, 1990). Even post-modernist Baudrillard (1968/1996) acknowledges how consumption is experienced as freedom even as "the subject, in his very insistence on being a subject, succeeds in manifesting himself only as an object of economic demand" (p. 152).

We must observe the ironic developments in the ethos of marketing and how it has infused all sectors of the society. First, contemporary industrialized societies now commonly speak of the market as a major force that simultaneously governs the actions of people and needs their support and allegiance. So, on one hand, the market is talked about as if it were a force out there, quite removed from human hands. "Economic realities like stagnant wages and rising prices are presented as *natural* [italics added] phenomena, almost like the weather—instead of conscious choices made by business owners, bankers, and politicians" (Jackson, 1994, p. 110). Yet, on the other hand, market globalization is discussed both as inevitability and as a tendency that requires people's constant engagement and support (Cheney, 1997a) as the United States and many other nations support efforts to expand the market through efforts at free trade and globalization of the flow of capital, and so forth. Moreover, it is described as being highly democratic at the same time that it is proclaimed to be a "wave" that cannot be resisted (see Mander & Goldsmith, 1996). So, where is the control in this picture? In this regard, the fact that many organizations cannot even explain essentially or precisely what it means for them to be market oriented or customer driven is interesting. Yet, organizations are sure that they are directing their efforts somewhere out there, to a force and an audience that includes but also transcends the demanding clients immediately at their doorstep (cf. Christensen, 1996; White, 1981).

The key point here is not that trends inside the organization are developing together with those outside the organization—that, for example, there is talk of both internal and external markets, but something deeper: Alienation has become a key social concept in this age of efficiency for the consumer when considering the ways the self is formulated. What both Marx (Kamenka, 1983) and Weber (1978) see as the tendencies of severance in modern institutions—Marx in terms of personal estrangement from the expressive nature of work as well as the means of production and Weber in terms of the compartmentalization of the self implied and even required by bureaucracy (see Sayer, 1991)—can now be seen in a their more fully communicative and rhetorical senses. To be sure, new forms of separation and reduction of the person have emerged in the world during the past few decades. And, although we can quibble endlessly over their modern versus postmodern qualities, we must look carefully at the uses and applications of symbolic resources such as efficiency. We must consider not only their alienating aspects but also the leverage symbolic resources might offer individuals and organizations for counter, oppositional, or ironic strategies. Just as the terms themselves are not univocal or stable, neither are the associated trends (see Foucault, 1978). Still, there is great cause for concern about the discourses and meanings that seem to have the upper hand in the language of doing business today. The cumulative conditioning—in the sense of habits of individual and organizational practice—that comes with these patterns of talk makes many forms of severance and reduction in today's organizational society all the more acceptable. And, with this observation in mind, we now turn to examine briefly several areas of organizational activity and their associated patterns of talk.

Discourses About Relationships Between Individuals and Organizations

Our analysis of contemporary public discourse about people in relation to organizations and organizational work life is necessarily highly selective and interpretive. However, we do hope to foster further reflection and discussion through both our categories and our cases by drawing attention to common themes and tones running through these discourses. Just as acute awareness of how other features—for example, dominant or counter metaphors (see Dunford & Palmer, 1996)—in contemporary discourse can open up new possibilities in conversation, so can full-scale recognition of patterns of talk, to be described here, perhaps lead today's society to (re)claim the human side of enterprise. We choose our categories—organizational operations, labor and employment, marketing and customer service, corporate governance and investor relations, and competition and market globalization—because they reflect certain kinds of relationships between people and organizations. *Organizational operations* describes the relationships between the controlling or deciding members of the organization (that is, to the organization's most powerful stakeholders) and the organization as a whole, including all of its members (what Simon, 1947/1997, calls *operatives* are part of this picture) and all of their activities. We focus on individual submission to the systems and processes involved in organizational maintenance, whereas the organization conducts business on a day-to-day basis. *Labor and employment* refers to the relationships between and among society, the organization (as it is represented in its decisions, actions, procedures, and discourses), and future, present, or past employees. Thus, announcements of downsizing and its meaning for employees would be considered under this heading; so would broader descriptions of employment trends. *Marketing and customer service*, discussed briefly above under the heading of the expanding influence of marketing, refers primarily to the organization's relationship with its present or intended clients or customers (generally outside the organization, although increasingly inside the organization as well)—those who purchase or who might purchase its products and/or services. *Corporate governance and investor relations* attempts to capture the range of relationships that are invisible or absent altogether (particularly in the United States and especially with regard to publicly held corporations), yet where they should be present between the investors and the invested of the organization. Here, we pose questions such as, What types of relationships are these? How are they framed or labeled? Where are the people in the process? Where are the relationships? Finally, *competition and market globalization* refers to the larger scene in which corporate actors are understood to be operating today. The frequent discussions of the market as existing seemingly beyond human hands and volition are treated here. Also, we treat here the current rhetoric of competition, particularly that which advocates competitiveness for its own sake with little or no reference to the outcomes "down the line." Obviously, these categories do not exhaust all of the possible relationships and connections between and among parts, roles, and representations of the organization and its people; however, each label highlights particular and important discursive contexts for what organizations and people are doing today. In each category, we take special note of cases where the person is either reduced to an object or is, in our estimation, inappropriately absent altogether from a domain of discourse.

Organizational Operations

By operations we refer to systems, structures, processes, and procedures communicated and used by the organization to do its business and maintain itself on a day-to-day basis. Specifically, we look at the institutionalization of the person-as-object metaphor in the organizational languages of bureaucracy and efficiency, including various specialized languages. We also point out the prescription of relationships, messages, and decision-making procedures within the organization's operations. When looking at the "makers" of efficiency in relation to the organization's operations and bureaucratic rules and regulations, we do so from three metaphorical perspectives: people above, behind, and underneath the operations.

Although the term *efficiency* remains ambiguous, it centers on such concerns as "getting the biggest bang for the buck," cutting or minimizing costs, eliminating waste, increasing speed, setting individual or collective standards for a rate of production, and more recently, benchmarking. As a "god-term" in U.S. business and in other sectors, efficiency regularly goes unquestioned as a value in decision making, whether decisions are made in the corporate boardroom, the hospital, or the school. Thus, the term can be confidently invoked without calls for explanation, without need for an account from the advocate. And, although it is indeed useful and important for organizational life, efficiency has come to subordinate most if not all other organizational goals. As a result, its extreme application can dehumanize work activities, becoming an example of what Weber (1978) feared as the dominance of "formal" over "substantive" rationality: sheer calculation of decontextualized means over consideration of broader ends and values. This has been especially true with regard to how scientific management came to be implemented in the middle decades of this century—with its overwhelming emphasis on technique and measurement—and in terms of how efficiency is touted rather unthinkingly today (see, e.g., Cheney & Brancato, 1992).

