

# Rain-Dancing with Pseudo-Science

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**Abstract:** In this polemical essay the authors ask whether computerisation has become the neurosis of our age. By comparing the application of IT methodologies with ritual behaviour within human social institutions, they propose that the so-called rationality of management science, with its tidy benchmarking, auditing, categorisation and performance measurements etc., is actually a pseudo-science. They show that from the position of Nietzschean epistemology, this rationality is merely a false claim to the instrumental efficacy of data modelling, that is indistinguishable from the rain-dancing of primitive tribes.

**Keywords:** Auditing; Categories; Computerisation; Data modelling; Epistemology; Institutions; Management science; Measurement; Methodology; Morality; Ritual

## 1. INTRODUCTION: UNCERTAINTY AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

According to Douglass North (1990) 'Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change.' Like North, we will use the term institution not only to refer to the 'rules of the game in a society' but also to indicate society itself and any political, social or economic grouping within it. The political, social and economic institutions of our industrialised society are facing a contagion of uncertainty and self-doubt as we enter the new century. As products of the Machine Age, they may have no place in the coming Information Age. According to Marcuse (1991), 'what is at stake is the compatibility of technical progress with the very institutions in which industrialisation developed', and vice versa. A spectre haunts these institutions, and society itself, that perhaps they are both products of the twentieth century with no place in the next. Can they change and confront the challenge, or will they hang onto the past and face extinction?

Too often modern institutions/societies respond to this uncertainty with bravado and the ritual (thought-less) application of pseudo-scientific procedures and methods. Audits, analyses, surveys, systems and management reviews

abound: a magic fluid, 'information', is claimed as the answer to all their problems. 'The gathering of information provides a ritualistic assurance that the appropriate attitude about decision-making exists. Within such a scenario of performance, information is not simply the basis for action. It is a representation of competence and a reaffirmation of social virtue. Command of information and information sources enhances perceived competence and inspires confidence' (Feldman and March 1981). Information is good, more information is better, and computerised information is best. However, this is a mechanistic view of information, not the systemic interpretation needed for the coming New Age. For these crazy algorithmic (so-called) solutions delivered by 'the science of management', most often aided and abetted by the wizardry of information technology, have themselves become a problem! The ever-growing demand for such answers displays all the symptoms of a societal neurosis. 'Madness is something rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule' (Nietzsche 1990). Such is the madness of our age – a vicious circle amplified by technology, of even more 'solutions' causing ever-deepening neuroses!

Underlying so much of the general sickness is a mechanistic drive for categorisation and standardisation, and by implication comparison, measurement and method, in the mistaken belief that they deliver the utility of valuable 'knowledge'. 'I would like to treat the question of the value of knowledge as it would be treated by a cold angel who sees through the whole shabby farce. Without anger, but without warmth' (Nietzsche 1979). But anger

can never be far away from those who suffer the excesses of computerised categories, standards, measures, methods and audits which take for themselves the trappings of science and technology, and thereby carry the weight of meaning, authority and legitimacy derived from, rather pilfered from, the dominating position of science and technology in our society.

‘[T]o attempt to avoid generalisation and interpretation by confining oneself to so-called “technical” problems of enumeration and analysis is merely to become the unconscious apologist of a static society’ (Carr 1990). Too often this common sense is overlooked on account of training (habit) and is abandoned in favour of the logico-mathematical ostentation of pseudo-science. Categories, and their consequent numerical labels, are presumed autonomously and uniquely meaningful. ‘Technological reality has become political reality’ (Marcuse 1991); the magic and ritual of technological means and their accompanying belief systems have become political ends.

It is only a small step to assume that all reality is equivalent to, and treated as identical with, the measurement data that represents it. Measurement is presumed to be ‘independent’ outputs, untainted by human bias. That it is governed by assumptions and beliefs is quietly forgotten, as is the recognition of the human condition as one of perpetually changing questions of appropriate or inappropriate choice of categorisation, of interpretation and generalisation.

All around are categorical and numerical bias, leading to the dubious application of methods attempting to map social phenomena into discrete sets, numbers, symbols and functions, when there should be a preference for balanced, sensitive and rational assessment of each situation – each unique but interrelated! ‘Our usual imprecise mode of observation takes a group of phenomena as one and calls it a fact: between this fact and another fact it imagines in addition an empty space, it isolates every fact. In reality, however, all our doing and knowing is not a succession of facts and empty spaces but a continuous flux. Now, belief in freedom of will is incompatible precisely with the idea of a continuous, homogeneous, undivided, indivisible flowing: it presupposes that every individual action is isolate and indivisible; it is an atomism in the domain of willing and knowing. Just as we understand characters only imprecisely, so do we also facts: we speak of identical character, identical facts: neither exists. Now, we praise and censure, however, only under this false presupposition that there are identical facts, that there exists a graduated order of classes of facts which corresponds to a graduated world-order: thus we isolate, not only the individual fact, but also again groups of supposedly identical facts (good, evil, sympathetic, envious actions, etc.) – in both cases erroneously. The word and the concept are the most manifest ground for

our belief in this isolation of groups of actions: we do not only designate things with them, we think originally that through them we grasp the true in things. Through words and concepts we are still continually misled into imagining things as simpler than they are, separate from one another, indivisible, each existing in and for itself. A philosophical mythology lies concealed in language which breaks out again every moment, however careful one may be otherwise. Belief in freedom of will – that is to say in identical facts and in isolated facts – has in language its constant evangelist and advocate’ (Nietzsche 1986).

The proselytes of this methodological bias hold a most peculiar view of humanity, and spread the evil lie that rigidly logical thought is a virtue. They are irritated by a humanity that created formal logic, or rather was granted access to the true and wonderful enlightenment of logic, only for it to be squandered by human failings – failings that can only be righted by the creation of perfect systems, systems untouched by Original Sin. Their heaven on earth is possible, but only by imposing a tidy synthetic intelligence on humanity – an intelligence disembodied and then automated. To them knowledge too can be disembodied, formally represented in isolation from its context, and engineered. They are blind to the fact that in doing so they deny humanity all that makes it human.

These sermonisers of logic see the world as rule-based, and their role is to find and apply the rules, and introduce audits to ensure/impose conformity. In tune with all bureaucrats, ignorance of their rule-base will be no excuse. The only risk allowed will be technical, methodological, and that will be overcome by the perfected machine. ‘Awkward’ and thus ‘irrational’ people, disparagingly called Luddites, will be audited into towing the line; and for ‘irrational’ read ‘evil’ in the ideology of ultimate tidiness, that sees computers as untainted by Original Sin. Worse, totalitarian ‘technocrats’ insist that everyone becomes an automaton in a utopian absolutism of Original Sin. Their act of faith is that an arrowed mesh of weighted nodes functioning as a map will magically synthesise the answer to the world, the universe and everything: notation is not distinguished from the material, and yet as Charles Ives so succinctly put it: ‘the music is not in the notes’. Three thousand years of philosophy have failed to find an answer to the human condition, but a chart loaded into a glorified adding machine will?

## 2. THE NEUROSIS OF TIDINESS

This categorical insistence on denying the ‘excluded middle’ (Watzlawick 1993) is merely a statement of tidiness, a limited snapshot of an ordered functionality and utility. This tidy approach is just another in a long line of technological enterprises whereby mankind feels it can subjugate nature by mere force of will; a utopian insistence

on the 'instrumental efficacy' of category and method. The sheer power of an all-pervading 'optimistic rationality' insists that things will get better, and that 'progress' is achievable through rational thinking, particularly when expressed as scientific thinking; or rather pseudo-scientific thinking, its illegitimate offspring when scientific method is focused on nebulous societal or organisational issues. That 'pseudo' lies not in the method itself but in its misapplication: 'the victory of scientific method over science' (Nietzsche 1968).

There is an ideological thuggery in this dominant mindset of misapplication, and so it was inevitable that today's societies and their institutions would promote this peculiar form of intellectual imperialism as they confront rampant uncertainty. Today as societies and institutions lose control of their own destinies, their very role appears increasingly ambiguous. They and their members become almost schizophrenic. Their bizarre behaviour is a recognised psychological disorder, 'obsessive compulsive neurosis'; increasingly to be seen as a societal and an institutional disposition. When faced with profound uncertainty, members of neurotic societies want their world to be tidy, and they turn to the modern-day shaman to force tidiness on it with categories, procedures, systems, measures and machines. There is a world of functionality, neatly described in networks of boxes, circles, lines and arrows; a world controllable by 'bubbleware'. There is a prevalent belief that, through the tidiness of method, first comes control and then success! But tidy categorisation and classification are notoriously difficult, for it means attempting to set a boundary – a boundary that is chosen according to the human observer's particular purposes and priorities. 'Even the categories in which experiences are subsumed, collected, and ordered vary according to the social position of the observer'(Mannheim et al 1985).

