

Book review:

# Managerialism:

## A critique of an ideology

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I was intrigued by the title of Thomas Klikauer's latest book because while I am familiar with the term *managerialism* and have on several occasions invoked it in my own work, I confess to not being entirely sure what it means. Is it a belief that managers know better than anyone else how to run an organization? Or that managers falsely believe that they know better than anyone else? Does it reflect a vision of a technocratic society shorn of political bias? Or is managerialism itself a dominant political force? In *Managerialism: A Critique of an Ideology*, Thomas Klikauer argues that it is, above all, an ideology, a belief system that promotes the interests of a narrow sector of society as the general interest. And, he believes that this ideology is the dominant societal discourse of the 21st century. For Klikauer, this is decidedly not a good thing, as he blames managerialist hegemony for much of the pathologies of modern life. He argues that managerialism is responsible for promulgating a "rat race" mentality that causes human beings to view each other as competitors to be defeated or tools to be used to capture wealth, and to a culture of violence that promotes war among nations, terrorism, and poverty, and reaches down to infect households (e.g. domestic violence) as well. Managerialism is the latest form of exploitative capitalism, promoting a reckless and everproliferating manufacture and marketing of cheap consumer products that have pushed the earth to the brink of global-warming disaster. Thus, defeating managerialism might be literally a matter of species-survival. This book is a work of social criticism in the Marxian tradition, meaning that Klikauer's aim is to not merely understand a managerialism-dominated world, to unmask the falseconsciousness of its belief system that keeps all of us running the rat race, but to change it as well. *Managerialism: A*

*Critique of an Ideology* is organized into 14 chapters that progressively lay out his case. Chapter 1 is introductory/definitional, describing what *managerialism* is: a merging of management techniques with the belief that these techniques are the best way to organize society. While the society thus produced is decidedly right-wing in nature, Klikauer argues that though managerialism often dove-tails with Hayekian neo-liberal ideology, it is fundamentally different in that while the latter promotes a specific political program revolving around the creation of "free" markets unfettered by government regulation (save to protect all-important private property rights), managerialism's only goal is to organize all society in the same way that corporations are organized. And since corporations are managed hierarchically and undemocratically, this means that managerialism's vision is of a society in which non-managers have little substantive influence on the major decisions that affect their lives. So why do we put up with this? Klikauer argues that people, particularly in Western countries, have acceded to managerialist principles for two reasons: that it has "delivered the goods" in terms of a rising standard of living for many, and because we have been brainwashed to believe its doctrine of TINA, "there is no alternative," way to run a modern society. Chapters 2 through 5 describe how managerialism has spread from its Scientific Management roots to "colonize the life-world" of people and dominate society.

Chapter 2, which details managerialism- as-an-ideology, is one of the book's strongest. Klikauer is able to give examples as to how managerialist thinking has pervaded not just organizations but many other aspects of the lifeworld (e.g. as individuals, we no longer "have" feelings, we "manage" our feelings). He describes the lack of democracy under managerialism in terms both humorous and frightening as when he claims that "the individual is free to exert microscopic levels of inconsequential autonomy over life's irrelevancies ... while simultaneously life's path has been set as ... an oscillation between work, consumption, and death" (p. 26). This cycle is buttressed by fellow-travelers that wittingly or unwittingly aid and abet

managerialism, including neo-liberal economists, corporate mass media, indistinguishable political parties, religious movements, and even ostensibly “critical” management theorists. These factors produce a public that has been brainwashed into a falsely conscious state whereby even obvious negative externalities of managerialism, such as poverty, war, and environmental destruction, are disregarded because of TINA.

In Chapter 3, Klikauer dwells on the role that management schools and business writers play in buttressing managerialism, unpacking terms like “human resource management,” “team empowerment,” and the “triple bottom line” to reveal their repressive qualities.

In Chapter 4, Klikauer argues that labor unions, once a source of resistance to management, have either been bought off with high wages or destroyed by anti-union government intervention, and no longer pose a threat to management control of the workplace. At same time (Chapter 5), the arts and cultural communities have also been subverted by corporate money, such that the ordinary citizen is inundated with mindless paparazzi-driven celebrity entertainment which prompts consumption and serves as a distraction from mind-numbing work, the destructive externalities of business, and elite control of political processes. Chapters 6 through 10 discuss managerialism’s relationship to social factors such as authority, democracy, and tendencies in management and psychological scholarship.