Historically, the emphasis on efficiency has been in profit-related firms, but the concern for efficiency has in fact become an obsession permeating nonprofit organizations, churches, and public sector organizations as they strive for lower costs and increased speed. In their move to redescribe and reconfigure themselves as businesses, though, many hospitals and clinics are failing to consider which of their values really ought to be the most important. As Denhardt (1989) observes, exalting efficiency as supreme does necessarily means that other organizational or individual goals will not be held in the same regard. Thus, the romance with efficiency has become an end in itself, leading to a side effect of ultimate *in*efficiencies, jeopardizing the long-term effectiveness of a strategy, larger organizational goals, the well-being of the people who carry it out, and their happiness. For example, as the first author regularly asks his students, What would education, or health care, or counseling really be like if they were redesigned with efficiency as the supreme value? Seldom is cost considered in terms of the people's cost, which, somewhat ironically, was Barnard's (1938/1968) primary concern with respect to efficiency. Foremost among the intended and unintended effects of organizational pursuits, said Barnard, is the "provision of individual satisfactions," that is, how the organization treats its employees (and by extension, other publics or groups of stakeholders). Thus, we recall the need to keep in mind the interdependence and complementary nature of efficiency and effectiveness, as described by both Barnard (1938/1968) and Simon

(1947/1997). Although Barnard and Simon each elevate the organization as a locus of identification to a point with which we are uncomfortable, they do remind people of the importance of examining the satisfaction of individual goals as an essential part of organizational performance.

We can also see the person as object as leaders and managers above the highly rationalized system impose a system on the rest of the organization and its people. As Denhardt (1989) argues, "The basis of organization is regulation; and regulation, of course, benefits most those who regulate" (p. 31). Yet, such controlling members of the organization often find the rational emphasis of regulation to be anathema to their own aspirations; that is, they seek to be as free of bureaucratic constraints as possible, able to exercise their latitude in decision making and incorporate their personal preferences into the policies of the organization. Still, with bureaucracy being the best known—and for many decision makers, the only—system around, bureaucratization is often relentless pursued even as organizations proclaim to be "post- or trans-bureaucratic" (see Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994). This is precisely why the same organizational managers who are responsible for spearheading new initiatives such as team-based structures often set themselves above the very practices they are promoting (see, e.g., Block, 1996; Grenier, 1988). Superiors, after all, are entitled to be unfettered and creative in their expression of ideas; but they may see subordinates, on the other hand, as working best when they are in fact being efficient, relatively uncreative, and following the rules (see, e.g., Ritzer, 1996).

Thus, for example, celebrated total quality management (TQM) programs are often implemented in ways that privilege technical rationality, despite their announced claims to attend to the role of the creative person in the organization (Fairhurst & Wendt, 1993). Indeed, as a number of recent critiques of teamwork, employee participation, and empowerment show plainly, Taylorism remains highly influential in organizing to maximize monitoring of the worker by himself or herself and by others (cf. Barker, 1993; Boje & Winsor, 1993; Gunge, 1995; Parker, 1993). Boje and Winsor (1993) thus refer to many programs of employee empowerment in practice as "self-Taylorism," in the sense that team members are being asked to monitor very closely one another's efficiency. Parker (1993) illustrates such dimensions to "new management" systems vividly in his description of work stations at the celebrated General Motors-Toyota "NUMMI" plant in California: Workers are expected to make frequent signals—through pulling cords and illuminating lights—to indicate to management instantaneously whether the line is on schedule, falling behind, or experiencing some other problem. Monitoring and corrections are therefore steady, mechanistic, visible, uniform, and "self-involved." That is to say, some of what passes for employee empowerment, employee participation, or workplace democracy in organizations is today conducted within the context of controlled, prescribed, and carefully circumscribed activities, involving extensive monitoring and correction through tight feedback loops (see Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), although by no means should this observation be taken as a generalization without exceptions.

Trends in managerial or administrative discourse are neither cosmetic nor trivial (Abrahamson, 1996). Addressing management fads and the reductionist language of how-to manuals and conferences, Abrahamson (1996) insists that they can in fact shape the views and practices of thousands or millions of managers who are seeking quickly comprehensible ways to cope with an increasingly complex decision-making environment. One needs only to look at the widespread adoration of programs such as reengineering to see that managerial fashions (and supporting academic research) are often taken on without much reflection as to their appropriateness in a given case, their long-term prospects for success, or their ethical implications. The influence has been so great that reengineering's chief promoter, Hammer (1996), now renounces much of what is done under that banner, reemphasizing that the heart of his program is the reordering of work around basic processes (e.g., procurement or innovation or service) and not downsizing. This is to say also that academic and lay discourses on management do sometimes influence and interpenetrate one another. In fact, the course of influence can run in either or in both directions. In addition, programs for benchmarking can be employed with little thought about how they may generate more work for employees—spending more time documenting work than doing it—or worse, that employees may be asked to try to eliminate their own jobs. It is in these ways especially that new organizational patterns, such as self-directed work teams, can feel much like old systems of strictly top-down management (see, e.g., Graham, 1993).

We see the person as object underneath the organization's operations when examining how various organizational structures come to function in practice. As noted in McPhee's (1985) analysis, structures are set in place to formalize, authorize, and direct indirectly the organization's operations (and the operations of its people, we might add). Such structures include organizational design, job descriptions, procedures, and compensation systems. These and other structures necessarily function as "substitutes for communication," in the sense that they can be handily referenced instead of there being protracted discussions at each decision point that an organization or one of its subunits faces. However, the same structures that are enabling can become oppressive for both the regulators and the regulated.

Each specialized language (HR, MIS, finance, accounting, etc.) has its own professional requirements, which can be seen in terms of specific vocabularies, procedures, and outcomes for report writing. Information about people is collapsed to fit preexisting categories, abstracted from context and processed narrowly, not as messages to be understood richly and responded to accordingly (see, e.g., Ansari & Euske, 1987). To some degree, this sort of process is necessary for the organization to communicate with its specialized environments, such as those of customers, competitors, and regulatory agencies. But, again, as organizations communicate with these constituencies, people are often reduced to numbers, convenient group labels, or specialized professional jargon (cf. Clair, 1996). In this way, it is hardly surprising that the depersonalization becomes the order of the day in many organizations, and the realm of in-depth moral or ethical reflection can seem to be a distant universe (Jackall, 1988).

