

Corporate Knowledge/Contestable Spaces/Funky Business (draft)*

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Abstract

The paper outlines an ongoing project aimed at further identifying contestable spaces within the business-knowledge market. Focus here is on popular American management literature and its close Swedish emulations like *Funky Business* by Nordström and Ridderstråle. The paper outlines a methodology for analysing and actively intervening in these "contestable spaces of discourse" which draws together several concepts. First, it analyses professional-educational discourses as *interpretive moments of uncertainty* within the increasingly tighter and faster hermeneutic cycles of knowledge production characteristic of global business cultures. Second, it explores the degree to which the content and language of these discourses are selected, manipulated, and packaged by professional consultant/teachers to insure the continued sales and profitability of the resulting "knowledge" within the professional education market. Finally, an action plan is offered for a critical engagement with the rational-market discourse currently little challenged within the professional education market, of which aspects of the American Culture Project at Skeria Utveckling provide an example. The approach has interesting implications for understanding for example the Americanisation of Swedish and European business cultures in terms of the legitimacy of contending *cultural constructions* of management/business reality.

1. The Post-modern Condition and Spaces of Resistance

According to Fredric Jameson and others, a feature of the Post-modern condition is the penetration of the free-market discourse - of which America is the strongest proponent - into virtually every cultural domain. These include the political as well as the intellectual - where knowledge is commodified and packaged for the educational market (Jameson 1991). For those unwilling to concede these cultural trends as a "done deal" the problem has been one of identifying avenues for effectively engaging in prevailing market discourses: to identify and inhabit these as *contestable spaces*. Toward this end a considerable body of critical scholarship on business and management has appeared, especially in the past 10 years or so (see bibliography).

As a contribution to the critical literature, in this paper I take a broadly constructionist approach (see Hall 1997:25) to business knowledge-products (mainly popular management books) as a means towards identifying, and analysing an American-business discourse. Then I briefly describe a pilot project within my own institution, Skeria Utveckling - a municipally owned educational development company -for critically engaging this popular business discourse within the Swedish business-knowledge market itself.

2. Business-Knowledge Market as Contestable Spaces

To begin, in speaking of the business-knowledge market, I will limit myself here to business-knowledge products of American origin (or their close 'Americanised' copies). These are sold through private consultancies such as McKinsey & Company, as well as through popular

business books, often written by these same consultants, such as the now legendary *In Search of Excellence* (Peters 1982; cf. Furusten and Kinch 1992). A broader treatment would also include university courses designed for business professionals - the so-called "executive educations."

To begin, studies within the Stockholm School of Economics and Department of Business Studies at Uppsala University show that the market for these products has increased dramatically in Sweden since the 1980s. And this in turn, has justifiably raised questions about their nature, and their implications for Swedish business and social-democracy (see Furusten and Bäcklund 2000; Furusten 1999; 2000; Furusten and Kinch 1992). For example, Furusten and Bäcklund (2000:5) have shown that between 1988 and 1997 American consultancy firms (led by McKinsey & Co., Andersen Consulting and Boston Consulting Group) increased from 2 to 13 companies with a increase in turnover from 14% to 81% (in Net Swedish Crowns - NSEC) of the market.

Popular American-business books - often written by consultants - have similarly increased in popularity (Furusten and Kinch 1992) - by the 1990's accounting for 36% of best-sellers in Sweden (five times or more on the 1987-90 best-seller list) compared to 56% Swedish (one Norwegian, none British). Notable examples include *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and *Thriving on Chaos* (1987) by Tom Peters, and *The One Minute Manager* (1982) by Keith Blanchard and S. Johnson. Moreover, according to Furusten and Kinch (1992:72) "Successful American books were marketed in Sweden and the genre was copied by Swedish authors," e.g. *Business Strategy* (1988) by Bengt Karlöff, (1992:72), *Service Management* (1983) by R. Normann, *Managing Knowhow*, by Karl Erik Sveiby and Tom Lloyd, 1987.

The most recent example in this genre is the popular management text *Funky Business: Talent makes Capital Dance* by Kjell Nordström and Jonas Ridderstråle - two Swedish professors at the Stockholm School of Economics. Originally published in English in 1999 by Bookhouse Publishing, it is now available in 20 languages. Funky Business also exemplifies a recent intrusion of what I will call the *American Business Discourse* into the Swedish business-knowledge space.

3. The Business-Education Market as Interpretative Moment

In Sweden the conditions for considering a more 'Americanised' business discourse appear to have been in place by the early 1980s. By then there was growing interest in management and leadership in Sweden related to the globalisation and acceleration of markets, the increasing perceptions of intensified global competition as well as the much advertised 'turn-arounds' of troubled companies like SAS using innovative management policies (Furusten and Kinch 1992:55).