Chapter 6 roots managerialism’s ability to achieve compliance to the famous experiments of Asch and Milgram, which demonstrated how ordinary people are often willing to set aside their values and ethics when commanded to by authority figures; furthermore, it is easy for authority figures to make decisions that cause harm to others or the environment when they are far removed—geographically, socially, or financially—from consequences, as high-level executives, political, and military leaders often are.

Chapters 7, 9, and 10 discuss the relationship between managerialism and science, particularly research conducted by management scholars in think tanks and universities. The notion that business schools are incubators that produce professors and students (who become managers) committed to managerialism is a theme that pervades the book, and Klikauer is able to make points that are probably familiar to many academicians reading this review: the pressure from administrators to publish in journals that have been assigned high “quality points” by “citation indices,” the preference for lots of atheoretical empirical research over book-length theoretical works, and the imposition of standardized curricula and pedagogy by accrediting agencies concerned with making business schools more responsive to their “customers,” defined as the corporations that hire the students, all buttress his arguments about a creeping managerialism of the academic lifeworld. The result is an army of career-building management professors churning out reams of allegedly objective research supporting the managerial exploitation of labor under the guise of TINA.

In the middle of all this, Chapter 8 focuses on managerialism’s impact on democracy, particularly the individualism that characterizes modern society. Individualism works with managerialism because it inhibits the development of collective resistance to managerialism inside and outside the workplace. The result is a docile public, willing to accept environmental destruction and domination at work as the price of access to a higher standard of living, defined as the ability to acquire mass quantities of cheap consumer goods. In the final chapters of the book, Klikauer turns to the “... the point is to change it” aspect of Marx’s thesis to examine how managerialism might be challenged and what ethically and environmentally sustainable alternatives could replace it as a mode of organizing modern life.

Chapters 11 and 12 argue that the first step in this process is unmasking managerialism as an ideology so as to create an awareness of managerialism’s colonization of our minds. He

contrasts traditional Critical Theory, of the kind advanced by theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, with the more recent Critical Management Studies (CMS) movement. Klikauer argues that while the former constitutes a genuine, revolutionary critique of managerialism capable of lifting this veil of false consciousness, opening our eyes to the oppressive, speciesthreatening nature of managerialism, CMS is in this regard impotent, a “distorted version of critical theory adjusted to suit managerialism” (p. 215), and its adherents are members of the management-scholar hierarchy and hence hopelessly co-opted by managerialism. Klikauer argues that only a “critical-linguistic” analysis conducted by truly radical, outsider scholars, can unpack the hidden meanings in managerialist buzzwords.

While Chapter 13 reiterates the ways managerialism protects itself from critique, Klikauer argues that these protections are not sufficient, as managerialism’s “mythological and ideological substance” can indeed be dissolved by “exposing it to the power of critical theory” (p. 217).

Unfortunately, the concluding chapter (Chapter 14) fails to deliver on how this will or can happen. Here, Klikauer vacillates, acknowledging that critique alone is not enough to halt the managerialist machine, while nevertheless claiming that this critique “remains valid and rational” (p. 274). The book ends with a vague nod towards recent street protests of the kind conducted by the “occupy wall street” movement as perhaps the beginning of practical action against managerialism, but Klikauer also reiterates doubts about its efficacy in the face of managerialism’s immense power to squash or assimilate such threats. Klikauer’s writing style is refreshingly acerbic; he minces no words in describing the perils to human and environmental life he believes are caused by managerialism, a style I also enjoyed when reading one of his previous books (Klikauer, 2010). The book is also broad in scope, addressing the impact of managerialism on the entire world, including the world beyond Western society and encompassing the natural environment. There is also an intellectual, ethical, and political

passion to the work that impacts the reader. Klikauer truly believes that managerialism is leading the human species over a cliff, and he has the prophet’s ability to bring that sense of urgency across. Even when a specific point struck me as less than convincing in a technical sense, I still often found myself being carried along anyway by the sheer emotional force of the writing. Klikauer is also appealingly eclectic in his influences. His world-view of an ethical human society derives from an unusual mix of Kantian, Hegelian, and Frankfurt School critical philosophy that I found enjoyable to chew on intellectually, even aside from its application to the issue of managerialism. However, I had problems with this work as well. Despite the colorful and passionate language, I still found the book difficult to grind through, because Klikauer reiterates the same critical points about managerialism continuously. This causes the chapters to blur into each other, making the reading experience less than aesthetically enjoyable, and I developed the impression that the same argument could have been made in a monograph-length paper.

