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Paradoxes of individualization: social control and social conflict in contemporary

Amber Geurts

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BOOK REVIEWS

Paradoxes of individualization: social control and social conflict in contemporary modernity, by Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers and Willem de Koster, Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2011, 183 pp., \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780754679011

Spirituality and the paradoxes of individualization

The spiritual turn in contemporary society

The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today ..., is as furiously religious it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature historians and social scientists ... is essentially mistaken. (Berger 1999: 2)

With these words Berger (1999) revised his former position on the theory of secularization, which was closely tied to the rationalist course of modernity. The one-sided attention to processes of religious decline meant that the persistence or, rather, the resurgence of religious beliefs or practices in the present remained largely unexplored for a prolonged period of time. Nevertheless, as previously unquestioned external and authoritative sources of meaning and identity (i.e., class, community, family, and religion) lost their grip on individuals and their choices and behavior and resulted in processes of detraditionalization (Heelas, Lash, and Morris 1995) or individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2000), the range of identity and life-style choices widened considerably. The decline of pre-given or self-evident identity and meaning invoked existential questions, questions that also form the base of the modern turn to spirituality: the sacralization of the self and the conviction that “real” meaning and identity can only be discovered in the deeper layers of the self.

The collected studies in Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers, and Willem de Koster’s *Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity* offer ideas on how to understand process of individualization and the spiritual turn in contemporary society. They start by discussing the processes whereby the de-traditionalization of modern society has resulted in a weakening grip of tradition, and traditional institutions for that matter, on individual selves. In its place has come a surge of individualistic ideals, such as individual liberty, personal authenticity or uniqueness, and a demand for personal development, which can be closely connected to the spiritual turn to the “deeper layers of the self” within (New Age) Spirituality.¹ As such, the book is illustrative of the societal turn to ancestral visions, cultural myths, and spiritual narratives seen in contemporary society.

Paradoxically, the editors argue, this emphasis on the authentic and true self poses a new, often unacknowledged, form of social control (Paradox 1): different social environments and contemporary institutions legitimize individualism, with its emphasis on self-expression and self-development, as appropriate and desirable among individuals. In other words, underneath the diverse “quests” toward the “true” or “deeper” self lies a commonly shared belief, a doctrine if you like, of “individualism.” What is more, the editors argue, such ideals of individual liberty and authenticity to one’s true self do not necessarily create tolerance for cultural diversity, but is, rather, able to penalize, perhaps even exclude, those who do not adhere enough to modern values of “individuality” or “authenticity” set forward in accounts of individualism and spirituality in modern society (Paradox 2). The paradoxes of individualization discussed in the different chapters of this book make an informed and forceful argument of why the spiritual

turn in modern society is less individualistic and hence more socially significant than today's sociological research, or managerial research for that matter, acknowledges. The central message of Houtman, Aupers and De Koster's book (2011) thus provides a refreshing and thought-provoking counter thesis of processes of individualization and spirituality in contemporary society.

"Spirituality" in different contexts

The discussion of individualism and its paradoxes is the red thread that runs through the different chapters of this book. The different chapters in the book, which address choices in how people consume (Chapter 2 & 4), work (Chapter 3), worship (online) (Chapter 6), and interact (Chapter 5, Chapters 7–9), largely demonstrate how ideals of individual liberty are acted out in different contexts and settings. These accounts demonstrate the main argument of the editors, namely that under individualism, individuals are expected to be "true" to themselves in their actions and views and should relentlessly engage in self-development.

Chapters 4 and 6, for example, provide an exploration of (the consumption of) online spirituality. Via interviews with individual gamers of the game World of Warcraft, one of the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, chapter 4 illustrates how gamers often praise and enjoy the individual freedom and self-expression that computer games like World of Warcraft enable. However, a content analysis of the advertisements of MMO games paradoxically indicates how such visions of individual expression are in fact actively engineered, marketed, and sold by the computer game industry itself. This veils the economic interests of the game industry, who aim to retain gamers, via such "individualized" experiences, in this enchanting online world where "*an infinity of experiences await*" (63).

Chapter 6 on the other hand does not so much address the Internet as a religious source in and of itself, but, rather, how existing and new religious traditions go online to spiritualize the Internet (Campbell 2010). By means of interviews with religious and spiritual web designers, it illustrates how religion on the Internet can be seen as a modern market for ultimate significance (Luckmann 1967), in which the widest possible range of religious and spiritual traditions are on offer. Nevertheless, the decentralized, open, and individualized nature of the Internet particularly adheres to those interested in New Age spirituality: for them the Internet can be seen as a natural habitat or a "*match made in (cyber)heaven*" (104) for sharing spiritual wisdom, for connecting with like-minded others, and for constructing your own, personal form of religiosity. In contrast, (offline) progressive and orthodox forces among Catholics make the religious appropriation of the Internet a conflict-ridden process (online). These chapters are thus illustrative of the first paradox of individualization, namely that the surge of individualistic ideals, which can be closely connected to the spiritual turn to the "deeper layers of the self" within (New Age) Spirituality, is often enacted in social environments that expects and demands them to do so.