As Furusten and Kinch (1992:72-73) have shown these trends also followed those of the influential managerial movement in American and its own changing perceptions of the business environment. In American business a number of new factors were important in the growth and exportation of the American free-market discourse. These included, 1) increased Asian competition and a belief in the competitive advantage of their business culture 2) a resulting domestic pressures on business performance, 3) a widespread dissatisfaction with quantitative based research in organisational theory and its practical relevance to "doing real business" and a resulting re-focusing on competitiveness from product improvement toward "Businessmanship" or "Business management" (or as it is called in academia - Strategic

Human Resource Management) which Karlöff defines as "the ability to identify needs and accordingly formulate a business idea, and in addition the decisiveness and energy to translate that idea into practical action while still conserving resources,.."(Bengt Karlöff 1989:1, see Nohria and Eccles 1998:281), 4) the widespread perception everywhere of increasing individualism and "yuppie" life style, and 5) Corporate culture's success in carving out a new market niche for management know-how as a new product of consultancy groups like Boston Consulting, McKinsey and Company, consultant-writers, as well as high status universities and business schools.

However, following Clark and Salaman (1998 see also Salaman and Storey 2002:150), I suggest one can trace the reproduction of an Americanised discourse within the Swedish business-knowledge market through a constructionist analysis of the seller-buyer relationship; of that between the consultant-author (often referred to as 'management gurus') and the business manager - the primary consumer of business-knowledge products, whether books, consultations or courses. As outlined by Jackson (2001:41) their approach comprises several features.

First, it is assumed that organizational (and thus management) reality is constituted in the use of language. That is, the rhetorical techniques used, which include for example powerful metaphors that construct that reality. Second, that organizational or management reality is only constituted through its representation by different spokespersons; that the organization has no reality independent of the alternate perspectives brought to it, for example that of consultant-author or business manager. It is thus a product of interpretation. Third, the approach assumes that consultant-authors influence manager-buyers by selecting from the potentially broad and diverse set of possible accounts of organizational or management reality, a limited number of coherent narratives, for example the organization as community, the organization as market and the organization as adaptive individual. Finally, it posits that "it is within these narratives that executives seek to 'position' themselves and their employees."

As Jackson states it, this leads to an line of inquiry which "essentially involves probing the relationship and symbolic exchange between the management guru and the manager through the careful rhetorical critique of the narratives...(Jackson 2001:43), or as I prefer to call it – the business-knowledge discourse - as it is reproduced in the consultant/author-manager/reader relationship. Thus when viewed from the consultant-authors perspective such a relation can be seen as providing not only the opportunity to 'make a sale', and thus secure livelihood by peddling their knowledge product whether consultations, lectures or book sales but also to take a creative hand in producing and packaging that knowledge in the form of a narrative or account of what constitutes business knowledge, in addition to other thing, e.g. for acquiring professional status and prestige, providing a venue for performance, and, as will be discussed below, for cultivating a future market for their products by cultivating perceptions among potential buyers that there is a continued need for them – for making a market.

From the managers' perspective the relation can be seen as also both potentially fulfilling a range of perceived needs including the practical, emotional and ideological (see below), but at the same time demanding interpretation. Recent studies conclude that popular media (press and best sellers) is a prime source of business "knowledge" for managers, proving managers with little tiem or inclination to follow the scholarly literature on management a "screening deive" for reading selection (CEMP 2001:66). Nohria and Eccles (1998: 285-286) have

suggested that managers collect business knowledge through informal 'research' strategies which engender the gathering of packages of potentially useful information from a broad spectrum of sources. These include personal business experience, stories and lore, as well as popular literature, professional seminars, and consultants. Their goal is toward making business knowledge "robust", i.e. knowledge that can be stretched, adjusted and interpreted as necessary. Case studies, therefore, which figure so prominently in the popular management literature with their rich and evocative detail central to popular texts, tend to appeal because they can be interpreted by analogy to immediate cases. Such robust knowledge is immediately put into practice in so far as it influences managers decisions on a continuous basis (cf. Jackson 2001:4).

This is in contrast to the long empirically-based linear and deductive cycles of academics, and the process of forming 'robust' business knowledge on the part of manager-buyers might better be referred to as recursive, interpretive, or what is often termed hermeneutic. In other fields such interpretive contexts of knowledge production have been usefully termed *interpretative moments of uncertainty*. As Ian Hodder states, "In the uncertain creative moment the main methods that are used are accommodative involving the search for part-whole coherence and correspondence. But any accommodation that is reached can only be provisional since the hermeneutic circle is never closed – interpretation is always doubly embedded in the changing contexts of the present and of the ... past" (Hodder 1999:10).

Thus the reproduction of "robust" business knowledge in the consultant-manager relations might be seen as taking place within the increasingly tighter and faster hermeneutic cycles characteristic of the global business cultures today. Briefly, as the modern (or rather post-modern) business environment changes, managers increasingly perceive a need to re-evaluate the fit between their current approaches (theories, models, strategies) and the new circumstances they see as problematic and uncertain - an "interpretative moment of uncertainty."

