

# DRAFT

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## 1. Tell us about your work on corporate managers. What makes this occupational group interesting for a sociologist?

In the early 1970s, I was doing an intensive field study of the extraordinarily regimented world of office workers in a gigantic bank. At the same time, the highest political levels of American society were convulsing in the throes of Watergate. So I was constantly pondering the intricacies of bureaucratic worlds—one that I was studying first-hand and the other that was in the crosshairs of the world's media. Eventually, I framed the intellectual problem: How does bureaucracy shape moral consciousness? It's a big question and I had to find a way to study it empirically.

I was encountering a lot of managers while doing fieldwork in the bank and I came to understand that managers constitute the quintessential bureaucratic work group because they both create bureaucratic rules and are bound by them. So, I reasoned, an empirical study of how bureaucracy shapes the moral consciousness of managers could help me address the larger intellectual problem that I had posed for myself. *Moral Mazes: the World of Corporate Managers* studies managers' moral rules-in-use in their highly bureaucratized workplaces. That is, it examines managers' occupational ethics in the heart of the definitive

institutional/organizational form of modernity in order to approach the issue of bureaucracy and morality in a grounded way.

**2. You claim that managers are the carriers of a new moral ethos in modern society. What exactly do you mean by this?**

Managers spearheaded the great transformation of the middle classes. The old middle classes were farmers, artisans, industrialists, merchants, and financiers, who owned their own means of production and were financially and politically independent. Through revolutions in Britain and France especially, along with lesser social upheavals throughout Europe, they undermined the authority of the Church and the grip of status-oriented aristocracies and broke through the economic stagnation endemic to societies ruled by estates. But the very triumph of the old middle classes led to the concentration and consolidation of money and power and to the great, inevitably bureaucratic, organizations that guard and administer those riches. And the emergence of corporations, cartels, combines, and later, foundations and institutes spurred the remarkable growth of the new middle classes—clerks, salesmen, substantive and interpretive experts of every stripe, and, of course, managers, all of whom are salaried and wholly reliant on big organizations for their livelihoods. The decline of the old independent middle classes and the ascendancy of the dependent new middle classes is the big story of capitalist societies in the last two centuries.

This profound shift in social structure brought with it decisive changes in stances toward the world. The self-confident boldness that marked the

self-reliance of the independent old middle classes waned with the declining fortunes of that class. In its place developed the upward-looking status orientation that characterizes the new middle classes' dependent reliance on hierarchical organizations.

### **3. How does managers' ethos differ from traditional moral frameworks?**

The demons of bureaucracy shape the moral ethos of big organizations and the everyday moral rules-in-use of those who labor in them, managers first among them. What are these moral rules-in-use? Here's a brief summary of the bureaucratic ethos.

- Bosses determine the day-to-day occupational ethics that actually guide behavior of subordinates in big organizations. Bosses set goals for their underlings and evaluate subordinates' efforts toward achieving these goals. But typically there are no fixed standards for measuring work performance because everything depends on bosses' interpretations of subordinates' work. Thus talent and hard work do not necessarily lead to organizational rewards. Goals are also changeable and are regularly reformulated.
- Bosses always govern organizations for their own benefit and that of their key associates. They pack the hierarchies below them as well as boards of trustees nominally above them with associates who understand this fundamental principle of organizational governance. They frame action agendas and the parameters of legitimate discussions about them. They institute systems that separate performance and pay, as illustrated by executive salaries in good times and in bad. They reward friends and punish those who oppose them. And, over time, they come to believe that they deserve the good fortune that their organizational success has brought them.
- Bureaucracies' hierarchical structure binds superiors and subordinates in reciprocal fealty relationships. Subordinates must be loyal to their bosses. In return, bosses have obligations to loyal subordinates. They run

interference for these underlings with other bosses and they protect them, as much as possible, during the regular upheavals of organizational life. And, if all goes well, bosses take loyal subordinates along for the ride when they themselves get promoted.