This categorization includes not only the reduction but, in some cases, the removal of people altogether from organizational discourse. In an insightful but little-cited book called *Bureaucratic Propaganda*, Altheide and Johnson (1980) describe cases from the domains of government, military, business, and the economy to observe how the very language of bureaucracy is constructed within the parameters of a host of rhetorical constraints, producing results that unduly depersonalize whole matters and entire groups under consideration. As an example, they discuss how treatments of cases by governmental social service agencies typically remove persons from their biographies and social-cultural contexts. The authors explain such phenomena broadly in these terms:

> The purpose of modern propaganda is to maintain the legitimacy of an organization and its activities. The practical and day-to-day aspects of organizations are well understood by their workers, but all actions are symbolically changed when placed in the context of an official report. (p. 18)

Thus, we can see how the organization tends to decontextualize social life and reduce the roles of persons in its acts of commenting on its own activities.

We can also see people treated as objects incidentally, and in other cases, intentionally, when considering the people behind the organization's operations. We see the person-as-object metaphor relevant to the treatment of staff, particularly when noting the time managers spend on the specific processes of strategic planning, marketing forecasts, budgetary outlines, and quality control, yet failing to account adequately for the people behind these operations. Because support staff members and other makers of efficiency have been left out of the conversations over how to design and to carry out many new organizational initiatives and policies, they have also often been the least directly involved—although remaining the ones most directly affected. The traditional line and staff distinction is relevant here, although we would like to add a new twist to it by assessing talk about the largely "hidden" or forgotten segments of an organization's workplace on both sides of the line-staff boundary (see, e.g., Deal & Jenkins, 1994). So profound is this reduction of the person in the organization that whole segments of staff are sometimes treated as "overhead" in terms of organizational accounting procedures (Block, 1996). Such a problem was evident in talk about the recent U.S. federal government shutdowns (in December 1995 and January 1996), in which thousands of governmental employees were sent home while the politicians and top policy makers discussed budgets, maneuvering politically with a careful eye on public opinion polls. Deal and Jenkins (1994) compare descriptions of organizations (as if only a few of their members mattered) to an iceberg: What most U.S. citizens see are only the politicians and top policy makers; those thousands or millions who actually "keep the government running" are largely invisible. (Indeed, we can say the same thing of the organizational-cultural schism between faculty and staff at most universities and colleges.) And, in the case of the shutdowns, the employees' invisibility can be seen through descriptions in policy-setting meetings as "nonessential employees." Furthermore, if the government still ran without them—so goes the argument—then they must not really be needed.

By claiming the person-as-object metaphor to be intentionally employed in some cases, we mean to say that to the extent that they are discussed at all, the majority of staff employees are talked about in largely instrumental terms, where they help give control and predictability to the organization's activities but are not seen as instrumental to giving the customer products or services. We refer, especially, to the people who communicate and update codes of business conduct, investigate strategic options, develop capital acquisition guidelines, make sure employees stay within budgets, authorize spending and purchasing, and determine efficiency and quality levels. Decentralizing organizations does not help when it is effected chiefly so as to preserve standardization, consistency, and predictability (Block, 1996; Hummel, 1994). That is, many members of support staffs have a hard time relating what they do to the central mission of the organization—be that making widgets or educating students—except through conversations about efficiency. Deal and Jenkins (1994) and Ritzer (1996), in distinct but complementary terms, address the "mechanization" that such employees feel: Treated as cogs in a machine, they tend to treat others that way while aspiring to be bigger cogs (just as foreseen, in almost exactly the same terms, by Weber, 1978).

With respect to these same organizational members whose primary task it is to monitor levels of efficiency, we should add the ideas of meaning, connection, and purpose. The contemporary preoccupation with efficiency has led to a void of meaning for many employees whose job it is simply to make the organization more efficient. While seeking to be part of the larger process that shapes policy, and seeking recognition for being valuable contributors to the organization, such staff people as we have described here might naturally take refuge in their legitimate sources of power, rule interpretation, and application. In this way, staff persons can become entangled in and constrained by the very rules supposed to be of benefit to the entire organization. By drawing on such decisional premises as professionalization or expertise, the mystification of scientific explanations, or more commonly today, efficiency or productivity, staff members are able to widen their "space" of action (see, e.g., McPhee, 1985). But, as Block (1996) and Schultz (1996) describe (although from differing vantage points), invoking such commonly accepted decisional premises leaves little room for considering what role simply "doing my job" may have in a broader and deeper sense.

Furthermore, the predicament of the employee in many sectors can in fact be summed up in terms of her or his comparative market worth. The value of the person can be formulated in many organizational functions in terms of one's "added value" as an employee: "Becoming a better worker is the same thing as becoming a better self" (du Gay, 1996, p. 137). And, becoming a better worker frequently means in practice simply helping the organization to work faster to meet the presumed needs of customers.

Labor and Employment

The inclusion of this section probably comes as no surprise to the reader, for public discourse has been alive since 1995 with debate over—as *The New York Times* dramatically put it in the title of its recent special series of articles (March 3-9, 1996)—"The Downsizing of America." We could also highlight the success of the syndicated newspaper cartoon *Dilbert* by Scott Adams, the media attention and criticism of AT&T and other corporate giants axing employees in times of rising profits, and the related economic reports on the evening news. There is an active intention behind discussing painful organizational transformations in euphemistic ways as if there were no people involved, for instance, using the term *rightsizing* as opposed to the more traditional layoffs or firings. Talk of downsizing, rightsizing, reengineering, and so forth is now a part of people's everyday vocabularies today, as well as being represented in the language of the boardrooms and annual reports. The language of business strategy with respect to temporary workers is striking in this respect: They are often described quite literally as disposable (see, e.g., Gardner & McAllister, 1995), rightsized, or unassigned in many of the policy decisions of contemporary business (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996). Deal and Jenkins (1994) summarize well what we see as a glaring problem in much of the discussion surrounding downsizing and its variants: They explain that of the roughly 100 million people employed in the United States, about 75% are "unseen, unheard and frequently unappreciated or unrecognized"; we treat them "like a piece of equipment" (p. 13). Furthermore, we mention the metaphorical extension of "just-in-time inventory" to "just-in-time-employees," as described by Jameson (1996). And, as Rifkin (1995) observes, the growing prevalence of "outsourcing," in both its material and symbolic aspects, represents an organizational refusal to commit to individuals, largely in the interest of a "flexible employment" policy (with its double meaning).