4. Controlling the Business-Knowledge Discourse: archaeological analysis

As noted above central to the constructionist approach to the reproduction of business knowledge is the concern with control. Here I follow the Foucauldian lead to business knowledge analysis at what has been called the archaeological level (Foucault 1972; 1994) – at the level of their material manifestations as bodies of discourse. An archaeology of business discourse “seeks to delineate the apparatuses of power, storage, transmission, training, reproduction, and so forth to make up the conditions of factual discursive occurrences” within the business-knowledge market (Wellbury 1990:136-137, see also Burrell 1989; 1998).

Foucault's arguments suggests how the re-production of what counts as popular business knowledge can and is to a large degree controlled or regulated by the consultant-author (Foucault 1972; 1980; 1981; cf. Jackson 2001:4). As intermediaries during such 'critical moments,' consultant-authors serve both to clarify perceptions of the business environment as well as to create the conceptual frameworks which can accommodate them. In this way they do become significant shapers of that new knowledge, in so far as they control the business discourse; in so far as they control the terms of its classifications; its linguistic and visual symbolism, its concepts, assumptions, and interpretations (Gee et al 1996:24; Jackson 2001:26; Linnvall 1999).

By *discourse* I follow Foucault's meaning of a system of representations - words, images, actions that follow rules and practices which produce meaning, and provide a language for representing knowledge about and talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. A discourse then constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others (Hall 1997:44, see also Thompson 1997:15, Tomlinson 1997:119).

This is also true of conduct within the domain of "economics. As du Gay points out (1997:319) "what we think of as 'economic' processes depend on 'meaning' for their effects and have particular 'discursive' conditions of existence." For example, Sten Jönsson's study of 'Mental Standardisation and Industrial Development' in Sweden concluded that "Conceptual standards in a way determine what can be said and what cannot be said, they define the terms on which their own functionality may be discussed" (1986:77; see also Jacques 1998).

In an archaeological analysis of business texts, I am less interested then in the intended or substantive "content" of the messages and more in revealing the structure of communication; in how the messages are framed in terms of imagery, symbolism, metaphor, in terms of the assumptions made tacitly, in the things that are admitted within the discourse and the things that are omitted - in what might be called the taxonomy of communication. I am interested then in seeing how a business discourse – like any taxonomy – has the effect of directing, controlling, delimiting, and bounding communication about its subject.

Procedures of Rarefaction

But how is a business-knowledge discourse controlled practically? Foucault suggested that "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures.." including what he termed "procedures of rarefaction" or regulating discourse by making it selectively less dense or thinner (Foucault 1972: 216). It is clear from studies that business consultant/authors do rarefying business knowledge from the much broader academic discourse (e.g. Human Resource Management, Organisational Theory, etc.), as well as from personal experiences and the existing popular writing. In this way they establish what counts as legitimate business knowledge, how it is expressed within its boundaries, what can be legitimately talked about, and what is omitted (Tomlinson 1997:129; cf. Jackson 2000:1-3; Furusten 1999:46).

According to Mabey, Salaman and Storey (1998; see also Brewster and Hegewisch 1994)) the current Strategic Human Management Strategy or SHRM discourse within academia might be seen as engendering four broad strands, 1) the significance of the social and economic context of management practices in relation to a range of stakeholders. Here questions of whose interests are actually served by SHRM are brought into focus, as are the relevance of differing national and economic systems, and the wider ideological issues which underpin assumptions of SHRM, 2) a focus on the outcomes associated with alternate SHRM approaches, e.g. what works and what doesn't in terms of performance, 3) a refocusing of attention on practices of recruitment and selection, performance management and reward systems, and 4) issues of knowledge and capability or the so-called *resource-based view* of the firm which arose in the 1990's under the influence of the American focus upon the strategic importance of the internal

resources (rather than portfolio management, market positioning, and niche markets for products).

It is largely from this fourth domain that much of the popularised notion of the American free-market or business discourse can be seen as a product of rarefaction. Familiar themes in this popular literature include, for example 'core competencies' (G. Hamel and C. K. Prahalad, 1994), 'learning organisations', (P. Senge 1990) 'competing on capabilities' (Stalk et al 1993) and in Sweden as re-combined themes in such books as, *Managing Knowhow* by Sveiby and Lloyd (1987) and *Funky Business: Talent makes Capital Dance*, Kjell Nordström and Jonas Ridderstråle (2000). Significantly Human Resource Management research has drawn similar conclusions when studying the degree to which national business cultures integrate corporate strategies with HRM findings. These suggest such integration among American firms are rare compared to their European counterparts. Sweden was found to be the most highly integrated (Brewster 1994).

5. Characterising the American-Business Discourse

So what does the popular American-business discourse look like? First it is generally accepted that popular management literature can be classified into several broad categories of what are popularly called "management fashions" (Abrahamson 1996) each espousing its own portrayal of business organization, of management reality, as well as prescriptions, master narratives and "management-guru" personalities. For example Jackson (2001) has recently identified three main management guru-inspired fashions: the "reengineering" movement led by Michael Hammer and James Champy; the "effectiveness" movement begun Stephen Covey; and the "learning organization" concept popularised by Peter Senge.