- In most American corporations at least, yesterday is ancient history. Despite constant upheavals, corporations typically do not have reliable tracking systems to fix responsibility for decisions and actions. So, the top manager of a sector receives the credit or blame for major success or disaster on his watch whether or not he had a hand in the triumph or failure. However, in the case of failure, bosses try to escape responsibility by blaming others for catastrophes that occur on their own watch.
- Bureaucracies separate managers from the consequences of their actions. Thus, for example, managers need never meet workers now unemployed by decisions to move factories abroad. This disconnection between action and consequences fosters thinking in the short-term instead of anticipating the long-run organizational/institutional results of decisions. It also fosters thinking in abstractions, a habit of mind that facilitates rational/technical assessments of labor, capital, financing, and so on, and is akin to the political pursuit of ideological goals without regard for their human costs.
- The disconnection between action and consequences also leads to an ethos of rapid upward mobility in order to outrun one's mistakes. But promotion carries dangers as well. One can find oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time and getting blamed for others' mistakes. The ideal, of course, is to rise quickly to a position where one has the power to blame others for one's own mistakes.
- Bureaucracy also fosters the avoidance of responsibility. Shrewd and ambitious managers shun making important decisions until they absolutely have to be made. At that point, choices are invariably limited and, more often than not, the decision "makes itself." Even then, one still involves as many people as possible in the decision-making process to obscure responsibility in case things go south. Big organizations are vast systems of organized irresponsibility.
- At the same time, the exigencies of law, regulation, and public expectations demand public rhetorics of upright moral probity and

stewardship. Adeptness at inconsistency—the ability to think one thing and say another, to tailor talk for different audiences, to invent multiple explanations for acting on exigencies, to “walk back” public gaffes—becomes an essential occupational virtue in big organizations. Only those men and women skilled at doublethink and doublespeak have the chance to burst out of the crowd and rise to the top.

- To hone the skills of doublethink and doublespeak in up and coming personnel, big organizations regularly employ external interpretive experts adept at constructing fictive realities and concomitant vocabularies. These interpretive experts perform several functions: they school their charges in the use of euphemisms that cloud hard realities; they teach the use of fronts, the Potemkin Villages that disguise real interests; and, most importantly, they preach the art of symbolic reversal, the ability to turn one’s opponents’ arguments upside down. The ethos of interpretive experts has at its core several premises. These are: there is no such thing as “truth” even in a minimalist Aristotelian sense; everything is infinitely interpretable; and exigency always takes precedence, but must be cloaked with accounts—explanations, excuses, and justifications—suitable for placating different important audiences. This ethos comes to rule the top echelons of big organizations and pervade those circles’ public communications, spoken and written, to both internal and external audiences.

This bureaucratic ethos now dominates both the private and public sectors of modern society. It stands in stark contrast to the worldview that propelled the old middle classes in their shaping of the modern world.

- 4. The bureaucratic ethos as you've described it certainly does contrast sharply with the worldview embraced and trumpeted by the old middle class. But do contemporary men and women in big organizations publicly acknowledge that they live by this ethos?**

They certainly don't announce their adherence to the bureaucratic ethos the way the old middle class publicly embraced the notion that hard work combined with talent necessarily leads to success. Indeed, top managers in particular publicly pay lip service to the old virtues even as they live by the moral rules-in-use that I've outlined. Interpretive experts—the advertising and public relations specialists mentioned earlier—are crucial here. They invent better reasons for “what has to be done” set in comforting frameworks that invoke bygone pieties. Thus, doublethink and doublespeak come to permeate the public sphere of modern societies, making public discourse on all important topics nearly impenetrable even for intelligent, informed citizens.