Inevitably, any choice of boundary is a source of doubtful classification: social systems are intrinsically ambiguous. Such ambiguity cannot be resolved into some tidy pattern of symbols, and jumping onto a bandwagon of pseudo-scientific methods is merely impulsive stress relief. Recognising the inevitability of ambiguity means that even the very self-identification of members of the society/institution involves purpose-driven choice. Many institutions are unwittingly tearing themselves apart in a futile quest to compare themselves against some imagined and imaginary ideal and unambiguous sterile set of standards. These standards are often unarticulated, because they are subliminal images only received by those 'on the inside', and so they cannot be articulated against any objective ideal that must necessarily transcend the aspirations of any particular society. There can be no standard of quality, but this doesn't stop the 'quality police' in their self-righteous and sanctimonious enforcement.

Following close on the heels of this categorisation and

classification comes measurement. However, the validity of measurement depends on who is counting, how, what and why they are counting; and what they do with the measurement. In the physical world such quantification can claim appropriateness since there is mostly a clear and stable relationship between what is being measured and the measuring scales used as a comparator. They share a common physical existence, a common physical dimension, a linearity within the confines of a theory that lends itself to empirical experimentation. However, 'often a measurable quantity is not a property of a thing, but a property of its relations to other things ... most measurements ... are concerned with some kind of projection ...' (Max Born, quoted by Adolf Grünbaum in Frank 1954). Consequently, pseudo-scientists measure what is measurable, often simply because it can be measured, and then insist on an untestable causal identity between the quantity being measured and the quality under investigation.

On the basis of such inappropriate projections is it then appropriate to force these measurements into a systematic analysis? 'I mistrust all systematises and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity' (Nietzsche 1968). The neurotic urge in today's society to categorise and measure places key aspects, such as the wishes, aspirations and qualities of its members, on the sidelines. What is missing is a sense of the 'excluded middle', the flux, the wholeness and a sense of irony and 'becoming', a recognition of the perverse arrival of circumstance, that mocks this insistence on a measured tidiness.

Those who impose tidy procedures refuse to accept that consequences of actions are not correlated with intentions. Such a refusal starts a feedback loop of its own. Neurotic institutions attract tidy minds, who in turn insist that the world is the way they want it to be, the way it 'ought to be', thereby reinforcing the institutional neurosis. This 'born-again' madness of the whole has the benefit of absolving the particular insanity of the individual tidy mind. Tidy minds think linearly, and they fail to recognise the effect of the disorderly multiple feedback from an organisation's own outputs, including their own actions derived from a 'will to tidiness'. It is all too common that numerical data precipitate automatic decisions and 'knee-jerk' reactions, even when those acting suspect that their 'figures' are spurious. This prevalent form of linear thinking denies all but negative (and thus tidy) feedback. It totally rejects the idea that the act of imposing tidiness on an untidy world, or on a world that may be ordered but in a different way, can itself lead to an uncontrollable chain reaction that explodes as extreme hazard.

So why does society ignore this fundamental source of danger? Because the assumption of 'sameness' in categorisation throws up temporary regularities, useful regularities, a localised logic, which can be used as the ritualistic basis of models that guide society through the turbulence of its

existence. But every time members conspire with this error, when they compare, and in particular measure (compare with an artificially designated standard unit – an ideal), a debris of detail, the difference between ideal/classification and the particular case, will be strewn around and about.

Professionals know they are working in operational environments that are messy and vague, much of it caused by this debris of detail in the unfolding history of a society or institution and its environment, and that lies outside any tidy design: ‘the devil is in the detail’; the devil is in the debris. The build-up of these memory fragments, when reconstituted as opportunities and risks by a particular contextual significance and relevance, feed back to undermine any regularity and have the potential of changing the interrelated dispositions of both society/institution and environment. They can emerge as either an erratic and unpredictable nature and the potential of disorder, or beneficially as the seeds of real opportunities.

In such an ill-structured and turbulent environment, positive feedback has an amplifying and magnifying effect, the so-called butterfly effect of chaos theory, where the marginal and insignificant trends of today become the major opportunities and risks of tomorrow. But rather than minimising the risks and maximising the opportunities nourished by this systemic behaviour, many auditing systems and informatising methods are built on barren narrow intentions, practical behaviourism and simple preconceived goals that lead inevitably to the foregoing of emergent opportunities and instead precipitate counter-productiveness.

The existence of positive feedback implies that there can be no permanent control over any society that is continuously evolving and emerging, or over any of its institutions; the imposition of standardised and standardising categories comes with the inevitability of long-term damage. The perversity of consequence turns design logic on its head. There can be no expectation of ‘being in control’. Control only exists in the sense of purposefully formulating and precipitating actions or intentions; but this is not being in control of consequences. In learning to live with this uncertainty, societies cannot deny inevitable ambiguity and vagueness. Individuals must be free to comment on themselves and the ambiguity of their position, but it takes experience, not expertise, to come to terms with the problems of a dynamic environment.

### 3. WHAT IS PROBLEM SOLVING?

How do we come to terms with these problems? In the early days of operational research, Polya (1945) suggested in his book *How to Solve It* that problems should be solved in four phases: understanding the problem, devising a plan,

carrying out the plan and looking back. With this ‘new aspect of mathematical method’, he was succinctly formulating a general approach: without understanding the problem, a solution can only be found by coincidence. If the problem is understood, a plan will most economically lead to the desired solution. Carrying out that plan and looking back in order to evaluate what has been done will give experience for further problems. Indeed, if things go wrong, the failure can be traced back to one of the phases. It seemed an ideal way for the evolution of a cumulative stock of experience and knowledge.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when the problem of building successful administrative procedures for governing (managing) a society or institution is investigated comprehensively, this way of systematic problem solving appears ideal, for it fits the scientific spirit of the times. With the clear separation of tasks, a transparent arrangement of the development effort can be achieved. Such a generic formal-rational approach, that of a linear process based on a series of logical steps, delineated by checklists and buttressed by a carefully selected set of techniques, has the benefit of making explicit the assignment of tasks and responsibilities. As far as many institutional procedures are concerned, this method of reiterating phases can still be expected to bring about standing administrative systems that conform to requirements when dealing with well-understood tasks such as billing or stock-keeping.

The general statement of the process for drawing up a ‘conceptual model’ automatically produces a formalised approach, a ‘methodology’, that in turn fosters the development of a comfortably secure bureaucracy, under the assumption that all is meaningful information. However, the ensuing surrogate method, which designates formal categories to observations, can actually become detrimental to the informal organisation that surrounds it because formality and informality are not assigned contingently. When the range of applications stretch beyond the purely logical/mathematical or straightforwardly functional context, a troublesome uncertainty principle switches in.

When truly human capabilities such as decision making, quality, expertise or deliberation are targetted, this method is completely at a loss. The challenge of individual perspectives, as expressed in a very wide context, therefore, goes beyond a mere reformulation of administrative requirements. Feedback loops, both positive and negative, form spontaneously within this framework of rigid phases, and these considerably complicate the approach. The feedback of changed behaviour on account of the initiation of a development effort itself, and others’ reactions to it, can change the understanding of the problem and sometimes even the problem itself. The inert and rigid sequence of a few phases simply cannot cope with such conditions without degeneration.

## 4. METHOD AS MAGIC

As a consequence of the recognition of its failure, logico-mathematical preciseness has long ago vanished from the institutional agenda of management practitioners. More recently their methods have been promoted more for the potential to bring out problems explicitly, to encourage communication and thereby to act as a learning tool, rather than for their potential to formulate solutions. Administrative systems are part of that evolving society and, therefore, the role they play and the way in which they are dealt with also evolve simultaneously. Yet it is by no means clear how this evolution should be understood, and in fact the subsequent change in method over the previous decades displays the change of attitude towards what an appropriate framework for reviewing institutional procedures should look like. That it should be understood is beyond doubt. However, the current emphasis on supporting internal and external communication and on 'organisational learning' (see, for example, Casey 1993; Hague 1993; Morgan 1998) is clear evidence that the discussion about appropriateness has now reached a level of ambiguity where it is hoped that by encouraging analysis and communication somehow a sense of direction will emerge. Worse, it has reached a level of absurdity where all that remains is a hope that 'something wonderful will happen.' This well-known quotation from Stanley Kubrick's film of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001, A Space Odyssey* epitomises the optimism of those who believe technology can produce miracles.

It is only appropriate, therefore, to suspect that the role and framework of methods as presently applied in our institutions is thoroughly questionable. For it is an indication of futility when methods come to retreat to a position of 'magical' catalyst. How else could one tool, that is a governing method, secure the successful course of the encouraged communication and, thus, the beneficial installation of a management procedure? How could it justify such a bias if not by treating methods as some sort of blessing? In this observation and recognition of the ritual cum magical aspects of method lies a grain of localised truth which can help us to understand the role of methods.

Irrespective of the relevance and appropriateness of methods for a particular society and its institutions, methods can be seen as having to adapt to the development of theory and practice. They reflect in their evolution the evolution of their context. It is therefore not surprising that we look back on the early approaches to management methods with a sense of contempt. It is unthinkable today to approach a major management review project with a simple four-phase method in mind. However, this is likely to mean that equally today's promotion of learning tools and communication aids will seem 'primitive' and naive for practitioners of coming generations, as it does to the present authors. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to

conclude that all methods are, therefore, primitive, ridiculous and absurd. Indeed, many methods are sophisticated in the appropriateness of their response to the challenges of evolution. All of them are an integral part of the evolution of institutions and the society they spread into because they are the products of the social fabric that forms this world; but which came first, the ritual method or the institution, 'the chicken or the egg'?