I suggest however that these "fashions" also share a number of common features which together constitute what Foucault termed a single discursive formation: "whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say., for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*." (Foucault 1972:37-38). That is, the "statements fit together because any one of them implies a relations to all the others: they refer to the same object, share the same style and support what Foucault describes as 'a strategy... a common institutional... or political drift or pattern'" (quoted in du Gay 1997:288). Moreover when viewed from a Scandinavian cultural perspective that commonality can be recognized as culturally American. Thus I've termed it simply the "American business discourse."

In my view the typical American-business discourse contains eight principle features, which serve as its boundary conditions.

First, the American-business discourse *alarmist*. The popular texts draw on a similar vocabulary to portray global context in which business must operate as massively uncertain, critically unstable, largely unpredictable, accelerated and hyper competitive and to insist that these conditions demand of any business hoping to survive much less to flourish to adopt similarly drastic, profound, immediate and continuous change. As Du Gay (1997:297) observes "Rarely a day goes by without a new pundit appearing in the press or on TV exhorting organizations to 'de-layer', 'downsize', 're-engineer', or 'enterprise up' in order to simply ensure their continued survival." So in *Thriving on Chaos* for example Tom Peters

(1989) sees that survival as beginning with a “facing up to the need for revolution” while providing the needed “prescriptions for a world turned upside down.” The popular discourse omits narratives aimed toward discovering traditional, stable, predictable, controllable, or reliable features of business environments over time.

Second, it is *management-centred* in perspective – also termed managerialism (Applbaum 1999). The logic of the managerial-centric discourse is that employees can be made more efficient, productive, and competitive, by persuading them to think like managers, while omitting alternate perspectives (Thompson and McHugh 2001[1995]: 117-118). During the 1980s and 90 the popular vision was that this was done through fostering management values through a strong corporate culture (see Deal and Kennedy 1982; 1999; Pters and Waterman 1982). Management was central in cultivating corporate culture by indoctrinating employees with management-chosen values and practices (Ray 1986; Wilmott 1993). The corporate culture perspective which Kleiner (1992) describes as the managerial "culture of intervention" has come under criticism from within academia, on the grounds for example that it "tends to ignore the possibility of conflicts within the organisation, ignore structures of power and interest, ignores structures of hierarchy and inequality, and ignores difference and differentiation of groups and of cultures (Wood 1989:380; Salaman 1997: 225). As a result the (business) culture is viewed "...as a product of consensus rather than as the precarious outcome of continuous processes of contestation and struggle" (Knight and Wilmott, 1987:41 quoted in Salaman 1997:255). It has also raised certain fundamental questions such as 'what do we mean when we say that some business strategies works? For whom does it work, for only the least expendable? (Karen Legg 1998:18-29). And when, for example is a manager not an employee? Who is really the subject in this discourse?

More recently a second perspective has taken hold : that of *the self-managing knowledge worker* (Jacques 1998:270) within the context of the so-called “learning organization” (Senge 1990). McKinlay and Starkey (1998:173) see imbedded here a new sub-discourse of work where “employment becomes membership, control is redefined as commitment, management transmutes into leadership,” where “the new language of employment denies the very possibility of class conflict at work,“ where “challenges to specific managerial judgements are encouraged, but collective opposition to corporate authority is deemed illegitimate....and workers [become] active participants in the construction and refinement of hegemonic factory regimes, complicit in their own subjugation.” Some like Fenwick (1998:141) object “to the conflation of individual and organizational learning within the learning organization in which ‘the workplace appoints itself as the individual’s educator, personal development councillor and even spiritual mentor’” (quoted in Jackson 2001:146).

This approach is found too in the disingenuous and heavily Americanised rhetoric of the so-called *Funky Business School* of Swedish popular management literature. Here the "power-to-the-people" language of the old left has been high-jacked to proclaim that because each worker owns his own intellectual capital, we are all essentially ‘capitalist owners’; that Marx was right; that the worker's revolution was a success; and thus that employees are today free agents with the intellectual power to insure their own success, if they so choose (see Nordström and Ridderstråle 2000). Thomas Frank (2001) in his controversial *book One Market, Under God* has referred to this as "Market populism". Like the Corporate Culture perspective it too overlooks real human diversity in capabilities, opportunities, training, skills, aspirations, etc (see also Thompson and McHugh 2001:118). It provides no discursive space for employees who are not the most enterprising.