Although the actual extent of particular corporate actions like these in today's corporate world is surely debatable, the seriousness of the general problem of dehumanization of business is by now well established. For example, a recent corporate leadership study sponsored by Cornell University found that whereas executives hoped that compassion would be one of the most important characteristics for leaders a decade from now, that same quality ranked near the bottom on a list of characteristics found in today's corporate leadership. Competitiveness and aggressiveness were first and second, respectively, in describing the status quo, whereas team builder and compassionate were first and second, respectively, among desired qualities for the future (Dyckman, 1996). Interestingly, here we find a sharp disjuncture between how corporate executives (as a group) see themselves behaving and how they think they ought to act. Thus, the severity of the contemporary corporate climate is recognized not only by critics of downsizing and other trends but also by corporate leaders themselves. Also, we mention the "moral muteness of managers" (as described by Bird and Waters, 1989), where corporate executives sometimes see moral talk to be dysfunctional, threatening "organizational harmony, organizational efficiency, and their [the managers'] own reputation for power and effectiveness" (p. 890).

Concerning downsizing, much of the public debate is now focused on two basic questions: First, is such massive downsizing really taking place or has the deterioration of employment opportunities for citizens been unduly hyped by the media? (See, e.g., Fallows, 1996.) Second, if such downsizing has actually become prevalent or severe, should this be cause for alarm or treated as to be expected in the course of doing business? The first question is largely an empirical one, because economists could presumably analyze current employment trends and compare and contrast them with those in, say, the 1960s or the 1980s. However, even here, there are sharply differing assessments of "what's happening." Cassidy (1996) feels that the only safe claim to "something new" about current employment patterns is that an increasing number of downsizing's victims in the 1990s have been middle class, educated, and affluent. By suggesting that current employment trends be regarded as "business as usual," Cassidy attempts to place those and previous employment trends outside the realm of critical question. By contrast, Beatty (1996), citing Gordon's *Fat and Mean* (1996), asserts simply that "The American economy has been failing most of its people" (p. 113). Gordon himself explains that deeper values have largely fallen out of corporate decision making and discourse: "As U.S. corporations have been traveling the 'low road,' especially since the early 1980s, growing numbers of workers have faced their employers without any protection against dismissal, without benefits, without rights, without even a modicum of 'job security' " (p. 223).

Speaking in terms of the discourse here, we offer Cassidy's (1996) article and Gordon's (1996) book to contrast the business as usual versus the economy is for the people arguments (broadly and roughly speaking). The former position clearly tends to privilege activities and choices of corporate actors, while—we must say, in all fairness—reasoning that the greatest good for society will be achieved if business can do its own thing, unfettered by regulations and government intervention. The second position tends to treat individual persons (and groups) as primary, arguing from their situations toward some corporate or government policy about corporations and proper corporate behavior. Neither argument is new, of course, but each takes on interesting nuances when it resurfaces in a new political and economic period.

We cannot resolve or even summarize in any comprehensive way the debate over the facts of current employment patterns—although it is notable that a temporary work agency, Manpower, Inc., is now one of the largest employers in the United States (see, e.g., Jameson, 1996)—nor can we offer a detailed analysis of alternative goals for capitalism. We are encouraged, though, by the fact that the moral dimensions of capitalism's development are beginning to be discussed in popular discourse (see Soros, 1997). Greider (1997), for example, questions the impulse in trade policy "to free market functions of all noneconomic considerations" (p. 70). Along with other critics, we insist that the market and its accompanying discourses cannot serve as a substitute for multidimensional social relations. Turnbull (1994) argues, "The use of only price information as a governance mechanism denies any social or moral concern in the governance of organizations or the impact which their operations may have on individuals and the environment" (p. 327).

As noneconomists but observers of the social and symbolic dimensions of the market, what we can do here is comment on the discourse we see and hear in the debate and register concerns about language that essentially minimizes the role of people, workers, employees in the economy.

Consider these excerpts, for example, in a recent, syndicated column by Martin Barnes (1996, p. A13), managing editor of the *Bank Credit Analyst*, in which he acknowledges in his title that "Wages Remain Under Pressure": "Global competitive pressures seem more likely to intensify than ease." "The U.S. labor market is becoming tight." "The news on wages is not all bad for the labor sector, however. There is a natural limit to the process of corporate restructuring." What is interesting about this discourse is not only that the individual persons (as workers, employees, managers, investors, citizens, or consumers) are basically absent but also that the writer's words seem to grant agency to things other than people altogether. No recognition is made of people behind the wages, earnings, jobs, the economy, or the labor market. That is to say, even corporations are discussed as natural forces rather than as making strategic decisions in their roles as organizational or corporate (in the broad sense) actors. In this way, people are effectively removed from the scene of corporate and collective action, whereas so-called inevitable forces such as the liberalization of trade are discussed as necessitating painful economic results for many persons (when those persons are even acknowledged at all in the discourse).

Marketing and Customer Service

Contemporary industrial society has indeed moved beyond the simple discussion of customer service as one of the primary goals of many organizations (as was enshrined decades ago in the mission statement of IBM and other large corporations) to a time when organizations are redesigned around the central theme of service to the client, customer, or consumer (du Gay & Salaman, 1992). Thus, it is now commonplace to speak of organizations as customer driven, whether those organizations manufacture automobiles, educate students (McMillan & Cheney, 1996), or provide opportunities for worship (e.g., Frank, 1996). To examine this theme more closely, we make the following observations.

First, there is an acknowledged phoniness to many of the imposed rituals surrounding customer service in the United States and elsewhere. As many foreign travelers or newcomers to the United States observe, the forced smiles and formally declared relationships in the settings of many service organizations ("Hi, I'm John, and I'll be your server for this evening") can actually serve to undermine their presumed goal: The forced relationship serves as a parody and as a mockery of what a real one might be—at least for individuals who desire that such interactions afford one the opportunity for something more than a superficial encounter (see, e.g., Ritzer, 1996). Powerful contradictions are present in the ways many organizations go about offering customer service. For example, in her critique of McDonald's, Garson (1988) reveals from interviews with employees that they are compelled to be friendly and smiling with customers at the counter at the same time that they are actively told to think of themselves as "part of a green machine."

