A Critique—through *The Simpsons*—of Excellence at Work

Una crítica —a través de *Los Simpson*— a la excelencia en el trabajo

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Abstract

This article critically examines the construction of the "excellent worker" as a role model, using popular culture, specifically the TV series *The Simpsons*, as an alternative source of insight, in contrast to conventional management narratives. The text highlights the paradoxical nature of administrative theory, which promotes the development of individual worker identities while simultaneously urging the standardization of workplace behaviors.

Keywords
corporate guru, excellence at work, popular culture, *The Simpsons*

Resumen

Este artículo examina críticamente la construcción del «trabajador excelente» como modelo a seguir, utilizando la cultura popular, específicamente la serie de televisión *Los Simpson*, como una fuente alternativa de reflexión, en contraste con las narrativas convencionales sobre la gestión. El texto resalta la naturaleza paradójica de la teoría administrativa, que promueve el desarrollo de identidades individuales en los trabajadores al mismo tiempo que impulsa la estandarización de los comportamientos en el lugar de trabajo.

Palabras clave:
gurú corporativo, excelencia en el trabajo, cultura popular, *Los Simpson.*

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Introduction

Homer: *Wait a minute! I'm not signing anything until I read it*
Or somebody gives me a gist of it.
Montgomery Burns: *Well, it just explains that you've... won, yes, that's it,*
Won the first annual... Montgomery Burns... uh... uh... award for...
Outstanding achievement in the field of...
Excellence! [1]

In *Brother, Can You Spare Two Dimes?* [1], the 24th episode of *The Simpsons* third season, Charles Montgomery Burns, the multimillionaire owner of the Springfield Nuclear Plant, discovers that Homer Simpson has become infertile due to radiation exposure. To avoid being sued, Burns deceives Homer by telling him he has won the fictional *First Annual Montgomery Burns Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Excellence*, whose title includes one of the most degraded terms in corporate language according to Collinson [2]: excellence.

Already in the 1930s, according to Žižek [3], the School of Frankfurt critical thinkers identified the charismatic "business genius" and his "mysterious *je ne sais quoi*" as an essential part of the "capitalism spontaneous ideology." Collinson [2] pinpointed 1982 as the year when the figure of the corporate guru was established, following the publication of *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman [4], an iconic book in contemporary management science. In this context, from Gabriel's perspective [5], In Search of Excellence was a turning point because it idealized the role of the manager as the epitome of American supremacy in a key historical milestone: the corporate fight against Japanese companies. This contributes to the emergent interest in the metaphor of organization as cultures [6] by positioning cultural studies in the spotlight of the academic and corporate arena [5].

Thanks to this favorable environment, a multimillion-dollar industry emerged, often referred to as *pop management* [7] or *post-excellent literature* [8]. This has led to the promotion of administrative texts for mass consumption and to elevating authors to celebrity status, often with religious touches. These authors (even referred to as gurus) sell the seductive premise, outlined by Peters and Waterman [4], that any irrational and intuitive behavior at work can be managed. The corporate guru literature has a notorious influence on contemporary society. Nevertheless, as McCabe [9] notes, their postulates are less effective than they think because the guru cannot control how their ideas are applied, and, furthermore, managers are unable to control how employees will react to these precepts.

Related to the above, Collinson [2] argues that the language of management has lost its way, as its primary focus is on promoting fleeting trends. The indiscriminate use of management jargon, lacking theoretical support or academic rigor, has fed an increasing skepticism about the actual effectiveness of the myriad management fads. For example, following *The Simpsons'* ironic tone, the brief opening for the *First Annual Montgomery Burns Award for Outstanding*

Achievement in the Field of Excellence was limited to tautologically stating that "Webster's Dictionary defines excellence as 'the quality or condition of being excellent.'" [1]

This paper reflects on the influence of the post-excellent discourse on current management thinking, especially on the excellent worker as the archetypal role model to be followed by the common person. For this purpose, it turns to the TV series *The Simpsons* due to its potential to challenge traditional corporate narratives through humor and parody [10], [11], [12]. *The Simpsons* gets away from workers' unidimensional depictions and embraces the human condition as ambivalent and paradoxical, as Homer Simpson sees himself after being exonerated of sexually harassing his children's babysitter:

> ***Babysitter:*** *Homer, I thought you were an animal, but your daughter said you were a decent man. I guess she was right.*
> ***Homer:*** *You're both right* [13].

Firstly, an introduction is provided on how the post-excellent literature has permeated non-work contexts, with special interest in Tom Peters' ideas. Next, the validity of popular culture in interpreting organizations is explored, emphasizing *The Simpsons*' postmodern narrative [12], [14] as a tool for social critique. Finally, popular culture is highlighted as an alternative means to criticize managerial discourses, supporting analyses that move beyond both anti-management rhetoric and commonsensical management texts [15].