Third, the popular American-Business discourse is historically and socially *decontextualized* : The discourse neatly severs causal chains and implications of business practices at the borders of business. Often termed the “shareholder orientation,” it neglects, for example address questions of the effects of business practices on the public sphere or the environment (Wilkinson and Wilmott 1995:789; Linvall 1999:40-44; Collins 2002: 250-313). However, this seems not unique to popular discourse, but a reproduction of domain assumptions in mainstream Anglo-American organizational theory as well (Lindvall 1999:40-44). But, as Thompson and McHugh (2001:120) have argued “Organizational theory and practice can only be understood as something in process, otherwise the search for general propositions and instant prescriptions becomes disconnected from reality, ...It is also necessary to counter the tendency to see organizations as free-floating and autonomous; and the concentration on the micro-level of analysis, or single enterprise. This means locating organizational processes within their structural setting, examining the interaction with economic forces, political cultures and communities.”

Fourth, it is morally and ethically *non-reflexive*: By its operating principles of pragmatism and instrumentalism, the American business discourse hands moral responsibilities to the market (Miller 1998:32, see also Legg 1998; Jackson 2001:71-72; Burrell 1989). It thus excludes discussions of the moral issues surrounding business practices, for example temporary hiring, minimum-wage hiring, hiring without benefits or job security, lay-offs do to ‘downsizing’ or ‘re-engineering’ programs or the ethics of promoting consumerism, or demanding workers continually adapt and innovate, or inculcating employees with management values (see Lindvall 1999: 43-44; Victor and Stephens 1994:481; Collins 2000: 281-313). As an example, Funky Business retells Management thinker Charles Handy’s story of Ford Motors celebration after having managed to layoff 400 of 500 employees at accounts receivable department. ‘People screamed but we did it, champagne bottles were opened and everyone was happy!’ (Nordström and Ridderstråle 2000:177) Everyone, we must ask?? Even the 400 laid off whose voice this discourse categorically excluded?

Fifth, it is *universalising* in its application of free-market principles: The discourse assumes (without argument) that “market rationalism” or what some have called the “enterprise discourse” (Du Gay 1997: 299) is universally applicable; that ‘what is good for business is good for all,’ employees and employers, public sector and private. It assumes for example, that profit is the only legitimate measure of business success - with no consideration of other measures such as full employment, needs-based (as opposed to purchasing power-based) production and distribution, - and assumes that all services have a market value including health care, education, public safety, etc. and thus are best managed by free-market mechanisms (Furusten and Kinch 1992:75). Moreover, it avoids dilemmas and questions of trade-offs, e.g. increasing competition at the expense of social protection and welfare, reducing state subsidies versus cost of unemployment, flexibility and productivity at cost of commitment to employees (Sparrow and Hiltrop 1998:68). Extremist of this view talk in terms of ‘market democracy,’ or as Nordström and Ridderstråle (2000:206) put it “one dollar one vote” which within the categorical boundaries of the discourse excludes talk about the obvious implications for societies like the United States where wealth disparity is extreme.

Sixth, it is *politically-libertarian*: Although overtly a-political, the implications of the discourse are uniformly toward more *laissez-faire* policies, including tax relief, de-regulation, and the reduced power of unions (Peters 1989, Tomlinson 1997:120, Sparrow and Hiltrop 1998:71). At the same time, discursive themes such as collective bargaining or egalitarian wage policies are excluded. For example, in *Funky Business*, Nordström and Ridderstråle

state, "In the do-it-yourself welfare state it is all up to the individual. For better or worse, there is no one else to rely on or to blame. It is time to become head of your own head, and determiner of our own destiny. It is time to come out. The slogan of our times is UBU - you be you. The masquerade is over. Denial equals death. Successful people are successful because they are what they do and they do what they are" (2000: 66).

Seventh, it is *Hobbesian or Darwinian* in its assumptions about the nature of the social world and of human relations: it assumes environmental instability, even chaos, where ruthless competition is a given, that these are outside our control and are ultimately good for business. It excludes talk about solidarity, compatibility, co-operation, symbiosis, stabilisation, security, stability or solutions. Some recent programs prescribe the managed reproduction of chaos and uncertainty within the work place as a strategy to keep employees off balance, insecure, and thus productive and innovative, e.g. *Funky Business* (Nordström and Ridderstråle 2000), *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (R. Pascale, M. Milleman, L. Gioja 2000) *Competing on the Edge of Chaos: Strategy as Structured Chaos*, S. Brown, K. Eisenharst 1998), *Creative Destruction* (R. Foster, S. Kaplan 2001, *Leading the Revolution* (G. Hamel 2000). For example in *Thriving on Chaos* (Peters 1988: 32-34) Peters' public policy recommendations include passing no protectionism legislation, "don't tie the corporate raiders' hands, they are the most effective force now terrorising inert corporate management into making at least some of the moves, such as downsizing, that should have been made years ago."

Eighth, it is *consumerist*. American business discourse speaks less about supplying existing demands or needs and more about *creating* future markets for goods. It openly exploits modern consumers' increasing needs to identify with common interest or "attitude" groups through symbolic media. It employs aggressive marketing and advertising strategies which privilege the sign value of commodities over substantive value; it packages products around what Sean Nixon has called the "emotional selling-point" aimed at making people want to buy (Nixon 1997:195). It unabashedly campaigns for consumerism. As funksters Nordström and Ridderstråle suggest "If you want to do something really interesting and revolutionary, learn to ignore you customers. Most ..function as 'rearview mirrors.' They are extremely conservative and boring, lack imagination, and don't know their own minds" (2000:158).