Second, the rituals of obtaining customer or consumer input into organizational decisions, like the opinion polls that have become a fetish in themselves, are often devoid of practical meaning. Respondents become able, at a moment's notice, to produce an opinion on this or that topic, supporting a system that seldom seeks real engagement of the consumers, acting either as individuals or in groups (Baudrillard, 1983). Laufer and Paradeise (1990) offer a sharp critique of the ironies associated with the spread of the marketing attitude in their book *Marketing Democracy*, a highly provocative work that includes a treatment of the types of rhetoric involved in modern institutions such as marketing. Although arguing in general that marketing has in practice become a weak substitute for the depth of participation required of a real democracy, the authors explain that the sort of dialogue that the marketing function ordinarily presumes between the organization and the market is not often a real dialogue at all. Drawing an analogy from the realm of political public opinion, Laufer and Paradeise insist that

> The image given by the public opinion poll is the image of opinion. It reflects to the perception of the politician a symmetrical image of the political activity that shapes it. As a consumer seduced by the images of products in the economic world, the man [or woman] whose opinion is polled is also a consumer of images in the political sphere, which he [or she] regurgitates in the form of answers to survey questions. (pp. 87-88)

The repetitive circularity of this process, in most cases, can only be interrupted through the development of deeper reflection by various publics and the "opening up" of the conversation by producing organizations.

Third, a type of commodification is encouraged in which everyone involved in the process of marketing is enticed toward self-promotion and self-packaging (du Gay & Salaman, 1992). Nowhere is this clearer than in the transformations sweeping the academy today. As higher education in North America and in Europe comes under greater attack and the metaphor of student as consumer is pushed as a way to make the institution more accountable and more responsive to its primary constituency, all of the institutions' personnel and activities become available for "marketization." Fairclough (1993) argues that market pressures to be more competitive and more customer friendly have now worked their way from the broad organizational level down to the activities and careers of individual faculty and staff members in universities and colleges. The stress on the student as consumer, although being well intentioned in terms of making institutions of higher learning more accountable and reoriented toward students, ironically can have the results of (a) placing students outside the very organization in which they should be actively engaged, (b) encouraging the momentary satisfaction of student-consumer wants rather than taking a long-term perspective on the educational process, (c) requiring only a type of "pseudo-engagement" of the student in his or her role as a consumer or customer, and (d) treating in a reductionistic and commodified way the activities and the people who make up the educational process (McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Schwartzman, 1995). Thus, in such an environment, it is hardly surprising that many professors speak of marketing themselves, their classes, and their programs with gimmicks. In sum, the great irony of the spread of the marketing attitude is that in its popular form, it may actually undermine the very kind of people orientation that it presumes to foster. The very processes designed to serve people become in practice a constraining dynamic that imprisons persons both as customers and as employees who are purveyors of customers' satisfactions. As Ritzer (1996) explains vividly in his book *The McDonaldization of Society*, a machine metaphor comes to dominate such relationships just as it does the actual production of goods and services. Responses to the presumed consumer are expected to be swift, accurate, and well targeted; they are even better responses if the customer's wants are fully anticipated.

Fourth and finally, the ethos of marketing, as a field of study and as an organizational practice, is aimed at being democratic while reducing the people who are supposed to participate to a kind of "pseudo-participant" status (see, e.g., Christensen, 1995; Laufer & Paradeise, 1990). For example, the impulse of marketing is that organizations and the larger society will bend to the will of consumers who are able to express their needs and wants at any given moment—largely through the form of rapid-response surveys. The consumer's role is privileged above other roles, such as those of citizen, employee, or family member. In the process, people are drawn away from more basic concerns, such as deeper or longer term assessments of theirs and others' well-being. Everything and everybody becomes a product to be produced by the most efficient means possible. Furthermore, the very impulses from consumers who demand specific products of certain qualities and in a speedy manner are the messages that insist in a way that organizations behave with less regard for the persons employed by them (see Cheney, 1997a). Thus, in one's role as consumer, a person may be making the kind of narrow demands that help to produce the result that he or she (or another person) is downsized or burdened with extra work or replaced by outsourcing by the employing organization (see, e.g., Rifkin, 1995). There are, of course, other ironies and unpleasant and unexpected outcomes to the "marketing movement"—such as organizations' attempts to get ahead of the very trends that they are supposed to be responding to by perceiving public desires (Cheney & Christensen, in press)—but we wish to emphasize here how the market is actually a product of the efforts of people. Treating the market in the schizoid way that society does reduces the constitutive role of people in it, granting it power (and in theoretical terms, "agency") to reduce the roles of people as both the market's interactants and its presumed beneficiaries.

In the 1990s, however, not only has marketing become a fully established function but also the citizen has been largely redefined as a consumer. In our view, initially democratic and sensible impulses have ironically resulted in the reduction of the person in her or his role as a consumer vis-à-vis today's major social institutions: the corporation, government, education, health care, and so forth. We agree with Garfield (cited in Ritzer, 1996), who in his critique of Walt Disney World claims that "it occupies customers without engaging them" (p. 137). Thus, in many cases of consumers' interactions with organizations providing goods and services, involvement seems to be the growing norm. But, to the degree that customers are engaged, it is in the form of enlisting and incorporating consumers' preferences rather directly into the process of production. In auto manufacturing, for example, the consumer can become part of the design process to some extent through the sophisticated use of computer technology. As Achrol (1991) reports, some Japanese companies have even developed a system "by which the customer designs his or her car (from available options) in the dealer showroom linked directly to the factory production line" (p. 79). Management practices such as this seem to "bring the consumer into the organization," both reducing the distance between any buyer or potential buyer and the organization and making less clear the boundary between the organization and environment. However, the interaction is usually within predetermined parameters, is highly ritualistic, and is disturbingly shallow.

Corporate Governance and Investor Relations

Ironically, we identified the category of corporate governance and investor relations largely for its absence of relationship. First, we must be clear about what we mean by relationship and then explain "relationship with whom?"

Particularly in the United States, there has been an almost complete absence of relationship between the governing investors and the corporation, particularly with respect to publicly traded corporations but also with respect to many privately held ones. The absence of relationship between people is represented by the stress on the return on investment—as opposed to any kind of awareness that people within the organization are "behind" the returns. In other words, any relationship with the people of the organization-as-target-of-investment is treated strictly in instrumental terms, assuming people are considered from the investor's view at all. As one of many sorts of bottom-line discourses, the language and relations of investment actually free the investor (person or firm) from thinking at all about the organization's people or their welfare.

