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## **William Whyte's 'The Organization Man': A Flawed Central Concept but a Prescient Narrative\*\***

William H Whyte's concept of organization man is now used in bowdlerised form, shorn of its polemical core. It was an appeal against the situation of people in the big organisations taking shape after World War Two, belonging to the organization rather than simply working for it, earning rewards that are also, in the end, traps. In the current worlds of agile organizations with serially loyal staff these people no longer exist, and in fact the only group that fits the Whyte pattern are dedicated priests. At the same time, the polemic is never more relevant than today because we live in a world in which we are closely surveilled on many levels using ever more sophisticated technology, and in which many human resource management practices increase the power of organization over individual. William Whyte's time has come.

Key words: **Whyte, priest, collectivism, organization, organizational**

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## Introduction

William H. Whyte's concept of 'The Organization Man' (1956, 1960) has played a central role in structuring the way people think about working for large organizations for the last 50 years. As with all much used concepts, it has also with the passage of time lost its complexity, specificity and nuance with repeated use. Now, the concept of The Organization Man is often used in a bowdlerised form simply to describe a committed worker in an organization, and this is certainly not what Whyte meant. Our aim in this paper is to return to and describe the essentials of Whyte's concept, drawing attention to its core, which is a polemic against the direction of change in American business and society in the mid 1950s. Then we focus on the loose way he links the concept to ideal attributes that he argues are common to management types in business, medicine, law, stockbroking and even the priesthood. We argue here that in fact the only individuals that come close to fitting Whyte's archetype for The Organization Man are dedicated priests. Despite this, he has never been more useful than now, when the power of the collective that he rails against has been reborn in the surveillance and soft-power laden world of current organizations. Finally, we suggest that there is a new form of Organization Man built on 'organizationality' rather than organization

## Whyte's 'The Organization Man' –what did he actually say?

Whyte begins his book with a key section which summarises his argument and also nicely frames our argument that the term The Organization Man is misused in most current discussion.

They are not the workers, nor are they the white collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for The Organization. The ones I am talking about *belong* to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. (Whyte 1960: 8)

Note in this passage the words 'soul', 'vow', and 'spiritually', all of which have religious connotations. By drawing on a theologically oriented vocabulary, Whyte was able to invest his concept with power sufficient to deliver his polemical message about control of the individual. As well, notice the reified notion of a self-perpetuating organization, framed as if it is a living being (for those who are familiar with 'Star Trek', it is 'The Borg' of the organization world). As exemplars for The Organization Man, Whyte focuses on 'junior executives' or middle managers; but to demonstrate the universality of the concept he identifies, somewhat caustically, a range of types that fall under the term:

... the business trainee off to join Du Pont ... the seminary student who will end up in the church hierarchy, the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics PhD in a government laboratory, the intellectual on a foundation-sponsored team project, the engineering graduate in the huge drafting room at Lockheed, the young apprentice in a Wall Street law factory (Whyte 1960: 8).

Whyte's work is a polemic against collectivism in big American organizations and the production-led, suburban-based prosperity at the time<sup>1</sup>. Notwithstanding references to times past in the work, he is at pains to point out that he is not presenting a utopian manifesto for individualism within organizational life: 'I mean no contrast of paradise with paradise lost, an idyllic eighteenth century with a dehumanised twentieth' (Whyte 1960: 16). However, Whyte follows Max Weber's (1930) attack on bureaucratisation of society, and includes an excellent argument about the agonies of the attraction of his equivalent to the Weberian iron cage of rationality. Whyte argues that the 'Protestant Ethic,' which centred on the individual, had been superseded by a 'Social Ethic' (or 'organization ethic' or 'bureaucratic ethic') that makes 'morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual' (Whyte 1960: 11). For the pressured individual, there are the economic benefits of working for The Organization, hence Whyte's version of the iron cage dilemma where it is not the evils of collective organization life but rather the effect of its benefits that overpower opposition, stifle resistance and imprison the individual.