6. Selling the American-Business Discourse

Given its rarefied nature, one of the most important questions is why the popular American-business discourse sells so well among managers? The obvious answer should be that it works: that its prescriptive contents when applied to real business situations do improve business performance - that product quality is its best selling point. But this is far from established truth. There is good evidence in fact that the substantive prescriptive contents of popular business texts bear little direct relationship to the success of businesses with managers who use it. For example, Nohria and Eccles (1998:288-89) report on the failure of Tom Peter's Excellence Companies and the ironic success of his least "excellent." Even Boyett and Boyett in their *Guru Guide: The Best Idea of the Top Management Thinkers* admit that "By most estimates, 50 to 70% of all corporate change initiatives launched in the 1980s and 1990s failed to achieve their objectives." (Boyett and Boyett 1998:48-49; see also Kearney 1992). That many firms have reported short-lived but superficial improvements through these programs may best be understood in terms of the so-called Hawthorne Effect: short term effects of any intervention involving attention to employees (Thompson and McHugh 2001:146).

Popular-Business Discourse as Cult

It has been widely argued that one reason for its appeal is the ideological support it lends to management. For example, Alvarez (1998:13-579) sees consultants as important carriers of interpretative and non-empirical theories (core of ideologies) (see Boudon 1986). Whether for personal reasons of self interests, coherent and positive signs of identity, or legitimation of the role of manager, "the optimum implicit in stories of managerial success and their implicit 'do it', self-efficacy type of message, are especially appropriate for the ideologies of social groups confronting unstable and ambiguous situations, as executives do, especially in post-bureaucratic organisations. It is a way of reducing tensions and providing group symbolic traits...in line with..(the).. notion of ideologies.." The discourse appeals because it reflects, verifies, legitimises and provides empathetic support for the particular problems shared by the management perspective. As Salaman (1997: 261) suggests, it resonates with manager's own values of enterprise, commitment, energy, and consensus, in what it emphasises and what it studiously ignores, as for example certain uncomfortable elements like the nature of power, of conflicts, or exploitation, of difference, in that its basic assumptions and take-for-granted 'realities' are left unquestioned and unanalysed, in its focus on performance and commitment; its lack of interest in, or attention to, divisive, exploitative aspects of organisation, which are from a managerial point of view quite 'natural', 'neutral' and necessary."

Thus, its appeal might be seen as similar to that of a religious cult in so far as the business discourse provides as Durkheim (1965[1912]) argued, both a degree of psycho-social security as well as hopeful motivation through adherence to a common discourse, a common set of values, norms, concepts, world view, language, symbols and rituals (see Pattison (1997) for a recent exposition of the 'management as theology' argument). The desire for such security would seem obvious when considering the uncertainty of the rational-market environment in which managers operate, especially in America (Huczynski 1993:196).

Popular Business Discourse as Packaging

But a second important factor in its appeal as the work of Andrew Wernick (1991:15) suggests is its "packaging." With proper packaging the medium reinforces or even becomes the message. Thus, whereas rarefaction and rhetoric construct the ingredients/contents of the business product, "packaging" effects its appeal in terms of how it reads, how it 'sounds, tastes, feels, etc. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing" applies here.

Apart from the appeal of content and ideology, the American-business discourse appeals in its form of presentation - the "work brims with optimism, energy, enthusiasm...the authors eschew the syntax of reservation and qualification common to academic prose." (Freeman 1985:347 quoted in Salaman 1997:262). Clark and Salaman (1996) have likened the performance of management gurus to witchdoctors, "seeing similarities in the power of the presentation, the intensity of commitment and passion; the implicit, occasionally explicit, element of threat and confrontation; the total conviction and commitment of the performer (no doubts here); the presence of riddles, dilemmas, mysteriously gained insights that confuse and surprise the audience, leaving the impression that somehow the performer 'knows' them, their problems, disguises and subterfuges" - these are powerfully manipulative elements. Thirdly, the performance governs the self identification of management in terms of a dramatic and heroic status: it glorifies management.

As several authors have shown *rhetorical* structure is important here is effectively delivering the message: popular management texts rely on an array of similar techniques such as anecdotes, dramatics, labelling, generalisation, metaphors, platitudes, personal expertise, and others to make prescriptions attractive, while excluding reflexivity or argumentation from weighed empirical evidence (see Furusten 1998, Jackson 2001, Tsang 1977). Brad Jackson's dramatic analyses of 1990's management 'fashions', for example showed how Reengineering, Effectiveness and Learning Organization programs represent three different rhetorical visions, each comprising "a composite drama that catches up large groups of people into a common symbolic reality" which in turn reflect 'rightous', 'social' or 'pragmatic' social master analogues of respectively (Jackson 2001:48, 155).