Yet even with this understanding, neat methodologies are being propagated. Not only do they support authority, but also their perceived importance is that they are assumed to give answers in an environment with very few answers! After all, one might argue, if we did not use any methods and techniques, we would be totally indiscriminating. How could such an approach be justified? At least with the guidance of methods we have the opportunity to order phenomena and to improve on our understanding. Granted that development efforts quite often do not deliver the results as expected, methods are nevertheless perceived as valuable tools for coping with administrative systems. Their usability is contagious, and the result is a readiness to adopt them in organisational procedures – they are of a ready mechanistic form that can be easily absorbed, and they thereby reinforce the authority of both society/institution and method.

## 5. AUTHORITY IN THE 'SCIENCE OF METHOD'

The true expertise for those methods is retained by high-priesthoods, who develop the 'science of method' to a point where they feel sure that few can challenge their grasp and authority. In this respect the 'science of method' is maturing, but bringing with it the embodiment of authority despite the lack of any clear direction. It is in the context of the 'Control Revolution' (Beniger 1986) and because of the dominance of science, technology and management that the authority is being established, and that in turn has encouraged the development of so many of these methods. But the good intentions that are bringing this development to maturity are not balanced by a recognition of the consequences that this establishment of authority generates. In fact we would claim that such methods are degenerate, having gone beyond the point of diminishing returns.

It is appropriate, therefore, that we draw attention to the ways in which these methods, auditing, surveys and their siblings, are generating and reinforcing their platform of authority and are laying claim to a scientific legitimacy, from which to justify further action. On the basis of an unreflected bias, institutions and the 'methodological professions' have each used their self-proclaimed authority to exploit their assertions. By colluding, the authority of all these communities is reinforced, extended and enhanced,

and this feeds back to make their claims even more compelling.

The focusing on a smooth fit of social influences results in the imposition on a community of a structure of mediating agents and their views. The underlying understanding of what a method is, and how it should be treated, is responsible for the 'syntax' of the methods. This leads to phenomena where the use of a particular method will invariably lead to a particular prefigured and acceptable outcome, whatever the situation. Consequently, no challenge to the authority will arise.

Knowledge is now substituted with a contrived understanding, which assumes for itself the ideological stance of a superior interpretative power, by way of an evolving but unquestioning consensus towards an explanatory framework that is grounded in tidy categorisation, measurement and 'informatisation'. Against this background, the alliance of leaders of society/institutions and the cadre of 'professionals' has created the arena for these methods – and the loop is closed. Thereby, what can be known about human performance is replaced by what can be explained within the limited applicability of systematic frameworks. Consequently, the basis for decisions shifts from 'objective knowledge' to a justification that is grounded in the consensus authority of self-propagating methods.

Thus, technological rationality has entered through the back door in the guise of 'scientific management'. Despite numerous failures, the build-up of an optimistic ideology leaves unchallenged the portrayal of formal and technological procedures, such as auditing, standardising and computerising, as controllable tools, in a vicious circle of the blind leading the blind. The ritual application of methods has misled whole communities into the pleasant tunnel vision of belief in the monotheism of this pseudo-science – a unifying theory of the one and only way. The mere act of initiating a formal auditing or review framework, and with it data collection, is welcomed as self-evidently beneficial, almost therapeutic: a Freudian psychoanalysis for both neurotic institutions and society.

Forecasting techniques, which are merely an assignment of categories and numbers to the future, are appearing everywhere. However, their categorical and numerical output can at best be as adequate or as inadequate as the input. Using such forecasts as a strategic tool is only a belief that numbers are meaningful in relation to the fearful future. Strategy becomes a matter of controlling the future by labelling it, rather than continually re-evaluating the uncertain situation. This approach, searching for the right and numerical label to represent the future, is more akin to numerology or astrology. It is the modern-day ritual equivalent of 'reading the runes' or 'divining the entrails'.

Therefore, these elaborate though simplistic instrumental fictions are a threat to responsible behaviour. For these 'useful' fictions underpin the edifice of classification so that

the 'rational being' 'now places his behaviour under the control of abstractions' (Nietzsche 1979). Management by measures means that personal dependence is replaced with a dependence on some mystical mythical objective order. 'Of this stamp is the cant "Not men but measures"; a sort of charm by which many people get loose from every honourable engagement' (Edmund Burke, in a speech on the Middlesex election, 7 February 1771). At worst, scientific method has separated society from ethical behaviour; at best, society is indifferent towards it. 'Away with this cant of "Measures not men"! – the idle supposition that it is the harness not the horses that draw the chariot along. If the comparison must be made, if the distinction must be taken, men are everything, measures comparatively nothing' (George Canning, in a speech to the House of Commons, 1801).

The warnings of Burke and Canning have been ignored for two centuries. It should be no surprise then that today problem situations are seen to be adequately expressed as categorical and numerical information, and numerically derived results are taken to be good approximations to the solutions of these problems, if not *the* solutions. The basis of decision taking has shifted from objective knowledge to a categorical and numerical justification. And the lust for such abstract solutions is spreading: information has become a resource!

The very subtlety of this insidious approach has prevented so many from realising that method furnishes neither a prescription for, nor even a proscription to action. Method is merely a way of interpreting the societal and institutional environments. Reasoning via measurement has insinuated itself into the human condition, and its legacy is a rigid framework of 'social engineering'. The pre-eminence of technological thinking has even led to a call for standardisation on the inappropriate basis of the obscure opportunities offered by these methods, with far-reaching effects on every organisation. Chanting the mantra of standards, surveys, systems, audits and information, institutions have inclined towards the creation of bureaucratic procedures that ride roughshod over the subtle nuances of social context, and that are completely unsympathetic to the very organisations they are supposed to serve. Consequently, many organisations have been poisoned with an overdose of bureaucracy.

Individuals and organisations have been brutalised by the insensitive application of this approach. However, such excesses are not easily shrugged off, because personal and organisational destinies are tied closely to it. Hence it is all too easy to forget that, unlike in classical engineering, the relevant determinants of the pseudo-scientific application of the scientific approach are not physical and deterministic, but societal and unpredictable. However, with the selling of the idea of information as an essential institutional resource, auditing, surveying, computerisation and

other data collection methods promote themselves as processing smoothly, systematically, methodically, scientifically, what otherwise would be chaotic, and thereby wasted. On account of this mirage of manageable data, societies/institutions are seduced into accepting an equivalence between the operating of the underlying pseudo-scientific abstraction and the behaviour of 'real problems', where by some 'sympathetic magic', manipulation of the standardised model is taken to be control over the underlying problem.

For many the lure of promised control and of properly and efficiently working procedures is too much to resist. It is not apparent without reflection that the wonderful 'answers' derived from such magic are often inert – they neither reflect the nuances of 'being there' as a 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962), nor the consequent differences between the model and the modelled. Indeed, the model, internally consistent yet externally absurd, often takes on 'a life of its own'. What is then interpreted as reality, and therefore seen as important, is the contrivance of the model and method, rather than what is being modelled. The friction between this contrived reality and the societal/institutional context is often an incentive to build even more 'sophisticated' models, to introduce more auditing and standardising procedures, ignoring the well-aimed advice of Dennis Healey: 'When you're in a hole, stop digging.'

Profligate application of standards, an engineering approach which processes people as mere data, and formulated to make decisions, has failed to see the collection of information as a basis for negotiation and compromise in the social context. Too often the response to uncertainty is the ritual application of yet more standards, displaying the bureaucratic tinge of such methods, and forming rigid and inadequate structures that in turn lead to inert, deadening conformity and repression. But these methods must finally be challenged, not least by problems that they themselves have created. Surely the mounting strain that audits and the like load onto organisations must lead to a major rethink about their applicability and the role they play in this context?

Methods can no longer go unquestioned as the harbinger of societal/institutional effectiveness. For the focus on 'positive usability' of audits and standards, aggravated by a dangerous pretence of understanding the subtle nature of societies and institutions, has precluded the acknowledgement of 'negative usability' of the very same approach. Adverse side effects manifest themselves, but not necessarily within the methodological framework of application. Many problems lie outside the immediate scope of these frameworks and so are invisible or appear nonsensical from within. The systemic nature of the situation challenges their systematic interpretation within the limits of method, because unforeseen and unintended effects are nevertheless

causally connected to the introduction of the approach in spite of an undeterred belief in the possibility of achieving a 'wish list' through the proper application of the method.

Emerging effects can have detrimental consequences because of the reckless transcription of the technological concepts of 'command and control' into the realm of societal/institutional systems. This approach, perfectly valid and appropriate in the development of accounting practices and engineering problem solving, is made without any adjustment for the changes caused by, but not managed by, the underlying positivistic reasoning as practised in the societal context of an organisation. For what these methods call control is merely the formulating of intentions and the precipitating of actions, and this is a long way from 'being in control' of the consequences.