Petersism and Everyday Life

According to Peter Drucker, as quoted by Hancock and Tyler [8], the emergence of management in the 21st century is a fundamental event because "Rarely in human history has a new institution proven indispensable so quickly." The above-mentioned concurs with Gabriel's vision [5], who wondered if, in some decades, we will refer to the reinvention of the manager's figure as a social and cultural icon in a similar manner to how we now use Taylorism to refer to Frederick Taylor and his scientific management. Even before *In Search of Excellence*, "shared values" diffusion has been Tom Peters' cornerstone (for example, [16]). This concept has heavily permeated the management theory, and *cultural engineering* [17] or *values engineering* [6] is one of its most popular mantras: the design of strong cultures depends on the rational and systematic enactment of values shared by all organizational staff.

From this perspective, Peters and Waterman's conception of corporate leaders as value forgers [16] who facilitate employees' internalization and appropriation of values gives rise to groups of "practical men" capable of overcoming bureaucracy to bring out innovation [4]. Peters summarizes management as a tool to lead every aspect of life, exhorting us to become the CEO of ME Inc. [18]. By contrast, the following Mr. Burns' quote challenges the modern management aspiration to distance itself from traditional bureaucratic thinking:

> ***Montgomery Burns:*** *I'll keep it short and sweet. Family, religion, friendship. These are the three demons you must slay if you wish to succeed in business. When opportunity knocks, you don't want to be driving to a maternity hospital or sitting in some phony baloney church. Or synagogue* [19].

Unlike Mr. Burns' old-fashioned management style, corporate gurus do not believe that extra-organizational institutions, such as family, religion, or friends, hinder success at work. Furthermore, according to Fleming and Sturdy [17], gurus proclaim that companies must encourage "existentially empowered" employees, and Bell and Taylor [20] describe the acceptance of emotional and spiritual individual expressions in the workplace as an effort to "human soul engineering." Authors such as Ashforth and Vaidyanath [21], Fleming and Sturdy [22], and Kunda [23] outline that normative systems have gradually shifted their focus from exerting coercive control to embracing emotional and existential grounds through cultural folklorist efforts [24] to gain employees' hearts and minds [23]. In this scenario, it can be said that cultural engineering has surpassed its original purpose of normalizing worker beings, widening its scope to intervene in workers' "real life" [23] through "the managerial colonization of everyday life," as Hancock and Tyler put it [8].

However, Wilmott [25] reflects on the paradoxical nature of managerial actions. Managers are responsible for fostering workers' autonomy, provided that this freedom is bounded by tightly controlled limits. Aligned with this, the discourses of corporate gurus are intrinsically paradoxical for Grey and Garsten [26] because they propose to build unique identities by standardizing workplace behaviors, and people's value is based on their capacity to acquire functional organizational skills.

Method: The Simpsons or the Validity of Popular Culture as an Information Source in Organizational Studies

Homer: *Oh, Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh* [27].

According to Hancock and Tyler [8], a post-excellent literature's main feature is the offer of HOW-TO solutions ("how to plan", "how to succeed"), and the obsession with "useful models" stifles critical thinking. This last point is exposed by Homer Simpson when he decided to change his name to Max Power:

> ***Homer:*** *Kids: there's three ways to do things; the right way, the wrong way, and the Max Power way!*
> ***Bart:*** *Isn't that the wrong way?*
> ***Homero:*** *Yeah, but faster!* [28]

Post-excellent literature offers Max-Power solutions: simpler, faster, but not necessarily more successful. Conversely, critical thinking encourages companies and researchers to generate knowledge on management, not for managers [29], by prompting them to examine the ambivalent or negative consequences of implementing management practices in real-world contexts. There is a trend in traditional organizational theory to promote stories and narratives sold as panaceas [30]. In contrast, Rhodes [10] affirms that popular culture products provide more realistic representations of current organizational problems. Due to its neutrosemic condition,

lacking an inherent and definitive meaning, reflections based on popular culture facilitate multidimensional discussions about organizational realities [31].

Popular culture products (i.e., rock and other popular rhythms, comics, sci-fi series, video games, among others) are considered low-brow culture consumed by less educated people, or "pop for plebs" [32]. From a Gramscian perspective, Brandist [33] explains that high culture is viewed as "exemplary" as an effort to ensure cultural and linguistic conformity by a relatively homogeneous, privileged group, and it defines itself as unitarian, explicitly formulated, and potentially hegemonic. On the other hand, the impact of popular culture lies in the second part of its name: popular [32]. This feature allows us to analyze how real people interact with each other in real-life situations, beyond classic academic formalities. In this context, the term "cinematic jiu jitsu," proposed by Hoerl [34], is appropriate as a metaphor to explain how popular culture products infiltrate mainstream hegemonic thinking to discuss controversial political ideas. In the manner of that martial art whose essence dwells on using the opponent's force to reach a dominant position, subversive discourses turn to conventional mass structures to deliver messages to a broader audience [34]. According to this idea, popular culture products such as *The Simpsons* possess a high potential to express positions opposed to dominant discourses.

