

A reviewer's introduction to *Staging the new romantic hero in the old cynical theatre: on managers, roles and change in Poland*

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The idea that organizational behavior theories are dominated by American cultural assumptions is old news (Hofstede, 1980). Unfortunately, this important insight has done little to foster the integration of theories from other cultural perspectives into mainstream organizational behavior. Rather, it has been comfortably marginalized as the study of cultural differences, leaving most published research and theory still dominated by American ethnocentrism. It is a sad fact that the internationalization of organizational and management theories has done considerably more to enrich our store of anecdotes than it has to broaden fundamental organization and management theory.

The problem is a formidable one. Nevertheless, one reason for this continuing theoretical ethnocentricity is that Anglo-American rational empiricism has unquestioned dominance in our best academic journals. Thus, I was pleased when the editors of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* asked my assistance in reviewing and introducing the following article. Our objective was to bring a work of theory deriving from rather different cultural experiences to the attention of demanding readers steeped in rational empiricism. In my research on the transforming organizations of the formerly communist countries, I have developed a great respect for the theoretical insights of my central and eastern European colleagues, and what can only be called a sheer delight in their style. Unfortunately, the very indirection and witty personal asides that make such insights so compelling when delivered over the dinner table render them unfit for print in a respected Western social science journal. The editors of *JOB* have commendably decided to provide a vehicle for sharing these insights in this occasional special section.

The following article, 'Staging the new romantic hero in the old cynical theatre' by Professors Kostera, Proppé and Szatkowski, draws on the Romantic heritage of Polish culture to introduce the study of managerial rationalizations via the metaphor of the search for a self-image as a romantic hero. In this regard, Polish managers are hardly unique. Yet while metaphors of organization are familiar from Morgan's (1986) work, there has not been much concern with organizational participants' personal uses of metaphors in the maintenance of positive self-images at work.

Why should the study of the rationalizations that organizational participants strive to develop and sustain be so new to us? Don't most managers strive to create romantic myths about themselves? How else to explain the perennial attractiveness of military and sports metaphors, despite ample evidence that complex business and nonprofit enterprises operate quite differently than do battlefields and playing fields? Don't managers generally seek to enhance their esteem in their own eyes and the eyes of others? How else to explain their deep interest in status symbols like titles, parking places, and corner offices? While certain symbolic features of managers'

actions have been identified by Western theorists, they are usually marginalized as a task which must be performed (i.e. Mintzberg, 1973). When emotions and self-image have been discussed, it is predominantly front-line service providers who are viewed as managing their interactions with others to bolster their self-esteem (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989).

In Poland, managers' rationalizations and their struggles for self-esteem—first under foreign occupation and central planning and then as their organizations collapsed around them—are painfully apparent. How is self-esteem maintained in such circumstances? As the authors note, Polish literature has long drawn on the great myth of the romantic hero to help sustain Poles' sense of esteem throughout centuries of wars and foreign occupation. For this reason for over a hundred years Polish intellectuals have debated—defended and criticized—the Polish myth of the romantic hero in the development of their country (one of the best known Polish critics of romantic heroism has recently been translated into English, Gombrowicz, 1988, 1994). By way of contrast, in more fortunate countries, wide public questioning of such heroes as cowboys and coffeehouse revolutionaries is relatively recent. By a terrible accident of geography, Poles have a well-developed appreciation of the comforts and traps of romantic heroism, and are more sensitive to it in all its guises. Professors Kostera, Proppé, and Szatkowski introduce us to the subtle role of managerial romantic heroism in organizational change.

My own experiences studying organizational change in the European formerly communist countries suggest that the tortuous process of searching for a 'good identity' in these organizations has been under-appreciated. Under the old regime, managers could garner respect by adopting the centuries-old role of protective parent. Good managers were those who were able to work the system and use their connections to obtain resources and protection for 'their' employees. Interestingly, our work indicates that those managers who proactively worked to take care of their employees were more successful in implementing adaptive organizational changes than were those applying the draconian approaches promoted by many Western consultants and educators (Pearce and Branyiczki, 1993; Pearce and Cakrt, 1994). Yet as Kostera *et al.* demonstrate, the role of the manager as protective parent has become increasingly difficult to sustain. They find that many Polish managers have adopted a 'new romantic hero', one that perhaps is too familiar to those who know Western managers.

While the assault on managers' self-esteem in Poland is much more profound than it is in countries taking their economic changes at a more stately pace, it is a difference in degree rather than in kind. In fact, managers the world over face attacks on their esteem as increasing internationalization and competition threaten them and their organizations with more demands for change, and a concomitant weaker sense of security in their competence. How are managers maintaining their confidence in the face of such assaults on their competence and status? I suggest that readers will find great value in the following article, not only for its rich insights about the changing hero myths (and decidedly slower changing reality) of Polish management, but also for its introduction of a phenomenon—managers' striving for positive self-images—that is as powerful as it is increasingly problematic for all managers at the close of the twentieth century.

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