## 6. THE AUTHORITY OF CLASSIFICATION?

Despite of this uncertainty, authority still sanctions such methods, and vice versa. More so, we see the 'pseudo-science of management' being 'hijacked' by frightened authorities under threat of that very uncertainty, for their own ends. In this way the intended outcome of any investigation merely correlates with the vested interests of an authority. History is written by today's (soon to be yesterday's?) winners. Tidiness in method is encouraged, because it is an option on scientific and professional respectability, which in turn is a means of forging identity and conformity amongst members. But in a world where untidy consequences proliferate in a truly systemic fashion, an orientation toward tidy, rational, systematic efforts is a liability. 'The methodological translation of the universal into the operational concept then becomes repressive reduction of thought' (Marcuse 1991). Unless it accepts the variety in each disorderly situation, the authority of a society/institution will eventually be usurped by the organismic emergent consequences that are evident in all active systemic environments.

Yet the fact is that many still believe that these methods have acquired supremacy because of their quality, and their gift of quality, when in fact the opposite interpretation is just as convincing. The authorities of technical, social, political and organisational expertise have hammered out between themselves a set of methods that serve their particular purposes. Some methods have become successful simply because they have been produced within such authorities. An expansion of an understanding of this pseudo-science that stresses a false claim to the objective aspect of the human predicament is in order.

The machine metaphor that pervades such designs is formal and technological to the core. This approach treats causes and effects as possible inputs and outputs of a 'black box', while social influences merely manipulate the inputs

and mitigate its outputs. By contrast, a sociological approach stresses the interpretative aspect of the human predicament, and causes and effects are themselves inconstant within a system of social interaction and feedback. Methodological influences are subsumed into this social system by means of interpretation and ritual. However, neither methodological nor sociological aspects are necessarily systemic. Both refer to systematic interpretations as they too are developed by some authority. But systemic interpretation, where everything is of potentially equal importance, must not resort to such authority. Systemic interpretation is essentially anarchic!

## 7. PURITY AND DANGER: RITUAL AS MORALITY

In such a bizarre world all constraints are self-imposed and society-imposed – there is no true and false, no morality, no good and evil; just social construction and ritualised delusions. It is ritual that maintains the pretence that truth and morality are cerebral rather than visceral. ‘The victory of the moral ideal is achieved by the same ‘immoral’ means as every other victory: force, lies, slander, injustice’ (Nietzsche 1968). The underlying tidiness, the certainties and truths, the ‘formal tautologies’ of any society/institution are flawed, they always have been, they always will be. Ritualised invocations deliver the security of a false familiarity. Ritual is bound up with the persuasive version of the world as represented in society. It is persuasive because it is self-validating; it suspends judgement; it does not uncover truths, rather it institutes and imposes them; everything is reduced to the terms of the imposed universe of discourse.

‘Good’ members of society believe that only by ritualised behaviour, by mouthing the creed of the rightness, of the political correctness and righteousness, can that society/institution balance the ‘Purity and Danger’ (Douglas 1984), can its members live with themselves. It is ‘the triumph of one-dimensional reality over all contradiction’ (Marcuse 1991), for through ritual society is safe from contradiction; or, at worst, by focusing a paralysing criticism society only has to deal with manageable contradictions, where the danger can be isolated and rendered safe. In this way societies/institutions combat ‘social pollution’, those actions, unknowns, behaviours, uncertainties, ‘evil spirits’ that contradict or are antagonistic to their accepted view of the world, the accepted morality.

A society’s/institution’s morality, its statement of purity, is perceived to give members power; for purity is a society’s defence against the dangers of the unclean – and uncertainty is nothing but unclean. ‘Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises, and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis we must produce truth as we must produce

wealth. In the end we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living and dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power’ (Foucault 1977).

However, this power has to be there first, since morality is in essence ‘the prejudices of the powerful’. And there is the rub. Cause and effect have been inverted; ritual is very good at creating this delusion, these ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1977). For ritual makes the effect, the morality, the prejudice, seem fundamental – a cause, and therefore right, in tune with the world order that delivers power to the society/institution. Ritual, then, is the conditioning of society by society with the repeated application of ‘formulae’ – repetitive chanting, ceremony, that has apparently little to do with the particular problem of ‘social pollution’. Ritual is a timely solution, where understanding has been lost over time. It is a society as magician, whose sleight of hand makes ‘us’ look in the wrong place, so that we don’t see what we don’t want to see, neither do we see how the trick is done.

Ritual creates an identifiable boundary around ourselves and those that are like us, an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983), a voluntary cage with invisible bars that separates ‘us’ from ‘them’: where everything that is different is evil. Of course we, the good members of society, conspire with the guardians of ritual, the ‘priesthood’, in this because we too don’t want to spoil a comfortable and secure illusion. Indeed ritual produces a state of well-being in the general community, a confidence in the way that we interpret our world, an effect whereby we are unaware that there even is a problem – we just don’t see it. The ritual has magicked away all the ‘evil spirits’, it ‘veils and masks the world of practice’ (Marcuse 1991).

This is why the moral role of ‘ritual’ is so important in every human community. It draws attention to current understanding, and draws society away from other alternative alien understandings; it separates the wanted (the ‘good’) from the unwanted (the ‘evil’), the ‘ordinary’ from the ‘extra-ordinary’, the acceptable from the unacceptable, proper behaviour from improper, ‘us’ from ‘them’. It is a homeostatic force that engenders trust, based on a sense of sameness and togetherness within the social grouping. Rituals ‘enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society’ (Douglas 1984), to know their roles and to delimit their expectations. They keep a society stable. Ritualistic interpretations are not necessarily wrong, just limited and of temporary usefulness.

Rituals need not be bad, as long as they are effective, as long as they have not become degenerate. They create a collective and selective amnesia, so that influences that could disrupt the cohesion and coherence of the societal and institutional groupings are forgotten or ignored.



Because of ritual, social complexity is lowered, control becomes easier and hence transaction costs lower, making the survival of the society/institution more likely. But ultimately there are dangers 'out there' that have to be confronted, tamed, made ordinary. If the society is incapable of the change necessary to deal with such threats, then it has become decadent and degenerate. 'To let oneself be determined by one's environment is decadent' (Nietzsche 1968); being unable to impose one's will on the environment is degenerate. And 'nature is not immoral when it has no pity for the degenerate.'

Standards are the moral statements of today's societal/institutional purity. The audit is a ritual cleansing designed to reinforce and protect that purity. Auditors are thus promoted as the protectors of virtue, the vestal virgins of standardisation; whereas in fact they are the enforcers of authority not quality, of conformity not innovation. Measurement, then, is just an enactment of ritual in our society and its institutions, as is method, as is standardisation, as is informatisation, as is technology and science: a 'rain dance', a pretence that we understand. They are all magic wands that will keep everything ordered and tidy, and banish all the 'evil spirits' to limbo: 'If it can't be measured, it doesn't exist' according to the famous scientist Lord Acton. It is very discomfoting for the competents of today's society to realise that certain important things can't be measured, and that, what is measured can be quite irrelevant – the only reason it is being measured is because it can be measured, and only ritual makes it important.

Worse, in this context methods are likely to blinker observation against the unfolding changes in the environment. As Einstein said to Heisenberg: 'whether you see a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is theory which decides what can be observed.' And theory, ritual by another name, also decides what cannot be seen. The consequences of this dynamic are the key to what any particular approach is going to become. Based on what a society/institution has been, at any particular moment, it will develop into something different. A method (ritual) must be seen as adaptable, not carved in stone in order to cope with changes, or it becomes a menace. The behaviour of any societal/institutional system must be 'new every morning'. Being competitive or cost-effective or damaging today can evolve into the opposite tomorrow. Societies and institutions must recognise this perverse nature of consequence, and reject the notion that a method forms a causal link between intention and consequence.

## **8. A RITUAL RESPONSE TO PROBLEMS?**

A starting point in this recognition is an understanding of why we perceive ourselves to be facing profound uncertainty. We only look at our world as a series of problems

that need to be solved when it has occurred to us that something out of the ordinary has challenged us. As agents within circumstances, we understand the world as competent members of a society/institution, because we are competent in, that is familiar with, the guiding principle of our circumstances. In separating the ordinary from the extra-ordinary we thus recreate the order of our circumstances. What, however, are we supposed to do when the circumstances under which we separate problems from the ordinary are changing?

The circumstances of what is ordinary change all the time. It has happened and is still happening, particularly now. The social nature of the principle of non-objective, unpredictable circumstances is becoming the standard of the ordinary. In anticipation of this, we can reflect on the change in the perception and definition of a problem as an occasion to investigate our way of knowledge. Our capacity to do this derives from our understanding of the circumstances. Only because we have some kind of basis or guiding principle can we set out to effect an act of separation. Without an understanding, however implicit or unconscious, of the circumstances, acts of separation must appear arbitrary and absurd.

We may see the deviation from the ordinary in terms of scale, expertise, quality, relevance or many other diverse ways. But whatever the special features of a situation may be, as soon as we have pronounced something to be a problem, we have singled it out of the stream of the ordinary, and set it apart from those things which we handle in the course of events. In doing so we have acknowledged that problems are not isolated, but embedded in a context of the ordinary, as a threat to the ordinary. Problems actually emerge as a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of things, in so far as ordering involves rejecting extra-ordinary elements. Thus, where there are contraventions there are ordered relationships, where there is a problem there is a ritual. Methods and audits do not solve the perceived problem, they are symptoms of it.