The Simpsons might be seen as a critical arena [12] that present topics usually ignored by mass media, such as nuclear safety and environmentalism, immigration and multiculturalism, LGBTIQA+ rights, adultery, sex fantasies, alcoholism, gambling addition, suicide, blasphemy, sexual harassment, corruption, elderly care, unionism, and labor relations [10], [11], [12], [35], [36]. The purpose of *The Simpsons* is not to accurately reproduce reality, but to emphasize the dominant social discourse and, through exaggeration and mockery, invite viewers to identify with its characters and judge whether the situations they are involved in are fair [10]. In opposition, Grice and Humphries [30] argue that rational ideologies have controlled academia, which is why management is often described as a neutral, objective, effectiveness-driven mechanism. Management, seen as an intrinsically "rational", "effective", and "reliable" activity, is a biased and prone to manipulation process, as Homer did when Kent Brockman interviews him:

> ***Homero:*** *Aw, you can come up with statistics to prove anything, Kent. Forty percent of all people know that* [37].

The former invites us to wonder whether, in contrast to traditional narratives that describe organizational science as a neutral activity and an instrumental tool, it is convenient to immerse ourselves in alternative cultural artifacts to problematize managerial knowledge by removing its "natural" label and exposing it to critical analysis.

Results and Discussion: Homer Faber vs. Homer Ludens

Frank Grimes (Homer's Enemy): *I am saying*
you're what's wrong with America, Simpson.
You coast through life, you do as little as possible,
and you leech off decent, hardworking people... like me [38].

Corporate language has colonized our interiors [39], and the increasingly blurred division between work and personal life is perceived as a more effective form of managerial control than executing disciplinary actions on workers [40]. Bearing in mind the previous paragraph, Homer Simpson is lazy, irresponsible, and a slow learner with tendencies toward alcohol abuse; therefore, his image is diametrically opposed to what Petersism recommends. Nevertheless, a possible reason for his overwhelming success as a cultural icon is that he symbolizes the resistance to blending his personal identity with his persona at work, adopting a more authentic attitude rather than pretending to be autonomous while following strict preset norms.

Homer Simpson personifies the Dionysian: in *Homerpalooza* [41] is depicted as "the man who embodies everything about rock 'n' roll, except the music." Homer Simpson keeps his rebel spirit despite living immersed in the corporate system, as he confessed to his mother, a fugitive hippie chased by his boss, Mr. Burns:

> ***Mona Simpson (Homer's mom):*** *Do you… still work for NASA?*
> ***Homer:*** *No, I work at the nuclear power plant.*
> ***Mona Simpson:*** *Oh, Homer!*
> ***Homer:*** *Well, you'll be happy to know I don't work very hard. Actually, I'm bringing the plant down from the inside* [42].

Costas and Fleming [43] remark that working dis-identification is a tactical reply to overcome tensions between who I really am and who I must be at work to retain a sense of authenticity. To explain the previous concept, in *And Maggie Makes Three* [44], Homer Simpson tells his children that a few years ago, he resigned from the nuclear plant to fulfil his peculiar dream of working in a bowling alley, a poorly paid but significantly rewarding job; but before leaving his job, he expressed all his loathing by playing Mr. Burns' bald head like bongos. However, his wife, Marge, got pregnant with their younger daughter, Maggie, and Homer must resign from his dream and beg Mr. Burns to give him back his frustrating old job. Mr. Burns accepted under the condition of placing a special demotivational plaque in his worksite "to break what's left of your spirit":

> *Don't forget: you're here forever* [44].

At that moment, his children asked him why there were no pictures of Maggie at home, and Homer replied, "Oh, there are pictures! I keep them where I need the most cheering up." Ingeniously, Homer has covered parts of the plaque with pictures of his baby, changing the demotivating message for a motivating one:

> *Do it for her* [44].

Unlike traditional management theories, which consider excellence at work as a rational process engineered by the organization, Homer keeps a job he loathes in a company he disrespects by actively distancing himself and building an insurmountable barrier between his organizational and extra-organizational selves, between *Homer Faber* and *Homer Ludens.*

Conclusion

According to Collinson [2], the critique from academia of the "excellence project" has been used to mock organizational gurus. However, Collinson [2] recommends going beyond these distortions to explore and critically discuss the theories and narratives of gurus. Similarly, Grice and Humphries [30] argue that Management can no longer be characterized solely as an oppressive force, as it may also foster workers' empowerment. However, it is necessary to explore alternative sources of information to gain a deeper understanding of current labor relations. In this context, Rehn [32] suggests that popular culture is a surprising niche in which to identify paradoxes that challenge traditional corporate narratives. The impact of popular culture products, such as *The Simpsons*, lies in the fact that they are immersed in the capitalist model, and their discourses feed them; however, they do not become dogmatic propositions, but instead remain open to interpretation by their consumers.

In contrast to traditional management theory, which advocates for the normalization of individuals through homogeneous solutions, such as the search for excellence, *The Simpsons* ironically accept "the absurdity in assuming that concrete moral messages could be reached in a 22-minute narrative" [14]. Or, in Homer's words:

> ***Marge:*** *Hasn't this experience taught you can't believe everything you hear?*
> ***Homero:*** *Marge, my friend: I haven't learned this thing!* [13].

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