In a similar approach using the stage metaphor, Staffan Furusten (2000) has shown how consultancy products are constructed strategically off stage" for "the stage," finding that "being versatile", "being there", "being competent"(both socially and conceptually), and "being different" are critical. As in "jazz" management standards and practice are negotiated via scenarios of rejection, decoupling and translation into something 'different.' By re-labelling or re-combining bits and pieces of different standards, combining strategies with re-coupling and translations the discourse becomes an 'improvisation' on known themes. Successful consultants both learn the standards (i.e. SHRM) and learn to improvise by experience, so the aim is "clarity, emotional communication on a not-too-obvious level, form...that doesn't hit you over the head but is there if you look for it, humour, and construction that sounds logical in an unexpected way."(Furusten 2000:18).

Successful business-knowledge products (whether consultations, books or courses) use fresh, stylish, imagery and combinations to attract attention and underline substantive messages, for example "newness", and "innovation", which are often considered keys to prescribed business success and its management (Nohria and Eccles 1998:288).

Packaging Funky Business

One good, if extreme, example is the popular book *Funky Business* (Nordström and Ridderstråle 2000) with its provocative packaging. Effecting the street smart culture of "tough, but cool," funky business hipsters - or rather *funksters*, use language emulating wise-guy street dialog - short, staccato speech - edgy, and trendy, like a Tom Devaney poem or a Tony Soprano directing his Mafia hoods. It goes with the imagery of the authors' shaved heads and black leather. In fact the book reads like another less popular but entertaining management book called the *Mafia Manager* (by V. 1997) - which gives advice on business from a boss's Machiavellian' perspective: same language, same tough ethics. But in *Funky Business* the weapon is not the gun but the brain.

Here packaging re-enforces content. The message as I read it is: *'we use our brains as weapons, we are smart, "street smart." We are not intellectuals; we don't dress like professors or use long sentences. It's about cerebral power - not cerebral wisdom. We are not so smart we let the bigger questions get in the way of pragmatism - we're like Americans: we don't think so much about the morals or ethics of doing business that it slows us down. We don't worry about the political or social implications of doing funky business because society is already - well 'fucked'. We are like smart mobsters: smart enough to stay alive, even stay on top, but not inclined to worry whether it's for the greater good, or if there might be a better way of doing business.'*

Funky Business is notable also for its frequent use of slogans which can be seen to appeal to same-thinking individuals as the “ritual language” of the “in” group, or in Foucaultian terms a discourse controlled through doctrinal adherence to the language, values, world view, aspirations and omissions of American-style managers (Foucault 1972:226). As symbols and metaphors they function as shorthands for saying “I am one of us.” Examples include:

- "No speed limits. Agility rules" (showing a cheetah in full stride)
- "I am the troublestarter – punkin’ instigator" Prodigy (showing people white-water rafting)
- "Re-invent yourself" (1950s man in suit and hat and briefcase)
- "Fading ideals" (wife and daughter looking at husband service man)
- "Condemned to freedom" (sea gull flying)
- "The more the merrier" (many people in blurred motion)
- "We are addicted to speed. We live it. (shows a watch)
- "Destroy to Build"- Mao (shows buildings being demolished)
- "We must be the change in the world we wish to see in the world - Gandhi (shows bronze plaque from Explorer craft)
- "You be you" (shows finger pointing at you)
- "All business is show business" - Jan Carlzon
- "Making it work is the ultimate circus act" (shows juggler)

From here, one might even speculate that the very content and packaging of business products themselves contribute to the making of their own market - in a sense 'practising what they preach.' For example, by creating the image of an unstable, high-speed, hyper-competitive, constantly changing, even chaotic environment they create in the minds of chronically insecure business managers a need for products which promise some control within these conditions (Salaman 1997: 267; Thrift 1997:36). But much like the old Mafia's protection racket or an apocalyptic-evangelical religion, the American business discourse provides no final solutions, nor any easy ways out - only the promise of continuous treatment (via education and re-education, consultations and more consultations, books and more books) - all this within those continuously problematic conditions which it has itself defined, and reproduced. Thrift has spoken of it as the "new hegemonic managerial discourse" (Thrift 1997:36).

7. Critical Engagement and Insurrection

Finally, it is legitimate to ask why such things are a concern to organizations outside of academia? My own Skeria Utveckling is a case in point. Skeria is a municipally owned educational development agency. Like similar organizations it is not only ‘a friend’ to business but an instrumental facilitator of its joint programs in research and education with universities. The reason for concern is simple: the American business discourse - at least as it is popularly constructed by consultancies and trade books - simply does not function well within this larger context of a community-development discourse. For reasons already discussed, the Americanised discourse can't but attract legitimate criticism from both academic and public sectors, and in doing so contribute to the alienation of business generally from a broader community-wide discourse.