The recognition of this coexistence of problem and ritual, in other words of the extra-ordinary and how we reaffirm to each other what is ordinary, is important. It seems that whatever we perceive is organised into patterns for which we, the perceivers, are largely responsible. As perceivers we select from all the stimuli falling on our senses only those which interest us, and our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency: a ritual by another name. Ritual is pattern; it is repeatable, and hence safe.

This means that identifying problems by discrimination is not an objective task, but rather a consequence of our familiarity with a scheme. 'Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off.' 'We interpret it by means of the schematisation of "things"' (Nietzsche 1968). This is not inquiry driven by some sense

of objectivity. Familiarity with what we happen to call ordinary preconditions us in this process of discrimination. It is a familiarity that derives from an ongoing process of mutual reaffirmation of 'our world', and above all 'the presupposition that things are, at bottom, ordered'.

But 'what convinces is not necessarily true – it is merely convincing' (Nietzsche 1968), it is mere 'fabricated reason and its reasonableness' (Heidegger 1962). However grotesque and contradictory we happen to perceive our world, we have lost the sense for its peculiarity as long as we do not venture to put ourselves deliberately at odds with the accepted way of life. The only way in which identifying problems makes sense is, therefore, in reference to a total structure whose keystone, boundaries, margins and internal delineation are consolidated by the ceremonial that is a constituent part of our environment, that is the rituals of society. By referring to those rituals, members of a society enact what is a formalised procedure reflecting that society's understanding of what is ordinary. Their actions communicate a version of the world that is idiosyncratic to that society. The mutual reaffirmation of what is ordinary thus creates both the very experience of a society, and the feeling of cultural and personal identity bestowed through it. And yet, by recognising their identity as a member of a society, individuals are under a commitment to behave in a particular way in order to maintain their membership, and with it its particular persuasive version of the world. But in being persuaded "one-dimensional man" has lost, or is losing, individuality, freedom, and the ability to dissent and to control one's own destiny' (Marcuse 1991). For in seeing the absurdity in ritual, he ceases to be 'one of us' and becomes an 'other'. To re-enter society he must rejoin the current madness in a schizophrenic self-denial of the absurdity; he must accept without question the lies his society tells him.

## 9. THE INDIVIDUAL'S ROLE

Individuals stand in the midst of this situation. The kind of rituals they choose to employ, the kind which forms their society, affects everyone. In the unfolding history of any society, each individual takes upon himself a role in the complex system of interdependencies. Entangled in this web of history the individual strives for individuality, and personality, and yet he is drawn to his fellows and seeks out the common ground on which to build friendship and society. He derives his identity from being an individual, yet he recognises his individuality only in contrast to his fellows. He knows that collective unity is tyranny of and toward the individual. The individual's role in the promotion of social systems is, therefore, never solely as a member of a community faithfully following its rituals, nor will he be standing aloof, unassailable by communal developments. Indeed, the moving force behind all societal

developments is the individual in his struggle with himself, his community and his experience of the world.

The complexity in this mutual and chaotic feedback between individual, society and external world affords an insight into the role of rituals in our society. Rituals 'provide a focusing mechanism, a method of mnemonics and a control for experience'; and they 'enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society' (Douglas 1984). Thus, they are the communication devices which signal to members of a society ways in which the totality of a particular persuasive version of the world is to be understood, and by actively involving these members rituals demand commitment to that version.

Individuals thus accept membership by agreeing to a version as a 'proper' understanding of the world. The ordered relationships that constitute the essence of a society and institution are thus internalised to such a degree that we fail to recognise that we think *with* such prefigured relationships, rather than *about* them. Indeed, doing the latter would require individuals to go against their strongest habits which they have acquired throughout their societal/institutional existence. Individuals would forfeit their status as 'competent members' of a society/institution if they then abandon their version of the world. Furthermore, they would themselves leave the sphere of the ordinary and move into the realm where the ordinary and the extra-ordinary are not separated by contours of meaning. Their 'competence' would be lost in exchange for the dangers associated with deviant behaviour.

In keeping with this shared but unspoken accord, members of a community use self-evident and 'implicit assumptions' when applying methods. Hence, 'methods and rules no longer present themselves as isolated "techniques" to be used, as necessary, by an isolated person concerned with his private ends. Instead, in acting as in-accord-with-a-rule, in recognising the methodic character of an activity, we collect ourselves into a community which always prefigures any rule and any method. There are no independent methods and rules which communities may choose to employ. Rather, the method and the rule is the community' (Silverman 1975). The act of acquiring the necessary skills to be a member of a society or institution means that we have gone through the initiation rights. We reinforce that membership whenever we look to methods for guidance, or communicate with our fellow members within the guidelines laid down, thereby reaffirming membership. Those who are outside this community will be seen as a danger: they are not 'one of us'. Yet in being 'one of us', 'we' are blinded to the failings of our society. This self-reinforcing blindness insinuates that we remember the security of yesterday, rather than seeing the dangers of tomorrow.

It is in this context that the proposition, 'auditing methods like all other modern information ideologies are

rituals', acquires its validity. It becomes apparent that the role of administrative methods is comparable to that of rituals in creating 'harmonious worlds with ranked and ordered populations playing their appointed parts' (Douglas 1984). In the era of the 'science of method' problem-solving professionals, as competent members of that era, took on the badge of competence in being catalysts who moderate discussions and membership. Within the rituals of that community, change has occurred in harmony with that community's predominant version of the world. The efficacy of their methods must appear to keep pace with the changing demands of the ever widening membership of the wider community and the consequent change in role of the community itself. While initially it was predominantly accountants, engineers, mathematicians and scientists that had to be considered, nowadays the widening range of stakeholders necessitates techniques which accommodate conflicting demands and various degrees of power and influence. Thus, methods restate what has passed so that 'what ought to have been prevails over what was, permanent good intentions prevails over temporary aberration' (Douglas 1984).

## 10. ROLES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

However, there can be no argument that the ritual employment of methods is giving rise to anomalies. And it is the individual who perceives them and who will try to reconcile the anomalies in one way or another. He will either uphold the rituals, or examine the use of such anomalies for future endeavours. In the latter case he puts himself at peril, because in doing so he denies his communal roots by discriminating differently and inferring different conclusions. His soon-to-be-previous community will spell out the dangers of his chosen path, such as the dangers of not identifying and dealing with the problem first via a ritual cleansing, before embarking on any further step. He will be left in no doubt that ritual not only separates 'us' from 'them', but also its other role is to insist that there is no separation between 'us' and 'I', that the individual can only exist as 'one of us'.

The futility of that individual's actions will be made apparent to him, and the society's hostility towards and/or disregard of and/or fear of his deviant (and defiant) behaviour will be the result. Ideologues do not recognise their threat to exclude miscreants as thuggery. The self-regarding society will delude itself into believing that the real 'punishment' will be that a 'proper' and socially acceptable solution will never be found away from 'the one true way'. Having seen the absurdity in this proclamation, such punishment will be easy to bear, particularly in the light of the belief that both problems and solutions are subject to change over time. However, the hostility and/or disregard and/or fear of his fellows will be very much harder to endure.

Within this scenario the individual can play various roles. If, in fright, he clings to his community's version of the world, coping with the world as they see it, he will be an ordinary though competent member of society – although possibly incompetent in his actions related to the particular problem he has perceived. But this leads to the 'mediocratizing of man – a useful, industrious, highly serviceable and able herd animal man' (Nietzsche 1990). The competence of this unquestioning intellectual gelding, this ideal herd animal neutered of his individuality, will be ascertained and labelled as such by the 'priests' of his society's rituals (Douglas 1984). The priests themselves derive their power from their (apparent) ability to get into contact with the world beyond the ordinary, and not to be endangered by flickers of disbelief. They harness the extra-ordinary for the affirmation of the community.

However, the doubting individual can break ranks and take on the role of the 'sorcerer'. Sorcerers are those who deliberately venture out from the community into the world of the extra-ordinary to be touched by the dangers associated with that realm. They also have the power to change from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary without harm to themselves. They can harness the extra-ordinary for their own ends; they can transcend the status quo. Hence, they are a threat, yet because they are unharmed by contact with the extra-ordinary without the shield of ritual they possess powers, and are, therefore, feared. But they are the innovators, the entrepreneurs, the generators of change, the makers of the future. They are saviours, necessary for the long-term well-being of society when the rituals of the status quo fail, as they inevitably must.

Yet another role is that of the 'simpleton', who is a member but not a competent member. Simpletons can venture into the extra-ordinary, but the dangers do not harm them, because they are unaware and dangers do not touch them. They can be used by the priests to gather extra-ordinary powers and to combat the non-believers to the advantage of the community.

Returning to the competent and not-so competent members of a community, some promote themselves as 'pious commentators' who echo their community's version of the world in an attempt to assert their own personal ambition. But these pious commentators are no match for the sorcerer, who knows how to bring danger down on the head of the unprotected.