For Whyte, a unity of three major propositions upon which the Social Ethic is based is the source of The Organization's power over The Organization Man. They are: 'a belief in the group as the source of creativity ["togetherness"]; a belief in "belongingness" as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in the application of science ["scientism"] to achieve the belongingness' (Whyte 1960: 11-12). Together these propositions underpin the push towards collectivism by subverting individualism and defining man essentially 'as a unit of society' who 'of himself, is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worth-while, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts' (Whyte 1960: 12).

Whyte argues that the more power The Organization has over the individual the more the individual needs 'to recognise the area where he must assert himself against it'. According to Whyte, the danger for both the individual and society, and indeed The Organization, lies in 'the soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society' (Whyte 1960: 17-18). Whyte places followers of the human relations school of ideas pioneered by Mayo (1949) at the forefront of those who espouse such a denial: 'Who is the hero in human relations? ... [I]t is the organization man, and thus the quasi-religious overtones with which he gratefully endows it' (Whyte 1960: 46). We shall return to Whyte's views of the human relations school soon.

## The background to Whyte's concept

Analysis of the context of Whyte's work is necessary because it provides a partial explanation for the tenor of the argument he presents. It was first published in 1956 in the middle of strong post war American economic expansion when suburbs were

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<sup>1</sup> Whyte is perhaps better known in his other intellectual career in urban studies where he was ahead of his time. He once was asked to name the three best cities in the US and replied 'New York, New York, New York'. He was a strong proponent for interesting city centers and street music (Whyte 1988).

growing and big science was blossoming, and people were becoming more mobile as they followed jobs in ever larger corporations. Whyte's critical response to this was typical of other works at the time and its tone echoes those of Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), J. K. Galbraith on 'getting the prices wrong' and allowing industrial concentration to develop (1952), Wright Mills' attack on the elite (*The Power Elite*, 1956) and Vance Packard's work about marketing, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957).

It was also very similar, in general message, to that of the Frankfurt School's Herbert Marcuse in his most popular work *One Dimensional Man* (1962) about the decline of revolutionary potential in capitalist societies and the emergence of new forms of social control. This is not to say the two were kindred intellectual spirits, however, Marcuse's concerns about the creation of a 'one-dimensional' universe of thought and behavior in which there would be no place for critical thinking and resistant behavior are strikingly similar to Whyte's concerns about the elevation of the 'group' over the 'individual' within organizational life. This similarity, which is particularly interesting because the intellectual, social and geographical locations of the thinkers were so different, can be seen in the following quotes from early sections of their key works:

Every decision he [The Organization Man] faces on the problem of the individual versus authority is something of a dilemma. It is not the case of whether he should fight against black tyranny or blaze a new trail against patent stupidity. That would be easy – intellectually at least. The real issue is more subtle. For it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle him *but its very beneficence*. He is imprisoned in brotherhood. (Whyte 1960: 16)

The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before – which means that the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before. Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal forces with technology rather than terror, on the basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living. (Marcuse 1962: 1)

After gaining a liberal arts degree at Princeton University, Whyte became a US Marine Intelligence Officer at Guadalcanal during World War Two. This was one of the biggest battles of the Pacific campaign and Whyte helped plan it (see his description of this, *A Time of War: Remembering Guadalcanal*, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. He then became associate editor of *Fortune* magazine, in the very belly of the capitalist beast. Whyte was therefore a model for an upper-end American man, equipped with a degree from an ivy league university, military leadership experience, and a prestigious job. He wrote his scathing critique of fundamental changes in American society from this extremely comfortable position and as part of a wave of intellectual negativity against the increasing influence of collectivism in the economic system. This was a well defined intellectual zeitgeist centred on concerns that the individual was increasingly subordinate to the collective or 'group'.

The economic background to the zeitgeist helps make sense of it. At the start of the 1950's, American production was greater than about 60% of the total of all of the seven largest other capitalist countries added together, and its workers were twice as productive as those in the UK and three times as productive as those in Germany

<sup>2</sup> Fascinatingly, during World War Two Marcuse had a role in US intelligence in the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency.