Spirituality, and management & organization

Chapter 3 provides an insightful analysis of spirituality in the workplace, and introduces a second paradox of individualization. It illustrates a case study of a firm where spirituality has entered the public sphere of work, to reduce feelings of alienation among employees and to increase their organizational effectiveness. The chapter also dedicates attention to the social significance of the topic of spirituality at work, indicating how large companies like Guinness and Boeing Aerospace adopted new age training, and how renowned management magazines like Industry Week and Sloan Management Review have published articles on the benefits of spirituality for business life, i.e., in terms of dedicated employees, who have developed their unique capabilities, and who found ways to break with alienating bureaucratic structures and

pre-determined work roles (i.e., Heelas 1996). Ultimately, the authors argue, this demonstrates that self-spirituality has a strong potential for socialization, whereby employees are taught, or ordered, to realize their “full potential as a person” (Paradox 1). Those who do not belong to the spiritual camp sense pressure to conform as they feel left out and not respected. They are even actively encouraged to join in, or “*They will miss the connection*” (51). This, then, is indicative of the second paradox of individualization.

Discussing the paradoxes of individualization

The discussion of individualism and its paradoxes is both the book's strength and its weakness. On the one hand, the different settings used to illustrate the general arguments of the book signal the relevance of the topic, and its applicability in diverse settings, among others in consumer behavior, in the workplace, in online gaming, and in politics. On the other hand, the diversity in accounts ensures that the book's chapters can be read independently of each other. As a consequence, the book gives an impression of how the main argument applies in different research contexts, but fails to provide further empirical and theoretical depth regarding the implications of spirituality for, for example, management and organization research.

For example, in the conclusion of Chapter 3, the authors merely call for the sociologization of research into (New Age) spirituality in the workplace, as “*spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced in the spiritual milieu and (...) introduced in the workplace*” (53). In so doing, the authors remain largely silent on how these paradoxes changes managerial practices, that focus on, for example, human capital development or the motivation of personnel. As such, this chapter should be considered as one of the rare studies that explores spirituality within secular bureaucracies and workplaces (Grant, O’Neil, and Stephens 2004; Case and Gosling 2010), by providing yet another example of the general thesis set forward in this book.

Although the book thus makes a strong case for the sociologization of (New Age) spirituality, which turns inherently personal and individualistic spiritual experiences into a social phenomenon that can, as such, be studied and critically examined, it is largely silent with regard to these future research implications. The absence of a concluding chapter, that discusses such implications and research directions further supports the feeling that an opportunity has been wasted to set up a research agenda. The book merely provides a reflexive and critical discourse of the role, function and meaning of spirituality in society and organizations, but it fails to address the various aspects of spirituality and symbolic activities and its implications, both theoretically and empirically, for organizations, organizational practices and decision-making processes, and management.

Concluding remarks

Houtman, Aupers and De Koster (2011) must be commended for making a strong, informed, and accessible case about an approach to spirituality in modern society that is at once less individualistic and diffused, and, as such, more socially significant than extant research has argued so far. Although the studies have been conducted in the Netherlands – which was one of the first societies to face significant societal transitions toward de-traditionalization and the cultural valuation of individual autonomy that gave an impulse to processes discussed in this book – the book's central argument and findings can inform explorations to other societies and research contexts. I would therefore certainly recommend *The Paradoxes of Individualization* as a thought-provoking book that helps to spur discussion about the spiritual turn in society in general, and management and organization in specific.

Note

1. Extant literature uses “New Age Spirituality” to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices from multiple traditions, styles and ideas, combining them into idiosyncratic packages (Berger 1999; Possamai 2003).

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Religious activism in the global economy. Promoting, reforming, or resisting

neoliberal globalization?, edited by Sabine Dreher, Peter J. Smith, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield International, June 2016, 320 pp., \$41, 95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78348-697-7

When Derrida somewhat provocatively argued that the Roman Catholic Church was in fact the first multinational company, his claim had some illuminating force, but not so much for historical reasons. His quip revealed the intricacy of the religious and the economic, and such under globalizing conditions. God and money are both instances of the universalizing aspirations of the human soul. The pious hope for individual salvation in some transcendent or world-denying sphere looks for signs and confirmation in this life. This individual spiritual quest is a wager that asks for confirmation, and parallels a quest for not only confessional, but also economic recognition.

The book *Religious activism in the global economy* has the merit of pointing to yet other forms of recognition-seeking piety. Largely underestimated in politicological and sociological assessments of “public religion in modernity,” this volume offers a wide range of religious engagements