A classic example of such a confrontation concerning the measurement rituals of modern management methods took place during a BBC radio discussion between Jimmy Reid, the Scottish trade unionist, and the chairman of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. Sorcerer Reid was being deluged by a torrent of statistical data. The flood of numbers was terminated abruptly with the pious statement 'The figures don't lie, you know.' Reid's devastating retort was to (mis)quote Mark Twain: 'It's not the figures lying that

worry me, it's the liars figuring.' The sorcerer easily wins such duels, but all confrontation takes effort, which is why the shrewd priests find it more effective to challenge and exhaust the sorcerer with simpletons.

All these role models are open to individuals. Yet, it is not a matter of independent choice to adopt them. The roles may be chosen by individuals, but individuals are also chosen by the roles. 'Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen.' 'Here I stand. I can do no other. Got help me. Amen'. So said Martin Luther, the archetypal sorcerer, standing against the pious commentators of Catholicism in a speech at the Diet of Worms, 18 April 1521.

It is a systemic property of the world that experiences emerge in a chaotic way. An individual's choice is, therefore, just as much a matter of the emerging experience choosing an individual as that individual's choice is a matter of free will. The classification of various roles is, after all, only an arbitrary choice that gives rise to its own anomalies. It is another one of the anachronisms that pervade our existence. As individuals we can grab that existence and do what we feel is appropriate. It will lead us along a path that is chaotic and clear at the same time.

## 11. THE INSTRUMENTAL EFFICACY OF RITUALS?

This perspective on ritual given above is a gross oversimplification of the anthropological work of Mary Douglas. Nevertheless it does throw a great deal of light on the mania for auditing in modern institutions. With this perspective we are now in a position to reflect on our predicament and to recognise our methods as the primitive rituals of modern times. It is not we who have advanced, just our technology. The question of efficacy of method is totally bound up with the efficacy of ritual. Yet in our 'scientific society' there is a very strong aversion to claims of even a remote similarity between 'us' (and how we do what we do) and 'them' (and the role of rituals in primitive society). It may seem a very long way from primitive ritual to our technological sophistication; however, by contrasting the primitive with the sophisticated, we will see that they are closer than we think. For there is only ever a limited repertoire of human responses, a limited set of roles. The categorical methods of 'modern' society are mere variations on a theme; technological fetishism; old ideas, but in new forms.

In getting involved in audits, members of our society prove themselves to be concerned with the challenge of that society. Hence, they remember themselves into that society, and by doing so ensure that the society defines membership (at least partly) in terms of an audit. Methods may appear sophisticated to an adept member of society simply because they deal with the issues identified as

important by that society. But this is just the reinforcing echo of that society's set of values; in our case it is the myth of modernity. Because we put great store in 'technological progress', and we are at the leading edge of that progress (where else could we be since we value it so much!), then we must be truly sophisticated.

But as the hippy poet Moondog observed: 'What I say, I say now, I say without condition, that science is but the latest, greatest superstition.' We must confront the century-old tradition of the Western world, of stressing the superiority of our 'advanced scientifically enlightened' society over 'primitive' societies. For this is just arrogant self-esteem and ritual posturing, and our chauvinistic understanding of the word 'primitive'. But don't members of primitive societies expect the symbolic actions of their rituals to prompt profound changes in the world, don't they expect their rain dances to produce rain? Don't they believe that, by some form of 'sympathetic magic', ritualistic behaviour can instigate a causal chain of events that ultimately delivers the contents of a wish list?

Actually no! That understanding of 'primitive' is primitive indeed. The leaders of primitive societies no more focus on any 'instrumental efficacy' in their rituals than we do in ours (Douglas 1984). Only in degenerate applications of ritual is stress placed on the instrumental, are the instruments themselves assumed to hold the efficacy. Only the pious and the simple-minded believe in the potency-in-themselves of ritual instruments. Perhaps the 'primitives' are more sophisticated than us! Perhaps it is we who are degenerate! For there are many pious and simple-minded in our society who really do believe in the instrumental; as this paper argues, a dominant management ritual of the modern society, the audit, is widely believed to have instrumental efficacy. But it is merely rain-dancing with pseudo-science.

Actually, symbolic action can be very sophisticated, which our judgemental notions of the 'primitiveness' of a society simply overlook. We call their rituals 'primitive' because our understanding of their bizarre society posits their society as primitive in relation to our own. The version of the world that persuades us is compared with that which persuades an alien society. These societies appear strange, even hostile, to us because our way of approaching worldly phenomena, of distinguishing them as 'ordinary' and 'extra-ordinary' sensations, as safe or dangerous, reflects our cultural patterns, not theirs. How can we categorise and measure the degree of sophistication when not only have we different yardsticks, but also we are living in totally different universes, where there are no common categories of discrimination?

Of course there is real efficacy of rituals, but it is not instrumental, rather societal. Beneficial rituals are used to direct routine behaviour and to reconcile society to the problems it must face. They enable a society to cope with

phenomena that would appear dangerous when seen without guidance, yet which become meaningful, coherent and thus manageable, by means of the enactment of ritual. They are the way a society imposes its communal will on the environment. Without the intervention of rituals, such situations produce responses ranging from fear to avoidance. By reconciling phenomena with a society's values and beliefs, a society's existence is conserved. Rituals are essential to communal life as the communication devices for 'proper' discrimination, and hence 'proper' understanding – provided of course that they actually do convince!

## 12. THE EFFICACY OF MANAGEMENT RITUALS

This societal efficacy of ritual is paralleled in the communal efficacy of management methods. This is not to say that methods are employed to rubber-stamp management procedures; indeed within method there may be a call for these systems themselves to be re-engineered (sic!). Rather, methods are employed by members of the community because their communal efficacy is internalised. The years spent in the effort to acquire competence within the community have generated the ideological blindness that precludes any alternative to the application of accepted methods. It is the belief in the ability of method to guide and support, rather than to produce – which it self-evidently doesn't – that is giving participants the security and confidence to cope with the task of management. Thus, it is an internalised belief in the efficacy of methods which supports their employment, rather than any delivered success – in fact nobody even asks if they have been successful, since the mere act of applying the methods is seen as success in itself.

However, if that belief in efficacy is shaken, then such methods lose their importance. For methods are being challenged, but not on the grounds of a disproven instrumental efficacy, but rather when they cannot be used as a means of acquiring competence and status. That success is due to the inherent ability of the individual applying the method, rather than the method itself, only compounds the concern. If the participants feel that the understanding and hence competence bestowed by a method is inappropriate (after all, it can't be their inadequacy at fault when problems arise), then their authority declines along with the community's perception of its instrumental efficacy and consequently with the community's judgement of its usability as a measure of what the community sees as relevant competence.

The various schools of thought which exist within any community are, therefore, more a product of their 'underlying assumptions' than of anything else. It is important to note that no school of thought can claim that its method

will automatically produce 'proper' systems. Method has to be employed sensibly in the spirit of its wider context; meaning arises from context (Wittgenstein 1973). The business context is much too chaotic and changing for instrumental usage to be successful in any commercial sense, except in the short term. In the case that the communal efficacy of a method is seen to have expired, individual members of the community, led by innovating sorcerers, will cease to draw their identity as members from such a method, and form new schools of thought, paradigm shifts, based on alternative 'proper' understandings of the world. As the study of ritual reveals, those who 'have most emphasised the instrumental effects of their rituals are most vulnerable to disbelief' (Douglas 1984). Equally, those schools of thought which are most strongly emphasising the instrumental effects of their methods are most vulnerable to refutation when the rain dance fails to deliver rain.

## 13. CHANGE THROUGH RITUALS

So the role of rituals lies primarily with their influence, to give coherence and identity to a community, not with their instrumental efficacy. For this reason, it is paramount that faith in their efficacy is preserved, because otherwise they cannot exert their function. Or, put another way, the faith required is a corollary to an individual's internalised acceptance of his membership of a community. It is the community's coherence which induces assent to a 'proper' understanding. A member is guided by the assent of his fellow members to follow their example. Thus, it is very difficult to 'break ranks', because once the mechanisms of membership, expressed in a community's rituals, are made public, major decisions, such as matters of *Weltanschauung*, are removed from the individual towards the public arena. For this reason it is problematic to try to persuade individual members of a community to believe in rituals or even that their behaviour is ritualistic.

If the employment of rituals is not producing the expected results *eo ipso*, then there must be an element of distortion involved which is not visible to all members of a community both in the employment of rituals and methods, and in a persuasive version of the world. We do not approach problems from a neutral position. By way of our membership of a community we draw on its particular version of the world. We are, hence, preconditioned to understand a situation in a particular way, the 'proper' understanding of which is embedded in the discrimination of what is ordinary and what is extra-ordinary. This classification is communicated through rituals. However, we have claimed that any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces except at risk of forfeiting confidence. Thus, when

anomalies arise, as they will in some circumstances, rituals and methods have to respond to them in one way or another. An element of persuasion is needed in order to encourage the reaffirmation of a particular version of the world. If, however, rituals and methods are employed with disregard of the challenges the anomalies pose for the community and instead are carried out in staunch defence of their validity, then disbelief and disassociation will be the result among sectors of that community.