At Skeria we view private business as a key stakeholder and partner with public and academic sectors. A concern about what and how business knowledge is being reproduced and disseminated is thus of practical as well as ideological concern - as it surely must be within

any society with a tradition of a more managed democratic forms of market capitalism. As Furusten and Kinch have noted "This is especially interesting in the case of the public sector in Sweden. It is not unusual that the public sector copies management methods associated with large successful private companies. As the public services have more complex goals to fulfil than private companies which influence is not necessarily healthy for society." (1992:75).

Practically speaking, what is being advocated here then is the development of business-education packages offering not alternative discourses but *expanded discourses* which engender conceptually thicker, socially and politically more contextualized, and morally and ethically more reflective perspectives on business practices (cf. Thompson and McHugh 2001:119-120, Clegg 1998:29-48, Thurley and Wirdenius 1991, Collins 2000). More broadly speaking the project aligns with Foucault's "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" by placing renewed attention on the "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects." (Foucault 1980: 81-83). Such a discourse then would not only offer surveys of extant theories of business organisation, management and leadership, but also critically engage issues such as the nature of business knowledge, how is it formed, packaged, and marketed. In the Swedish context specifically, it would engage discussions over the complex questions of the relations between private industry, government and public welfare (Wolf 1986).

At Skeria Utveckling we have begun such a project within the context of the still embryonic American Studies Project. Apart from its contents, we believe such a discourse can in part at least be created through positioning and accessibility. Institutionally, Skeria is ideally situated to design and facilitate curricula which will be open to a range of stakeholders, including traditional university students, business professionals and the lay public. A pilot course entitled Introduction to American Business Culture has realised this in a modest way by enrolling students from both private enterprise as well as academia. And more extended courses are in the planning phase. Issues about financing such ventures remain to be discussed. It also remains to be seen whether such a thicker, more reflective and hopefully more socially responsible business discourse can itself survive as a commodified knowledge package among more rarefied competitors? A recent surge of anti-management guru bestsellers suggests however a growing "niche market" for more critically engaged management discourses (see Jackson 2001:21). Nor is it yet clear whether or how we will address the issue of its own contradiction: Marketing a product which questions its own commodification?

8. Conclusion: Future analyses

Admittedly, I have looked at only one side of the issue by focusing on how the consultant/writer controls or shapes a business discourse through such processes as rarefaction. Clearly of course the manager/reader is of equal importance in creating by the same processes of selection and delimitation and interpretation what will circulate as the Swedish brand of an American business discourse (see CEMP 2001:69-73). How such discourses are normalized within these new cultural contexts raises additional questions for inquiry. How for example do texts like *Funky Business* through specific discursive strategies resolve, mask or neutralize contradictions presented by new normative introductions like managerialism, social de-contextualization, market democracy, libertarianism, consumerism

into the Swedish environment? How do such normalizing strategies facilitate the shifting, replacement and re-alignment of norms surrounding the new business practices? I have focused here on the consultant/writer side of the discourse to foreground its American features, and to begin analysing how these will form the 'raw' discursive material from which the Swedish business discourse will form bearing its American signature.

In a future project I hope also to explore the issue of Swedish interpretations, modifications and incorporations of an American-styled business discourse. One possible point of departure would be Lindvall's (1999: 111-119) classification of over 160 managerial concepts in terms of their relative openness/closeness to content re-definition by a user. It is sufficient to say here only that an interesting and important consideration shall be influences of specific Swedish cultural contexts – both local and global.

In this vein one might speculate for example that ironically the Swedish business sector is more vulnerable to the content and imagery of an American or Americanised rational-market discourse than American managers themselves. It is true notably that the most vitriolic critics of so-called "guru-inspired management fashions" and "market populism" have come from outside Scandinavia (see Collins 2000; Frank 2001). An important factor to explore therefore will be its de-contextualised consumption within the relative security of the Swedish managed-market situation. For one, Swedish businesses don't operate daily as in America with real-life reminders of the social and moral dilemmas presented by free-market enterprise (poverty, poor public services, welfare, education, etc). Second, the current generation of neo-liberally oriented (in American terms conservative) business managers which grew up within the security of the Swedish welfare state perhaps naively take for granted as unassailable those very qualities of life that the more liberal economic policies implicit in their Americanised rational-market discourse threaten (cf. Mishra 1999).

Relevant here is Tom O'Dell's (1997:111) argument for the symbolic importance of things American generally in Swedish identity formation in relation to the American Other. At the same time this relation is not stable, but swings ambivalently "Like a pendulum...between representations of a better, more modern future, and the epitome of the barbaric and uncivilised jungle in which the strongest survive" (1997:222). America, he suggests can itself "constitute(s) a package of dreams, and an arena for playfulness which is not always reflexively scrutinised down to the smallest detail. Swedes have found America a place of exploration" (1997:227). Perhaps then American-style business discourse provides something of a 'playground' within the relatively greater security of the Swedish Social Welfare State for 'playing at' business survival - much in the ways for example that the fictitious but immensely popular survival game, Expedition Robinson provides the excitement of risk without the risk.

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