(Reich 2008). This was driven by large corporations, for example (the now recently bankrupt) company GM produced 3% of American GNP in 1955. It was a period of oligopolistic competition in the economy; there were only three large steel companies, two general appliance manufacturers, three major food processors and three car companies. In accord with this business pattern, big labour unions developed quickly as did the large military industrial system. The response of Whyte, Riesman (1950) and Galbraith (1952) to this is understandable and is easily read as a cry of alarm about the social and economic implications arising from the development of such a power block of large organizations.

The world economy has changed dramatically since then. As Reich argues: 'Power has shifted to consumers and investors' (2008: 50). Globalisation has changed all markets and most supply chains, and large corporations now pursue profits via low prices. Companies are interdependent and therefore the boundaries of organizations are opaque. Labour is far more mobile, both inside countries and internationally, and there is also a strong trend for labour to be non-union. This is still a system that favours large organizations but it is far more complex than when Whyte was writing. At the level of the individual, a key change has occurred in the nature of the employment relationship, an exchange process which has become increasingly individualised, and which is now often likely to reflect a calculative and cynical attitude on the part of the individual towards the organization. The loyalty and commitment of the individual is now often contingent on the organization's fulfilment of its perceived employment obligations (Coyle-Shapiro et al. 2004).

The background against which Whyte developed his concept has changed, can it be applied today to those he identified as archetypal for The Organization Man, 'junior executives' and workers 'poised in the middle area' of large organizations? (Whyte 1960: 8). The answer is no. While they may arguably have been so in America in the mid 1950s, most middle managers in large business organizations today are not Organization Men in the Whytian sense. Economic, social and organizational change has so altered the business and employment context that the utility of the concept for understanding the individual in relation to organizational life has been undermined. This can be illustrated with a brief outline of the career pattern of three graduate students, who obtained positions in global organizations a decade ago that might have reasonably been expected to lead to 'that upward path toward the rainbow of achievement ... smack through the conference room' (Whyte 1960: 22)<sup>3</sup>. Steven and Michael obtained positions with a US-based global management consulting, technology services and outsourcing company, and Alan with a US-based global computer technology corporation.

Steven was the most dedicated to The Organization of the three and eager to do what he could, such as the socialising after hours and working 'all nighters', to demonstrate his ability to work above the formal expectations of the job; he was willing to have his 'soul' taken over and certainly handed over his time. He was also the first of the three to have his aspirations terminally blocked when his section was abolished. The Organization did not share his loyalty. Steven then started his own consultancy

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<sup>3</sup> Based on interviews. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

firm. Michael, on the other hand, was less dedicated and played organization life as a game, socialising and working 'all nighters' only when needed to present and sustain the image of an Organization Man. He was successful but also left the firm within five years despite promises by The Organization of much better money. Michael went first to other jobs in small organizations, then completed a PhD and became an academic. Alan has successfully worked in several overseas offices of his organization. He remains a conscientious employee but, on his own admission, without any remotely 'spiritual' transfer. His real interest or 'soul' now lies outside of The Organization in composing music.

Of the three then, the only one to come even remotely close to matching Whyte's concept was Steven and his enthusiasm was brief before being extinguished with his sacking. Neither of the others had anything close to the psychological affiliation required of The Organization Man. While the selling of one's 'soul' to The Organization in return for job security may have been possible in the mid 1950s, to offer up such a bounty to The Organization today, when security is no longer offered in return, does not have the same attraction for many individuals. Even if it is an exchange that could be made, how can the mutuality of such a bargain be realised and sustained over time if individuals can be forced into the external labour market at anytime at The Organization's behest? These are matters worthy of consideration but which lie beyond the limited aims of this paper.

Let us return to the issue of the concept's applicability today. It is useful in two ways, once empirically, and once in terms of the passion of Whyte's analysis. Firstly, the empirics: we suggest there is a category of worker that comes very close to fitting the concept, the dedicated priest. We will develop this argument with reference to the careers of three Christian priests (in some denominations they are called ministers of religion, in others pastors, but as a collective the terms 'priest' and 'priesthood' will be used hereafter).