Those 'rebels' who for one reason or another recognise their servile position, and who then have trouble assenting to the communal authority of a 'proper' understanding of the world, will at the same time question the rituals employed which communicate that order, and consequently question that society in general. 'All liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude' (Marcuse 1991). The liberated will come to approach the world in a different way. Consequently, the communal efficacy of rituals is challenged and any attempt to stress the instrumental efficacy of rituals will appear to them 'primitive' and absurd. However, those who express doubt, but who do not have the sorcerer's power base, will be attacked by the pious. In fact, the attackers feel totally justified in their actions, indeed they know it is expected of them.

A case in point is the evolution of management methods. The classification involved in such problem solving necessitates a statement of the problem in the first phase of Polya's classification. When professionals are confronted with tasks where the perception of what the problem is is changing over time, advocates of a formal solution risk forfeiting the confidence of their societal/institutional fellows if they fail to adapt to these changes. Insisting that a changing perception of what the problem 'really' is, is merely a new problem, will of course only persuade those who are satisfied with a logical explanation in the face of illogical change. They will remain faithful to the formal way of problem solving come what may and, thus, remain convinced members of that community.

For those who question that approach, on account of the phenomenon that identifying a problem in itself changes the problem identified, formal problem solving cannot possibly be a 'proper' way of tackling problems. This is not a conflict of instrumental efficacy, but rather a conflict in *Weltanschauung* that prevents the parties assenting to each other's persuasive version of the world, while within the parties assent is induced through the example of the assent exhibited by the fellow members. Thus, the 'proper' discrimination of what is ordinary (and hence can be dealt with by individual members without a threat to the community) and of what is extra-ordinary (and hence must be mediated by means of rituals in order to reconcile it with that community's persuasive version of the world) is the gist of the conflict.

The imposition of a discriminatory classification based on formal thinking must give rise to anomalies, because a truly chaotic world cannot conform to the imposed logic of that schema. The ritual of formal problem solving will eventually fail to convince professionals that it could reconcile those anomalies in a satisfactory way. However, proof of failure is found in the effect of failure rather than any access to or demonstration of an alternative cause. Nevertheless new causes and ways of dealing with anomalies will inevitably be searched for. Such a search will always be an attempt to break the habit of mounting experience onto an intellectual matrix which derives its structure from authority. The danger stemming from a rebellion against authority and, more importantly, the powers that authority guards is defined in terms of punishments that are deemed undesirable in the community's version of the world. Expulsion or ostracism, and required atonement, are some examples of communal punishment. Yet, when an individual has broken his link to that community, his new understanding of the world may render these dangers harmless and the punishment a matter of his past membership.

The evolution of auditing methods up to the present day is a succession of attempts to impose some such classificatory schema upon reality in order to cope with a chaotic world. The assumption, so well expressed by Alexander Pope as 'all chaos is order misunderstood', is indicative of the strong urge to find a way of classifying which ultimately will help to tame that chaos. To crave for well-defined lines and clear concepts seems to be part of the human condition. The final paradox in this attempt to cope is that the search for 'proper' meanings 'is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction' (Douglas 1984). The regrouping of anomalies and their conceptualisation into another classificatory scheme is thus just another step in an attempt to modernise what is seen as primitive and out of date. However, all these efforts to cope with a chaotic world by being up to date are plagued by the anomalies their schema are producing. Thus, these schema are out of date by design. These schema are anachronisms on account of the very idea that drives them.

#### **14. WHEN RITUAL FAILS: THE RETURN OF UNTIDY CONSEQUENCES**

Of course, criticism of method often collapses when rebuffed with the insistence that the method was not applied correctly – perversely this response, basically a statement of power in the status quo, actually reinforces the acceptance of the method. However, in the light of developments, a crisis of credibility is in the offing as methods are being applied arbitrarily by competents and

incompetents alike. Tidy methods, based on highly questionable and confusing theories, are difficult to apply effectively without great experience. By the elaboration of methods, expertise and experience are effectively separated. Under such circumstances societal/institutional analyses, audits and reviews are undertaken that either depend on the often too simplistic understanding of underlying method, or are all-out attempts at the 'perfect' explanation. Both attempts are doomed to fail in an ever-changing reality, particularly when applied by idiots and simpletons.

In effect these ritualistic methods assume that societal/institutional reality can be represented, communicated and manipulated by means of neat categorising. Such clear-cut tidiness in methods is odd when reality is so messy. It is now widely acknowledged and most professionals (competents) would agree that they expend a great deal of effort adapting methods to their analysis, and worse, adapting analysis to their methods. These methods are not supposed to be an end, but a means. However, means do become ends, and tidiness is being forced onto an untidy reality! This tidiness cannot hope to represent the emergent non-linear causality of dynamic feedback. For there is a whole spectrum of particular biases driving the evolutionary process; non-linear feedback from the most peculiar and unexpected events in the institution's environment will be factored in. Just because many of the early approaches in the financial sector 'got it right' with their original formulation of their methods does not mean that their accountancy view of developments, and 'more of the same', will maintain the present unanimity among members in the wider societal/institutional context. In practice, professionals are required to negotiate the problems that arise. They have to negotiate problems that arise even from the very tidiness of their chosen methods, as these sprout new ad hoc extensions, 'policy on the hoof', when the going gets messy.

So increasingly the belief in this persuasive version of the world is not that solid, even among committed practitioners. However, if it was possible for a member of the community to leave that persuasive version of the world behind, he would at the same time lose the connection to the 'common sense' of his community. Thus, he would effectively be prevented from rendering a foreign version understandable to the community without infecting the whole community with the cancer of doubt, in effect rending it asunder.

Members of today's society know something is radically wrong, but yet many are still blinded by misguided societal and institutional rituals. Consequently they are unable to recognise just what the real problems are; they know only that something is wrong. They are so wrapped up in their own particular problems that they fail to see the big picture. They make the fundamental mistake of seeing their problems as the cause of the break-up of the underlying

order, rather than its effect. These problems are the consequences of old power structures now become impotent – a classic symptom of social collapse.

## 15. ORDER BY DESIGN?

Rituals no longer drive away doubt. The shabby nature of our present systems are laid bare, they have become decadent, ready for collapse. Societies and institutions have entered a state of anomy; they are without viable norms and standards yet still maintaining these rituals of old. The normal homeostatic processes and rituals of a vigorous power structure are gone. That power base has itself become decadent and unstable, it cannot purify itself. Confronting a rapidly approaching degeneracy, it should come as no surprise that we are losing confidence in the meaning of our vocabulary of our social norms. We don't know what the words mean any more. Terms that slip off the tongue like 'community', 'truth', 'science', 'work' no longer mean what they used to. Standards of 'justice', 'quality', 'morality' and 'fairness' become moveable feasts. Consequently societal and institutional leadership claiming justification in these outmoded concepts is doomed.

A purely functional perspective, a solution looking for problems, is driving much of today's mania for auditing and review. Design is seen as a matter of intent. In their method, designers of reviews (bureaucrats by another name) include, and wish to impose on the societal/institutional community, their sophisticated expectations and their ideological need for tidiness. Yet this tidiness denies the individuality and variety requisite for survival in an increasingly unpredictable world. Ashby's 'law of requisite variety' is clear that a system needs to be capable of generating variety internally if it is to combat the variety in the hostile environment. Designers can see only a snapshot of fragments of transitory ordered functionality and usability, in a sea of misconception. A pathetic insistence on tidiness is a complete misunderstanding of the human condition. Our 'proper control procedures' do not, cannot, impose order, quite the contrary. Order must be there first, and this order tolerates control. The neurotics of tidiness are confusing order with structure and stability; they are confusing cause and effect. Only by the concession of order does the consequent control impose structure and stability, does tidiness avoid looking absurd. All order is transitory regularity; order allows controls to work, and then order fails; consequently the certainty of control and structure collapses, societal/institutional ritual flounders, and method founders.

Past 'achievements', of course, are welcome, but not the damage they cause. Each formal approach gives only a representation of a particular stable veneer that covers a more chaotic whole. But even that veneer is transitory, and in time, as stability disintegrates, each ordered design is

prone to reinterpretation and quite often dismissal, and the ill-fated authority that backed it is compromised and loses credibility. Uncertainty, as always, precedes the transition to a new order – to new ritualised controls and new societies or institutions. With the old order firmly in place we do not see the nonsense in ritual; but as that order collapses, ritual becomes silly or even horrific. The solid ground on which old societies and institutions were grounded shifts, as the basis of their power becomes degenerate and disintegrates. Ritual no longer holds a society together, rather it is divisive. ‘Smart’ authorities will jump to new paradigms developed by their sorcerers but this means leaving a hapless community of belief behind.

Increasingly, today we are losing faith in method, or rather its misapplication; the ‘cult of the expert’ no longer convinces the wider community. The ritual appearance of the all-knowing scientist no longer reassures; the leaders of society must resort to gimmicks to keep the faith. For example, in order to confront the BSE crisis and a complete public lack of faith in scientific experts, a British minister, John Gummer, was photographed feeding a beefburger to his young daughter in an attempt to convince the public. Needless to say the subsequent discovery of an invincible protein that constitutes a species-jumping disease only succeeded in making his action look squalid.