Consider this excerpt from an Intuit, Inc. quarterly meeting with stockholders (as cited in Campbell, 1997):

> Eight weeks ago at our analyst meeting in Mountain View, we told you we were expecting slower growth. We felt confident, that as we improved our operational capabilities, that we would make our bottom-line numbers, that we would continue to improve our profitability over time, and that we would be addressing strategic opportunities in small business, the tax business, and a clear focus in the consumer area on Internet activities. We made our bottom line through better operational execution and certainly better product quality and through lower cost of goods sold through a higher CD mix. We also had very high quality tax software this year and lower tech support costs for customers.

In this part of the meeting, the closest thing to an allusion to employees can be found in the words *we*, *clear focus*, and *operational execution*. Unfortunately, this example represents many discourses about the invested corporation and its investors, with the complete absence of the people behind the returns, operations, and in service to the customer.

This absence of relationship not only exists between the investors and the "invested people" but also in simply understanding the corporation's basic goals and objectives. When a company's performance plummets, individual investors traditionally exercise the Wall Street Rule and quickly dispose of their holdings in the failing firm (see, e.g., Useem, 1993). Seldom are options of exit or voice or loyalty, in their profoundly social senses (Hirschman, 1970), even considered within the investment context. In fact, individual and corporate investors typically lack both the personal involvement and the in-depth information necessary for relatively complete decision making, reinforcing the mere "coming and going" of detached investments. To a great extent, of course, such arrangements are not surprising, given the sheer complexity of the economy and the difficulty of identifying exactly where the boundaries around a single organization really are (Powell, 1990).

The absence of a people-oriented relationship in corporate governance can be understood even more fully when one considers the actual growth in shareholders' influence. As institutional investors have come to own more shares of stock than individual investors (e.g., 52% of General Electric, 59% of Johnson & Johnson, 71% of Digital Equipment, 83% of Intel, and 84% of Dayton Hudson—see Useem, 1993), voice has indeed become a more potent and realistic option in the world of investor relations. Such a view becomes not only acceptable but very nearly required by the way in which such business talk is conducted. A poignant illustration by Malkiel is cited by Jacobs (1991) former director of corporate finance in the U.S. Treasury Department during the Bush administration. Malkiel's examination of 300 of the largest manufacturing firms in the United States and in Japan found that investment-return-oriented investors held 67% of the U.S. equity securities as opposed to just 22% for Japan. On the other hand, relationship-oriented investments accounted for 33% of the total in the United States but some 78% of the total investments in Japan. The difference between the two countries in this regard is striking. This can be explained in part in terms of the traditional Japanese corporate policy of attending to multiple constituencies or stakeholding groups (Langlois, 1993).

Despite the significant separation of management from ownership identified decades ago (see Berle & Means, 1933), there is evidence that institutional or corporate investors exert considerable influence over managerial policy making (see, e.g., Applebaum & Berg, 1995; Bowman & Useem, 1996; Jacobs, 1991; Useem, 1993). Today, institutional investors are demanding that companies cut costs to enhance shareholder value, often to the exclusion of all other goals (Petruno, 1996). It frequently appears that many publicly held companies are not in the business to reward creditors, to inspire the devotion of employees, to win the favor of communities, or to offer the best products and services; rather, they often become obsessed with making shareholders richer (Seely, 1991). This is evidenced by AT&T's highly publicized and criticized downsizing move in the United States in late 1995—their original estimate of a cut was announced in terms of jobs, not employees—at a time of great profitability and rising stocks.

Pay for performance and tougher financial oversights are intended to bring managers closer in line with shareholders' interests, but some authors have noted that such efforts run counter to other broadly accepted principles of human resource management (Bowman & Useem, 1996). In a related study on initial public offerings (IPOs), Welbourne and Andrews (1996) revealed that although offered stock prices were positively related with the presence of a high-ranking human resources executive or a good employee relations program, the prices were negatively related to the existence of employee-reward systems such as profit sharing or employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs). Applebaum and Berg (1995) conclude that such actions indicate that investors generally react negatively to nonmanagerial extra compensation and do not value such organizational factors as employee commitment, motivation, or job satisfaction. Again, the people of the organization become almost invisible.

For investors who would want to invest, there exists a lack of communication that would enable them to understand management's long-term goals and objectives. Because most U.S. investors are detached from the businesses they fund (and must be, due to Securities and Exchange Commission regulations), investors must rely on outward manifestations, such as quarterly earnings or other accounting measures, engaging in short-term trading practices, holding investments for mere days or weeks. Former Secretary Jacobs (1991) describes how corporate or institutional investors hold on to shares for a much briefer time, on average, than do individual investors. As Applebaum and Berg (1995) explain,

> Given the hundreds of stocks in the typical institutional portfolio, and the difficulty of being knowledgeable about all of them, easily accessible information such as quarterly earnings or announced reductions in staff may carry undue weight in decisions to buy or sell shares. (p. 19)

This occurred on a grand and dramatic scale in December 1995, when, as then U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich announced the creation of 750,000 new jobs, the Dow Jones Industrial Average actually plunged 171 points. Such a negative investor response to increased employment would have been unthinkable on Wall Street 15 or 20 years ago. Further exacerbating the problem, recorded Jacobs (1991), companies stack their boards with members handpicked by top management, insulating the firm from traditional oversight thought to be provided by true shareholders and potentially diverse constituencies.

Competition and Market Globalization

Some of the salient dimensions of this domain of discourse became very evident to the first author when he was conducting fieldwork in the Mondragón worker cooperatives in the Basque Country of Spain in 1992, 1994, and 1997

(Cheney, 1995, 1997a, 1997b). Simply put, many worker-members of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation (including both managerial and non-managerial persons) spoke as if the market were a superordinate force that dictated in a direct way what sorts of policy decisions they should make and how they as organizational members would behave. "The market made us do it," aptly sums up the language used by many managers who sought to justify or provide accounts for recent trends in the corporation (consisting of 150 co-ops and 30,000 employees) toward a greater centralization of internal functions, an univocal strategy presented to outsiders, and heightened attention to efficiency throughout the organization. Seldom did respondents pause to consider who or what comprised the market and only infrequently did they acknowledge that they themselves contributed to the market in their roles as employees and consumers (as well as being employee owners of Spain's 10th-largest corporation). Possibilities for shaping the market seem almost entirely out of the question, despite the cooperatives' value-based traditions, without the comparative importance of different market pressures being much debated. Interviewees also had a hard time identifying sources for the most important cues from the market—signals that they were presumably employing to guide corporate decisions, as points of reference, in a number of new employee participation programs.