### **The Priest as Organization Man**

The role of a priest is part religious, part pastoral and part organizational. The religious role involves belief and its core activity is 'soul work', those who enact the role are dedicated to a 'higher calling' and work very long hours. It requires several years training and formal education. A typical mainstream Christian priest has a degree in theology and undergoes a long apprenticeship in the religion before dedicated and demanding semi-independent work is undertaken. The duties undertaken in a priest's position can vary considerably, but common elements can be demonstrated with three cases, one a general description of a religious order and the other two of working (individual) priests.

Evidence from a recent enquiry into a religious teaching order indicated that priests in this organization tended to be recruited when in their early teens. On finishing school, trainee priests studied religion (with the organization) and education theory (with the state). They then performed teaching duties at a boarding school operated by the organization. They could not take permanent vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience until they were 25 years of age, at least 10 years after their initial contact with the organization. This is at least a decade of socialisation into the role of a priest, and



of intensive training in the organization's form of religious belief specifically designed to shape the 'soul' of these men (there are no women in this congregation). The seven days a week teaching workload of priests was also extremely demanding, as was being on call almost all the time as teachers at a boarding school. They were very much members of a 'group' of like-minded men, and their social and domestic lives were centred on the school and the religious order.

Our other cases are Paul, a protestant priest, and Mark, a catholic priest<sup>4</sup>. To enter his ministry, Paul was required to have at least a three year undergraduate degree (he has a law degree) and then a three year degree in theology. He needed to demonstrate a 'calling' to the priesthood, that is, a sincere belief and desire to serve as a priest. After that he was a probationer, working with an experienced priest for seven years. As part of Paul's training, there were psychological and physical examinations; the moulding of the commitment to the priesthood was multi-faceted. He says though, that his training was 'fun'. Being engaged in interesting work with like-minded individuals as part of a fellowship was a good time of life. In the case of Mark, he entered the priesthood late in life after many years theological training as well as several degrees in law. His calling was profound and in describing it he quotes W H Auden's eulogy for a young poet. Auden wrote that the man had squandered his potential and, in Mark's words, said to the poet 'when you appear before God he will recite the poems you could have written and you will cry tears of shame'. The priesthood is the poem that Max feels he must write.

The pastoral and organizational elements of a priest's role are best illustrated, in the cases of Paul and Mark, in their giving of sermons at several churches each Sunday, the conduct of marriage ceremonies, funerals and christenings, participating as a member of parish and other committees, as well as performing many pastoral visits per week. Priesthood also provides opportunities to exercise a social conscience, and in the case of Mark this is done through part time lecturing in human rights law at a university.

So, why do we think that these cases support the argument that dedicated priests fit Whyte's concept of the archetypal The Organization Man? Recall the key attributes of The Organization Man. He has left home 'physically' and 'spiritually'; he has given his 'soul' and is fully committed; he has surrendered himself to the collective that is The Organization, an act from which he derives a deep sense of belonging and togetherness; and, he has faith in the moral basis of a Social Ethic 'that will satisfy him that what he must endure has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface' (Whyte 1960: 10). In each of the above cases, men have left home physically and spiritually. They have undergone a very long, very intensive, and organization-specific training of the 'soul'. They have joined themselves to a huge collective that is backed by a 2000 year tradition. Paul and Mark both made particular comment about the feeling of belongingness and togetherness that the position of priest provides to the dedicated worker in 'god's vineyard', and all priests (apart from occasional professional priests who are apostates) believe that there is a deeper meaning to their time on earth, indeed this is basic to the belief structure that creates the role of priest.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on interviews. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Whyte's passion, never more relevant than now**