## 16. RITUAL OVERLOAD: ‘THINGS FALL APART, THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD’

In such times of profound uncertainty, the very meaning of uncertainty is that living with the ordinary is not enough, the extraordinary cannot be ignored or even tolerated. Then an excess of ritual is launched in society, an excess of ‘intimidation and glorification’ (Roland Barthes, quoted in Marcuse 1991). This leads to far less tolerance of the extraordinary, but perversely to greater awareness of the extraordinary – and the positive feedback loop is closed. There is a narrow threshold between negative and positive feedback (between purity and danger) which depends on a society’s ability to enforce its will on external influences, and not to be coerced by environmental factors. This in turn depends on trust and an internal sense of well-being that requires authority be imperceptible in its acts of intimidation. That threshold is breached by excessive ritualistic behaviour. Consequently societal or institutional purity and cohesion, the defence against uncertain danger, is now itself under threat.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

(From ‘The Second Coming’ by W. B. Yeats)

The future is now seen as a social pollutant, and it can no longer be ignored. And the defence of our time is a vain excess and passionate intensity of audits and reviews. In our society ‘...change is no longer thought of as achievement, as opportunity, as progress, but as an object of fear’ (Carr 1990). Eventually in this future, unavoidable problems will arise, and yet members of the society will refuse to admit the existence of serious social pollution, or they will refuse to accept other ritualistic interpretations that could deal with it. But change is essential if the society/institution is to survive and prosper in this future. We have reached that point where ritual has become degenerate, pure ideology, mindless chanting, which is futile against the inevitability of social breakdown. For ‘the froward retention of custom is as turbulent a thing as an innovation’ (Francis Bacon). Then as the rituals fail to deliver safety, ultimately the society will lose faith in itself. For a point will come when that society knows something is radically wrong, but because of ritual it is blinded and unable to recognise just what the problem is.

Then society enters the theatre of the absurd. Every level of society exhibits the Peter Principle (Peter 1996); the priests no longer fend off the danger; individual pious commentators are promoted to priesthood beyond their competence. These pathetic but self-important pygmies do not have the wit to ignore the minor distortions in the flux around them. Terrified by their own inadequacy, doubtfully confident in their rituals, they feel driven to act, although they are unable to differentiate between major and minor problems around them. All is danger to them because the pious can only interpret via ritual (through bureaucracy): perhaps interpret is too charitable a word – they can only act by rote of ritual. Problems are what ritual identifies, however, and unfortunately ritual does not deliver a sufficient vocabulary to explain the complexity of their dynamic situation.

Unresolved tensions are often best left unresolved, ignored, forgotten; for most minor problems, when ignored, would simply go away. However, minor or major problems are indistinguishable to ritual. Ritual acts ensure that the minor problems soon become major. The pious quickly get out of their depth. Rituals are overused because of a widespread lack of faith and trust in society. Overwhelmed, the pious resort to vacant and repetitive chanting of the rules and to gratuitous acts of societal self-abuse and self-mutilation. The rain dance becomes frantic and hysterical. Displacement activity takes over and things rapidly get out of hand. The very ritual actions that are supposed to purify society make the situation even worse, and this highlights the incompetence of the pious even more. So they become even more insistent in the efficacy of their ritual sacrifices. Then the remaining competent priests, those who can see the nonsense in it all, are also sucked in. But because of the restrictions placed on them by ritual they too are forced by



circumstance to take on the mantle of incompetence; in the passionate spotlight of intense ritual even they have no freedom of action.

Frantically, ritual initiates a positive feedback that drives the society/institution back into chaos. For the greater the external threat, the greater fear, the greater the insistence on categorisation; the extraordinary must be denied. The greater the threat, the greater the dependence on categorisation. The greater the threat, the greater the scale of the sacrifice required. And as the fear increases ritual explodes. Overuse of methods make adepts even more certain of the rightness of their position, simply because it appears everywhere. Ultimately the cynical and worldly-wise priests lose control, the pious commentators 'become virtuous from indignation' (Nietzsche 1968) and take control. A rabid fundamentalism is let loose in which there can be no indifference. Ritual becomes pedantic formalism, the subtle, now not-so-subtle, instrument of domination, repression, unfreedom, servitude: 'domination is transfigured into administration' (Marcuse 1991). The application of ritual becomes obsessive, compulsive, neurotic. In this state there can be no peaceful coexistence with the extraordinary, with the different.

## **17. CONCLUSION. METHOD: SERVANT NOT AGENT**

Thus an obsessive compulsive neurosis surfaces in today's primitive modernism, where ritual audits and reviews have brought our society to just this state of madness. The world of management is a world of ritualised intent; but societies and institutions are worlds of consequences. The task of management is to cope with the systemic manifestations and consequences of societal/institutional change. Against a background of social, economic and political uncertainty, decisions will require a broad-based and solid understanding. This stance must be more than just a token tribute to philosophical problems and questions of meaning. It is not good enough to respond to the questions raised here with an anti-intellectual 'So what?'; for that is a smug statement of complacency towards any questioning of cherished beliefs, and hardly the attitude that should be taken by a strategist in the face of profound uncertainty. In order to be strategic, understanding must be disconnected from the prevalent authority, whose legitimacy is ritualistically anchored in its ideological stance.

Hence, there is a crying need for a reassessment of the management approach to societies/institutions, and of the problems associated with the expansion of this approach as an integral part of organisations. As reviews are confidently over-applied in ever more unstructured environments, the unsuitability of their instrumental rationalism brings about more frequent and increasingly disastrous consequences, and less scope for management of change. The designers of

grand schemes optimistically believe that, by mere intention, they can confine the consequences of using an audit to the achievement of a 'wish list' of their original goals. They fail to see evolving circumstances that are not what was originally intended, but everything that accrues to their action – what it has become, what it will become, and not what it was intended to be.

In more reasonable times the negative feedback of ritual has the beneficial effect of creating a stable society. Then the only logical approach was to initiate plans, but to be flexible enough to react quickly to whatever risks or opportunities appear. But a blinkered faith in planning, and using the past as a mirror to the future, constrains understanding, insight and lateral thinking of quality employees. In an intrinsically singular, untidy world, 'perfection of planning, is a symptom of decay' (Parkinson 1996). For 'to make plans, and project designs, brings with it many good sensations; and whoever had the strength to be nothing but a forger of plans his whole life long would be a very happy man: but he would occasionally have to take a rest from this activity by carrying out a plan – and then comes the vexation and sobering up' (Nietzsche 1979).

Steering an organisation/society must be grounded in perpetual observation and experimentation, in contingencies, and in a sympathetic reaction to the disposition of the social and commercial environment; learning from mistakes; but there must be no obsessive compulsive neuroses about failure. This must be a sceptical approach, not based on a now-naive ritualistic belief in a description through arbitrary category and measurement. Continuous experimental feedback is essential within each organisation/society, in order to cope with unpredictable, unintended consequences of 'being there'.

All actions are situated, and only in our self-determined reality do they acquire their meaning. In any other context, particularly now in this time of institutional change, they will acquire a different interpretation. Thus, we have to steer in the flow of events as they appear meaningful to us. Facing such uncertainty is a matter of accepting that the unimaginable can and will happen, and being prepared to deal with it on the level of personal choice, and with a sense of wonder and positive thinking, maximising opportunities and minimising risk – not being constrained by organisational procedure. However, standardisations have, after all and despite all, become both the training ground for future generations of management professionals and the cornerstone of the present study of administrative systems. A radical reorientation has to take place in order to accommodate the changes we understand to be necessary. Our present lamentable and thoroughly un-intellectual state of affairs should be of great concern.

It is simply not good enough to comply with tidy methods and to encourage their uncritical usage. A new attitude is needed if we are to overcome the widespread

cynical opportunism in those who are promoting 'certainty through measurement', preying as they do on the societal/institutional environment racked with doubt and uncertainty. The management and accounting disciplines too must not shirk their responsibilities by delegating decisions to a rule-book (prayer book?). They must shoulder the responsibility for commercial consequences of their influence, for they cannot shift the blame for the damage they do onto these methods, which ultimately cannot be held accountable for the risks they institute.

The continuing societal predicament is one where all order is chaos misunderstood. That order is localised and must eventually degenerate because of positive feedback. Positing such order in the short term is sensible for the necessary regulating of any society/institution. However, problems will inevitably arise when ideologies instrumentals that regulation to form rigid bureaucracies. Only an understanding of what is sensible can lead to the emancipation from such ideologies. Therefore, any new approach to institutional/societal change must not be based, naively, on the belief that a description of the situation via models and methods will enable us to be 'in control' of any change to qualitatively different social structure. It is delusion both to assume that we are in control of the application of an audit, and to conclude by extension that organisations can be controlled accordingly. Even our vocabulary conspires in this self-deception. 'Organisations' are not totally organised, there is much that is disorganised and unorganised, even unorganisable; they are systemic and not systematic – and hence there is madness in the adherence to method that insists otherwise. Societal notions don't come much more foolish than the ritual over-application of method, than rain-dancing with pseudo-science.

Oh wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel as ithers see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
An' foolish notion.'

(From stanza 8 of 'To a louse' by Robert Burns)

Will we look/see ourselves from other perspectives that can cope with institutional change? Will we find a new approach? Or will we blunder along as usual, engulfed in

formal methods and devoid of involvement, in a permanent state of doubtful certainty?

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