Second, while I found some aspects of the book refreshing, there was also the sense that Klikauer is largely pouring old wine into a new bottle. His description of managerialism is very reminiscent of George Ritzer’s (1993) “McDonaldization” thesis, down to Klikauer’s frequent invocation of the phrase “irrationality of rationality,” a term that Ritzer also used to describe how ostensibly hyper-rational management processes were actually producing dangerous outcomes for many people. In reading this book, I often felt that one could substitute the word “McDonaldization” for “Managerialism” and the arguments would have fit the same. Similarly, his argument that the great mass of us have been duped by mass media and mindless entertainment into accepting a debilitating work–consumption–work cycle of life that breeds alienation rather than self-actualization is substantively little different from the “false consciousness” and “culture industry” arguments made by Frankfurt School critical theory philosophers from the 1940s through the 1970s. This work was later criticized by postmodernist scholars for its elitism (e.g. how

has the critical theory philosopher managed to avoid these same sheep-producing influences?) and also structural Marxists for its alleged over-emphasis on “superstructural” (cultural) aspects of the socius and neglect of economic influences on modern life, but Klikauer ignores those critiques.

Also, Klikauer explains the need for his book by claiming that managerialism is a neglected topic within critical studies of society. But, there have been prominent recent works that tackle managerialism from a radical/critical point of view, and that make essentially the same arguments about it as does this book (e.g. Locke and Spender, 2011; Parker, 2002).

Again, Klikauer does not engage with these works in any meaningful sense, and this pervades the text: while the book is chock-full of citations, there is little engagement/debate with the ideas cited. There is a “lone wolf” style to his scholarship, as if he were Marx studying alone in the British Museum library, outside the academy. Related to this last point about a writer’s structural position is Klikauer’s dismissive treatment of CMS, which he denounces as being unable to critique managerialism because as professors working at managerialized universities and members of managerialized institutions (such as the United States’ Academy of Management), CMS scholars are too immersed, both career-wise and intellectually, in the managerialist machine to develop a critical stance towards it. But Klikauer himself is no outsider either, as his professorship at a (presumably managerialized) university and his willingness to publish with Palgrave, a major for-profit publisher, attest. Klikauer surely realizes that the audience for this book will be almost entirely other professors and students at (managerialized) universities and will likely have a much bigger impact on building his career than on the minds of the broader public, so I found his arguments of CMS careerism and “critical academics playing with each other” somewhat disingenuous. Indeed, given his claims about how managerialism has almost totally infiltrated modern society, I am not sure where an “outsider” stance could be established. Most importantly, *Managerialism:*

*A Critique of an Ideology* fails, on its own terms, to deliver the goods. Klikauer emphasizes Marx’s point that the goal of meaningful criticism is not merely to describe the world but to change it, and yet, this book offers almost nothing to explain either

- (a) what practical action should be taken to defeat managerialism or
- (b) what type of world we should build to replace our managerialized one, other than the vague notion that it should be ethical in a Kantian/Hegelian sense and not destroy the natural environment.

This differs from his book on business ethics (Klikauer, 2010), in which he proposed concrete structural changes in corporate governance (i.e. ethics councils) to curb onerous corporate behavior. In contrast, *Managerialism: A Critique of an Ideology* seems to peg most of its hope for societal transformation on the notion that looming environmental disaster will cause a sea-change in the minds of people away from consumerism and other aspects of managerialism, much as Marx thought that rising poverty and misery as a result of wealth concentration would cause workers to rise up against capitalism. But if there are signs that this is happening, they are not very visible as of yet.

## References

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