Whyte's polemical intent and biblical language created immediate interest because it suited the spirit of the times. The intellectual community (far wider than just the scholarly academic community) was receptive to works critical of an increasingly urbanised, hard working but submissive, consumption-driven society. These were times of fewer very large organizations and long term employment. As we have pointed out, times have changed. Our world is a hyper-competitive, technologically driven and globalized place where organizations must be strategically agile in order to survive, and knowledge is the key to survival (Hanson et al. 2008). Workers are economic units, 'human resources' without, for the most part, long term prospects of employment. They are data points in large HRM data bases (and these data bases are increasingly inexpensive). They are monitored in the workplace via CCTV cameras and other technological devices and outside it mobile (cell) phones can be tracked. One can imagine that Whyte's passion about the negative social and economic implications of large organizations would remain undiminished in our time if he could see how the means of organizational control over the individual have been enhanced by technological change since he first wrote. Similarly, Whyte's concerns about 'social engineering' within organizational life and the role of professional 'personnel managers' in that process might well also remain undiminished in the light of common people management techniques that are deployed today under the guise of strategic human resource management.

As we have pointed out, Whyte directed much of his polemic at the human relations school of ideas that had emerged out of work done by Mayo in 1927 at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electric Company (Mayo 1949). According to Whyte, a central tenet of this school was the idea that the urge to associate and cooperate with others in a group was perhaps the strongest human characteristic. For Whyte, this idea could only lead to what he saw as an unacceptable overriding principle for organizational life of 'what's good for the group is good for the individual' (Whyte 1960: 38). To sustain his point, Whyte critiques Mayo's advocacy of 'non-directive counselling' for workers, that is the use of counsellors paid by management but who would not report to management what individuals said to them. The fundamental problem he saw with such an arrangement lay in its implicit assumption that the individual's work problems arose from 'inner subjective conflict' and that through talking those problems out the individual would be adjusted to the group, rather than the alternative possibility of adjusting the group to the individual being considered (Whyte 1960: 39). It is not too much of a stretch to see the employee assistance programs that many large organizations have today reflecting that same assumption, and thereby drawing Whyte's fire.

Human resource management has moved on since Whyte and now a similar effect can be observed in regard to a range of contemporary HR activities. Work/life balance and personal development initiatives are promoted, but these benefit The Organization more than the individual because they provide, for the short term required by The Organization, a compliant worker. They also reinforce the bonds of beneficence around the individual. Self-managing teams, empowerment and other such participative management techniques bring the individual into The Organization's deci-



sion-making processes, but do they not also serve to pressure the individual to submit to 'group' consensus? They certainly reinforce the primacy of the collective over the individual. Organizational values, mission statements, and codes of ethics and conduct are promulgated, and organizational culture is developed and these have many positive aspects. But do they not also serve as a means by which The Organization is able to persuade the individual that there is no conflict between them, indeed that there is a unity of interest in furthering The Organization's goals and objectives? Performance management processes, such as Management by Objectives (MBO) with its structured cascading of work objectives down through The Organization to the individual level, ensure the individual's work activity conforms to The Organization's goals and objectives, but at what cost in terms of the individual's creativity?

Given that Whyte's concept of the archetypal Organization Man has limited direct applicability in today's world (albeit that the dangers he saw in the overarching control of individual by organizations might still be perceived) a new term is needed to describe the 'organization ready worker'. The effective demise of the 'one organization, one career' option for almost all individuals, and the emergence of attendant notions such as 'employability' and 'boundaryless careers', means that the required attributes, skills and knowledge to fit into a large organization at any part of its value chain have changed. Because knowledge is their major source of employability, the 'organization ready worker' needs to have the capacity to be serially loyal (so they will not trade insider knowledge), they need to be skilled (in whatever area is required), and they need to be willing to work long hours and move home when required by transfer or career opportunity. And, of course, their loyalty may well cease to be reciprocated and therefore they must be willing and able to change firms, and may do so if they feel like it. In return, they can expect to be well paid and enjoy attractive working conditions. We suggest the term 'organizationality' might best describe all of the attributes, skills, knowledge, and willingness to make the mind/body compromises, required to work in large organizations. Such individuals are attractive 'human resources' from the point of view of management (which often means they are people like them). However, the dilemma identified so presciently by Whyte over 50 years ago remains, how to avoid surrender to the bonds of beneficence that imprison the individual within the 'brotherhood' of life in The Organization.

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