The point here is that the language of discussing the market on the level of its relevance to organizational life often presumes a disjuncture between the market and the very people, organizations, and forces that make it what it is: The company and its employees are entirely subject to the market. In the system described above, as in many other organizations in all sectors, the meaning of employee participation is moving away from a right or even a privilege to contribute to decisions that shape work to the necessity to give one's all to the work team and the organization, with the consumer or customer being the ultimate reference point (Cheney, 1997a; cf. Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). The locus of control for participation is thus in a sense moved toward the outside of the organization—directed to what the organization is thinking and believing that the consumer wants at that moment. Again, there is an element of realism in this view that has to be acknowledged. In many organizations, work processes are in fact much more participative than they were previously. But this perspective of participation tends to de-emphasize the employee-as-person-in-one's-own-right, placing her or him in the role of participant within a frame of complete submission to the consumer. Furthermore, with the predominance of such talk and thought, many organizations unintentionally forgo opportunities to promote their own internal values to the larger environment. Such unseen options for influence are especially notable in strongly value-based organizations, as in the case of Mondragón.

A recent and full-blown critique of the market, written by an economist, serves to broaden the context for this argument. Lane's (1991) analysis moves concept by concept through the contemporary economist's ways of viewing society, organizations, and people. Although any fair treatment of this opus is well beyond the scope of our article, we must mention that Lane takes issue with a number of important economic concepts that presume to deal with people. For example, Lane explains why the notion of human capital, as typically invoked, cannot begin to account for a person's intrinsic worth. Likewise, Lane finds reductionistic typical economic treatments of social relationships such as friendship and family bonds. Ultimately, he insists that neither the market itself nor today's way of talking about it account well for the things that are most closely associated with human happiness. With his humanistic critique of the market and scholarly discourse about it, Lane argues that economic models and discourse, as typically conceived, are too narrowly constructed either to treat people as completely human or to provide a full range of life's satisfactions.

Competition is typically discussed these days in much the same way as is the market, operating almost as an unquestioned god-term (see, e.g., Burke, 1966; Weaver, 1954) or perhaps as an ideograph suggestive of both material and symbolic relationships (McGee, 1980). The term becomes both sacred and beyond analysis; like efficiency and the market, it becomes an intense concentration of meaning at the same time that it functions ideologically in a sloganlike manner. "This must be done for the sake of competition," is said regularly but with little regard for a larger purpose—the point or the goal of the competition. So mindless is some of this talk, we observe, that one of the great paradoxes of competition goes unnoticed: The end or objective of competition is the end or termination of competition. Only when a particular firm is close to or has achieved what is called a monopoly does one (usually one outside the organization) perhaps stop and say: "Halt!" In most other cases, competition is promoted with little or no thought to the sorts of relationships or roles people are placed in. The matter is simple and straightforward enough when, for example, it is said that two companies ought to compete by bidding for a governmental contract. Then, the firm with the best and most efficient plan is trusted to win. But it is another matter to say that competition should constantly be promoted, without recognizing that this push can actually lead to there being far fewer players in the game (a type of reduced competition) or to less satisfied and therefore less motivated participants (as when people and organizations become demoralized) or to damaged trust throughout an industry (so that, in some cases, honest competition is no longer possible). Thus, it is hardly surprising that despite their announced allegiance to unrestricted free trade, many organizations in all sectors today are busy trying to avoid competition—by creating strategic alliances with other organizations, thus redefining some competitors as collaborators (see, e.g., Greider, 1997).

Krugman (1994) notes how the rhetoric of competition (as he calls it) has taken on a life of its own so that little attention is paid to the type of application being made in any discussion: to individuals, groups, a corporation, or a nation. So, for example, it makes some sense to talk about the competitiveness of a company because it can go out of business by failing on the bottom line. But that does not mean that individual members of the organization, on one hand, or the nation where it is based are necessarily in competition with other individuals or other nations, respectively. In fact, such talk is quite detrimental to international relations, creating the false impression that any national economy's fortunes can be completely at the mercy of another nation's policies: This reasoning not only overlooks the internal dynamics of any particular economy—in which the overwhelming proportion of economic activity is wholly domestic (yes, even today)—but also leads to easy vilification of other economic rivals. Inside the organization, too much talk about each department or work team being both an entrepreneur and a customer can actually work against collaboration and unity of purpose. Moreover, on an interorganizational level, there is much to be said for creative institutions such as "flexible manufacturing networks," which reconfigure the relations between and among organizations in more cooperative ventures that serve society's most important needs. This is exactly the sort of arrangement, involving partnerships across all three sectors, that can be found in northern Italy (see Putnam, 1993) and in some places in the United States today (see Holley & Wilkens, 1994).

Krugman (1994) explains that the metaphor of competition derives much of its appeal from its *comprehensibility*. Two sports teams vying for a title can easily be imagined—but the rampant reference to global competition actually distracts attention from more important concerns. Jacobs (1991) observes that in the United States "all preach the gospel of competitiveness"—whether Republican, Democrat, union member, or executive. Our central point here, following the analysis of Kohn (1986), is that a celebration of unbridled and intensified competition actually serves to undermine some of the very sorts of things it is supposed to achieve—by reducing people to mere instruments in the pursuit of an often ill-defined and paradoxical goal.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations: What Is a "Person" to Do?

We have observed examples of the person as object in a variety of domains we term organizational operations, labor and employment, marketing and customer service, corporate governance and investor relations, and competition and market globalization. Some readers may believe it unfair to put necessary reductions of the person in economic statistics and the standardization of persons in "bureaucratese" together with the recent, chilling announcements by major corporations of massive layoffs or the abrupt closing of plants. Thus, again, we must say that our examples should not be seen as all having equal gravity. Nevertheless, we have tried to provide a heuristic and provocative point of view for examining broad and narrow tendencies in the public discourses in and around organizations today. What we have lacked in analytical rigor, we hoped to have gained in terms of fostering further discussion.

