



## A Žižekian ideological critique of managerialism

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### ABSTRACT

Managerialism is often unwittingly assumed to be devoid of ideological import. This is because its market-based principles, utilitarian understanding of human behaviour, and the instrumental logic of its science-based methods are thought to imbue its applied forms with a certain rationality and objectivity, one that is capable of fathoming the deepest and most enduring 'truths' of effective management in contemporary times. This paper challenges such reckonings by applying Slavoj Žižek's mode of ideological critique. It argues that far from being bereft of ideological stimulus, managerialism is steeped in currents of ideological cynicism generated by the very epistemological realities of scientism under which it operates. Indeed, such currents may even provide the foundation upon which its applied forms are readily accepted by organisational members in their workplace behaviours, despite what they know or believe.

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### 1. Introduction

Managerialism in its contemporary American manifestation, according to Enteman (1993), is predicated on the understanding that societies are the sum of transactions made by the managers of organisations (Enteman, 1993). Such a claim is perhaps overly ambitious in its summation, but it takes little away from its practice within organisations themselves. Its defining tenets have proven difficult to identify, with it being described as a set of beliefs and practices (Pollitt, 1990), method for orientating internal organisational transactions (Davis, 1997), utilitarian managerial process servicing an objective rationality (Brown, 1992), science-based managerial style (Mullins, 1996), particular organisational ideology (Klikauer, 2013), rational expression of special interests within organisations (Locke & Spender, 2011), or some combination thereof (Enteman, 1993; Pollitt, 2016).

For present purposes it is enough to suggest that managerialism provides a rationale for a certain type of managerial practice, one that heralds the strategic setting of long term goals and the logical planning of organisational processes to affect the most productively efficient and cost effective means for their realisation. Central to this rationale is the belief that organisational structures and

processes are capable of being orientated around a single model of management, one thought to have universal applicability because of the close adherence of managerial decision-making to market principles (Chauviere & Mick, 2013). It is a form of management that leaves little in contemporary organisational life exempt from the standardising principles of the market, regardless of whether the decisions and transactions involved are internal or external to the organisation (Pollitt, 1990). The practitioner adopting and mastering these principles will thus have a measure of expertise and knowledge capable of managing an organisation in any context, whether it be a mine, university, pharmaceutical company, public institution or private business; indeed, any organisational entity of reasonable size and complexity (Enteman, 1993; Hood, 1991).

The universality of this model embodies a normative logic by which managerial policies and practices might be changed to accommodate the increasingly dynamic and unpredictable environments in which contemporary organisations operate. In doing so, it juxtaposes a new style of management against the technocratic and bureaucratic forms that dominated for much of the past century. These older forms are now deemed redundant for being too cumbersome and too inefficient in providing for the wants and needs of contemporary consumers (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Parker, 2002) and the recipients of public services (Edwards, 1998). The remedy established by the logic sets out a range of instrumentalist guidelines based on market-principles, whereby managerial thinking might be (re)configured in ways that are more

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appropriate for the times.

There is a cohesive array of assumptions of wider historical, social, economic and political origin that gird this thinking. The first is that managerialism has evolved both naturally and incrementally, with organisations simply aligning their systems of management in ways that accommodate the changing political and economic realities in which they operate. The world economy has become more liberalised along the lines of market principles. The policies of national governments have become more market orientated under transcendent neo-liberal ideals. Hence it should hardly surprise to see organisations mirroring these market-based dispositions in the way they are managed (Clark & Newman, 1997). The second assumption is that no alternatives are possible. All complex organisational entities must adopt market-based decisional processes, lest they be put at risk for being at odds with the dominant economic and political environments in which they operate. The third is that advancing globalisation will continue to force and affirm the managerialist model, inspiring or driving all organisations of size and complexity to adopt its universalised methods. The fourth is that managerialism is inviolable, for it is both rational and objective; the natural accompaniment to markets that are readily observable and thus calculable (Magretta, 2012). The final assumption is that managerialism stands at the pinnacle of the science of management. Its science-based methods and applied market-based principles are assumed to place managers in a unique position to ascertain society's most pressing wants and needs, and to organise the resources necessary for their realisation in the most cost efficient and productively effective manner (Klikauer, 2015).