With each other, managers do acknowledge the rules they live by, though often indirectly or in joking. And they talk about them with fieldworkers who are willing to spend a long time listening to them tell stories about their careers in big organizations. Their moral rules-in-use and concomitant worldviews are embedded in these stories about courageous and boneheaded bosses, loyal and disloyal subordinates, ongoing battles for supremacy in their organizations, the constant jostling to get ahead, wise and catastrophic decisions, blame-time, the importance of public appearances, and, of course, sheer luck.

## **5. What has the Great Recession revealed about the principles that guide modern corporations and governments?**

Let's look at the role of investment bankers in the Great Recession as a paradigmatic case. These men and women typically go to top business

schools where they are drilled in the necessity of increasing the value of assets in as short a time as possible and by any means necessary, without regard for the overall well-being of their own organizations, let alone for the stability of key social and cultural institutions of the larger society. They make the market for the bundling and securitization of home mortgages, corporate bonds, and commercial real estate loans. They create extraordinarily complex derivative instruments that produce no tangible value whatsoever for the economy, but make the workings of financial markets impenetrably opaque and baffling even to putative experts. The derivatives chain financial institutions to each other in ways that prove fatal when the market declines. Investment bankers bet other people's money in a high-stakes intramural competition for ever-upward-spiraling, short-term returns and the crucial peer recognition that those returns confer in an intensely self-enclosed, self-referential world, one that is oblivious to outside points of view and frames of reference. At the same time, they hedge their bets to eliminate or temper risks to themselves. They pay themselves king's ransoms even when their firms are tanking and their shareholders losing money. When their world crashes, they demand that taxpayers rescue their firms because they are too big to fail. They also demand bonuses because, they argue, their expertise is vital to repair the ravaged financial system. All the while they insist that the real culprit is not their own recklessness but mark-to-market accounting rules that force them to disclose publicly the worthlessness of assets they hold.

On the government side, to take only the American case, one sees key congressmen and senators taking huge campaign gifts from investment bankers that prosper by bundling high-risk mortgages and then selling the notes to the catastrophically-managed government-sponsored enterprises,

Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac, themselves protected by friends in high office. One also sees the president appointing the same Wall Street men who created the Great Recession to the crucial tasks of cleaning up the carnage.

- 6. In addition to corporate managers, you have studied a range of other occupational groups, including public relations and advertising practitioners, as well as police detectives and prosecutors. And now you're studying men and women working in counterterrorism in various government agencies in the United States. What is the connection between these various studies and what criteria guide you in choosing occupational groups to study?**

All of my studies are part of a larger project. This is a long-term examination of the social, institutional, cultural, moral, and epistemological foundations of modern American society, seen through ethnographic studies of selected occupations and professions. Each study focuses on a different piece of the larger puzzle. As I mentioned, the study of managers explores how bureaucracy shapes moral consciousness by examining corporate managers' occupational moral rules-in-use. The study of advertising and public relations professionals explores the social epistemology of work groups who create the plethora of visual and verbal representations that flood our public culture and both illuminate and obscure social realities. The study of police detectives and prosecutors examines the nature of public investigations into events with crucial public consequences. How do officials charged with important investigations determine "truth?" What are the structure, social psychology, ways of knowing, and occupational ethics of official investigative work? It's a study of the institutional and organizational contexts in which crucial decisions about what constitutes the



truth of matters are made. By taking the paradigmatic case of detectives and prosecutors—men and women who seek to discover who did what to whom and then fix responsibility for action—I ask how such truth gets transformed into public proof in the judicial system. Finally, since the atrocities of 9/11, I've been studying several occupational groups engaged in counterterrorist responses to the threat of radical Islamism. This includes not only those working in the intelligence and military arenas, but also intellectuals engaged in crucial legal and cultural battles about how Western democracies respond to threats from those motivated by totalitarian ideologies.

**Biographical note:**

**Robert Jackall is Willmott Family Professor of Sociology & Public Affairs at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. He lives in New York City. Oxford University Press has just published the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of his *Moral Mazes: the World of Corporate Managers*.**