

Do you believe in the promised land? Contrasting images of utopia in popular management writing and the music of Bruce Springsteen

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This paper reviews how work and organisations are represented in the music of Bruce Springsteen's and compares it to certain utopian tendencies of the representations of work in much popular management literature. The issue such a comparison raises relates to how knowledge of work and organisation is represented in an example of popular culture stands in stark contrast to how knowledge of organisations is represented in particular types of management literature – one with a tendency to utopian triumphalism and the other with a tendency to ironic reflection. In the paper it is argued that this contrast is one where popular culture can offer the possibility of a voice from below, whilst popular management theory tends to speak from a voice from above. Further, it is argued that Springsteen is important to understanding organisations because he provides a critical and grounded perspective on the experience of work. This importance lies in how Springsteen's songs explore the 'difficulties and hardships of working life; he depicts the 'hopes and fears of an ethnic working class from which he emerged with a clarity and empathy' (Cullen 1997: 4). Further, he does this not by romanticising the lot of the working class, but rather by 'laying out in uncompromising terms the shattered lives and broken countenances that make up the dark side of American existence as it is experienced by working people for whom the American Dream is a taunting cruel, and ungraspable abstraction' (Smith 2000: 303). He offers a 'critique of the promise of political economy that spins out lies and engenders dreams that can never be fulfilled' (Pratt 1990: 193); dreams to which management writers are so often complicit in (re)producing. Here, therefore, popular music will be used as a means to critique popular management.

In contrast to Springsteen, the paper discusses popular writing about organisations in terms of the enlightenment tradition of social Darwinism. This is a tradition that dates back to the 1800s, when Herbert Spencer proposed a theory of social development justified and explained through the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin. This theory was used to legitimate western imperialism by suggesting that societies develop in accordance with the rule of the 'survival of the fittest' – where 'the best' aspects of culture and society triumph and survive (Kahn 1995). In this paper it is argued that this spirit of social Darwinism is still alive and well in organisations. In particular, popular discourses such as those of organisational culture, like imperialism before them, propose an ideal to which organisations should strive in order to develop and progress; they propose a textually manifested utopia. This Utopia is presented as a *new work order* (Gee, Hull and Langkshear 1996) – an ideal work culture – that is reflexively created through the reading and writing of contemporary management fashion. Such organisations – utopian dreamlands where heroic managers lead entrepreneurial and

'motivated' employees – have become the other against which managers and organisations are compelled to evaluate themselves and strive to become.

By discussing an exemplary set of Springsteen's songs dating from the mid-1970s to the present, the paper explores a popular perspective of utopia and working life that is quite different from that of popular management. In particular, where management writers seem enthralled with the simplicity of a promised land, Springsteen shows that work is not so simple. His songs are concerned with 'the effects of poverty and uncertainty, the consequences of weakness and crime; they trawl through the murky reality of the American Dream; they contrast utopian impulses with people's lack of opportunity to do much more than get by' (Frith 1988: 98). Thus, 'the bulk of Springsteen's work uses class oppression as a vehicle for exploring themes of individual survival, [and] it works so well because the rocker absorbed his history lessons deeply. He readily sees both the distance between the promise of the United States and the often painful reality, as well as the power of music' (Cowie 2001: 115). For Springsteen the promises of the promised land, whilst still culturally compelling, have not been kept. The result of this is a tension between two realities – the utopian desire for redemption through work and the existential dissatisfaction with the experience of work. It is this utopia, with its 'promises of prosperity, equality and mobility for all, which haunts the working people who populate Springsteen's music' (Smith 2000: 306). For Springsteen there is an ironic discrepancy between what work pretends to offer and what actual working people experience in 'reality' (ibid).

Thus, whereas for popular management there is a belief that organisations can be transformed into 'better' places where people work cooperatively in pursuit of visionary common goals, for Springsteen 'progress' means retaining a belief in redemption through work whilst having to continually face evidence that suggests that this redemption cannot be realised. Springsteen's characters are able to portray a sense of anger and disillusionment whilst still being able to hold on to their dreams and indeed, the pride and will to survive them (Cullen 1997). Hence, for Springsteen the Utopia is complex and ironic, for management it is simple and realisable. What Springsteen offers, therefore, is the opportunity to understand organisations from an ambivalent, ironic and contradictory perspective without seeking to 'get it right' with singular and final explanations or prescriptions.

The paper concludes by arguing that Springsteen's poetics provide a role model for understanding organisations. This is a model that emphasises 'egalitarianism; an instinctive compassion; a pragmatic scepticism toward utopian solutions; and ... a bracing humility about human endeavour' (Cullen 1997: 198). This moves away from the modernist utopian rhetoric which 'promises to deliver a meaning which shatters social reality and replaces it with something better ... [where] people are empowered by their conviction in an, as yet, not existing circumstance' (Letiche 1996: 207). Instead what remains is an attempt to understand the stories of how people might make sense of their organisational circumstances without alluding to the incredulity of utopian meta-narratives that assume that management both can and should control the circulation of meaning within an organisation. Indeed, for Springsteen, it is the conflict between the imagined utopia and the experienced organisation, rather than its resolution that is a driving force. Springsteen's characters do not necessarily offer any real (or false) solutions to the problems of working life, but they do use popular culture to present a sensitive portrait of the alienation and tension that so often results from work (Cowie 2001). It is argued that this acute sensitivity and empathy is of key value to the understanding of working life and of organizations – one without false promises and one that acknowledges and represents some of the paradoxes and problems of work.

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