Responsibility and accountability for our current plight are vexing issues when people are confronted with messages produced by and for organizations (Coleman, 1974). Coping with these challenges, let alone transforming them, is no small task, whether speaking of legal, moral, political, or rhetorical domains. Because of the nature and structure of corporate discourse, decisions become disconnected from their makers, the mystery of hierarchy is deepened, and the possibilities for real engagement or dialogue are reduced. The complexities and vagaries of a "postmodern" communication environment, in which messages are often fleeting and strongly self-referential, only serve to exacerbate the problems for the individual in relationship with organizations (see, e.g., Baudrillard, 1983; Cheney, 1993). Aware of Kenneth Burke's reminder (e.g., 1966) that "You can't legislate language!" we note that no simple proclamation of "people-ful" or "people-friendly" discourse will do the job. And, as some of our very examples show, there is a question of authenticity to be advanced with respect to any claims by organizations, their spokespersons, or their leaders to care about people.

Any decent assessment of the validity of an organizational assertion must come over time and in terms of the comparison and contrast of multiple messages and practices. It is not just an imperative that organizations practice what they preach, for preaching itself is a form of practice. An unkept promise, functioning as an organizational practice, may have broad implications by contributing to the general cynicism or distrust of all who consume not only the organization's products and services but also its messages.

Rather, we can recast the matter in practical, communication- sensitive terms as, How can organizations both preach and practice a genuine commitment to persons? The question is difficult and the solutions elusive, but they are nevertheless compelling and urgent. Claims to genuine customer service or an employee orientation must be measured, as well as scrutinized, against other forms of organizational discourse, such as the degree that the corporate culture promotes moral responsibility (Gibson, 1994) or the degree to which the organization's distribution of material resources matches its professed investments. An environment (and culture) of accountability and personalness must be fostered, in which organizations, their relevant constituents, and their public representatives assume responsibility not only for their production of messages but also for their potential and actual effects. As large organizations of all types play greater roles in what might be loosely called the public sphere, they must be brought to recognize and take responsibility for the ways they define such things as personhood, community, and democracy in the modern world.

Obviously, this article has only begun to scratch the surface of what we and others see as a broad-ranging and urgent issue: the prevalence of people-free and people-reducing discourse in contemporary organizational life. Our label of persons as objects is not new. Modern advertising critics, feminist theorists, lay commentators on the decline of civility in public discourse, as well critics of the rhetoric of war and racism, have all noted aspects of the person-as-object metaphor. In addition to these critiques, we might mention the array of countertrends, such as a revival of interest in business and communication ethics (Botan, 1997; Ciulla, 1991; Pearson, 1989), new calls for corporate moral accountability (see, e.g., Schultz, 1996; Sheppard, 1994), and the movement toward "green business" (e.g., Hawken, 1993), all addressing aspects of the problem described here (although not necessarily under our label).

Like Coleman's (1974) claim that corporate or juristic persons (that is, organizations) have a greater proportion of power in the world today than they did 100 or 200 years ago (although the total amount of power in the global system has increased), our thesis can serve as a heuristic and provocative launching point for a discussion, though being unprovable in any ultimate sense. The linguistic vagaries, ambiguities, ironies, and potential pitfalls entailed by a critical endeavor such as ours must be recognized. We highlight especially the dialectical tension with respect to the key organizing terms of our society—the abstract value-related terms around which people organize themselves, their projects, and their regulations of behavior. Currently, organizations promote messages about having values (as is the case for family values in political discourse), in part because it is now a business trend and it is an expected policy of all large organizations. But, what is behind the values becomes difficult to assess not only because of questions of representation and authenticity but also because of the ambiguities and transformations of the value symbols themselves. For example, employee participation, functioning as an organizing label and as a program, can be a cover-up for union-busting activities or authoritarian management practices (see, e.g., Graham, 1993; Grenier, 1988). Teamwork may well mean something dramatically different in Japanese factories than it does in those of Sweden (see, e.g., Berggren, 1992; Stohl, 1993). Self-management at work can function by shifting organizational control over labor to a new but perhaps very constraining form of peer pressure within the context of the work group (see, e.g., Barker, 1993).

At the same time, however, one can observe that at any point in the development of a dominant discourse, certain strategies for hegemony, resistance, opposition, transformation, or appropriation emerge (Foucault, 1978). For example, Foucault (1978) argues that discourse, operating as "tactical elements or blocks . . . in the field of force relations" (pp. 101-102), can run counter to the prevailing, dominant, or even hegemonic meanings. In an interesting study of dating advertisements, Coupland (1996) shows how even a constraining and easily parodied genre such as this one, where commodification of the self seems both required and desired, can afford opportunities for creative self-expression. Finally, and in a piece of analysis more directly related to the present discussion, du Gay (1996) argues that "although consumers are caught within the grid of production, they are not reduced to it" (p. 89). This is the case because persons, acting as consumers, are often able to "make something similar to what one is, establishing it as one's own through appropriating or reappropriating it" (du Gay, 1996, p. 89; cf. de Certeau, 1984).

In the case of the discourses we have critiqued here, symbols such as efficiency or human resources or the consumer are, even at the moment of being expressed in terms of dominant meanings, capable of multiple interpretations; and we can witness significant perturbations in meaning over time. Consumption, for example, has gone through radical transformations since the 19th century, when it was used primarily in reference to disease and excess. The aggressive and somewhat anti-institutional consumer advocacy movements of the 1960s and 1970s may have ironically contributed to the very situation today, where the role of the sovereign consumer tends to be privileged over others (e.g., those of a citizen, a family member, an employee, etc.).

The euphemistic turn toward labels for unemployment merits attention for better reasons than the fact that it makes for interesting cocktail party conversation. When the firing of employees at any level of a firm are called, presumably with a straight face, resource allocation, degrowth, or payroll adjustment, the use of doublespeak deserves criticism for its peopleless character. Clearly, though, careful attention must be paid not only to the prominent labels for corporate and organizational policies of today but also to what is around the labels. For it is not enough simply to call for wholesome, personalized, people-friendly language. The point, then, is to open up the conversation and keep it going, recognizing the limitations of any labels or metaphors and the possibilities for their obscuring important stakeholders in the discussion—namely, people. Discourse remains one of people's most important resources and is in fact central to what society calls democracy. Although terminology or concepts cannot be legislated, questions can be asked and an environment of decision and communication fostered in which people are more likely to take others' interests into account. To do less would be to deny the very resources that provide the basis for all of our institutions—that is, people.

Note

1. An earlier draft of this article was presented at the preconference on "The New Social Contract and the Future of Work," at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, May 1996. The authors are grateful to Lars Thøger Christensen for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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