The worldview captured in these taken-for-granted axioms underpin the more widely understood proclamations of managerialism, which have not been without influence. Any cursory review of mainstream research and text books in the field of management will suggest a system of thinking that is strongly wedded to the view that combining the disciplines of the market with the rational management of organisations offers the most assured means for achieving a 'good life' for all. It is a view especially dominant in the American literature, much of which views the manager as a rational agent. Rather than applying a distanced epistemology, it both authorises the rationality of managers and legitimises their control over others. As the principle agents of modern organisations, they are held to be objective decision-makers who invariably follow logical sequences in assessing organisational goals, judging optimal solutions based on market-principles, and facing down any irrational or capricious impulse on the part of the state or subordinates that stand in the way (Clegg & Bailey, 2008).

As a normative view of organisational life, it is an understanding that has been associated with ideological currents that span the political divide. Antecedent linkages have been traced to managerial forms in countries wedded to communist ideals (Doran, 2016; Protherough & Pick, 2002), as well as neo-liberal ideals (Hil, 2012; Locke & Spender, 2011). Little or no account is afforded to the possibility that managerialism may sail by the winds of an ideology whose antecedents reside in the subjective understandings of people as they negotiate daily life. Indeed on the rare occasions that ideological influences are broached, they are either ignored or downplayed (e.g., Brandsen, 2009; Meyer, Buber, & Aghamanoukjan, 2013; Jones, Roberts, & Frohling, 2011; Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2014; Pollitt, 2016). This lack of consideration may be due to simple ignorance, or the result of the pejorative connotations so often associated with ideology. But it is more likely the product of thinking that has unequivocally aligned itself with the market-based principles and research methods of neo-classical economics, itself long considered to be beyond

ideology for the scientism by which its subjects of interest are engaged. True, there are differences between the two; one being the focus placed on transactions between utility-maximising individuals in the case of neo-classical economics, whereas the focus of managerialism is placed on transactions between profit-maximising organisations. Another is that neo-classical economics applies market-based principles to enforce the cause of competitive markets, whereas managerialism applies these principles for the purpose of dominating markets (Klikauer, 2015).

But a more important difference, and one of central concern to the present discussion, is that there has been considerable debate in recent years as to whether the neo-classical approach to the study of economics is a value-free science or a value-laden ideology (e.g., Backhouse, 2010; Kavous, 2014). Few such questions have been asked of managerialism, which implies a naïve impulse that is blind to the possibility of its own pervasive ideological underpinnings. It is a blindness that extends deep into the scholarship of management, and particularly so in the American literature, where the focus is near uniformly fixed on gathering and calculating empirical data, which are given in endless case studies and statistical surveys used to weigh and measure as means of advising how to produce more with less.

The following discussion elucidates a conception of ideology that greatly differs to those given in mainstream understandings of the concept of ideology, and does so through an exploration of the work of Slavoj Žižek. Applying his mode of ideological analysis to managerialism offers challenges to its central premises on two fronts. The first questions the mechanisms of managerialism said to sustain the success and security of contemporary organisations under its applied forms. The second counters the mainstream view that assumes the scientism of applied managerialism render it devoid of ideological import. The justification for applying a Žižekian ideological critique to these questions rests on its ability to make connections between the subjective understandings of organisational members, both managers and workers alike, and how these understandings are framed by the instrumental logic of managerialism as it operates within workplace settings that are inherently antagonistic. It is a mode of analysis that sits firmly within the radical humanist tradition of European intellectual scholarship, and its inherent reservations held towards rigidly positivist accounts of reality; to which one might add the better considered European accounts of management that are aligned with this tradition. In so doing, it points to a particular creed of ideology that has little to do with the wider ideological currents commonly associated with political economy, but is instead made manifest through the subjective fantasies held by organisational members as they engage with the realities of organisational life. To these ends the following discussion first sets out the trajectory of thinking that has led to Žižek's particular method of ideological critique. The section following then applies this critique to managerialism, and, by means of conjecture based on Žižek's methodological approach, demonstrates how the interplay of ideological fantasies is a necessary condition to sustain its operation.

### 1.1. *Wide-eyed naïfs, believing all they encounter*

A useful starting point in any treatment of ideology, is to recall how the concept was first used by Marx and Engels, who, in the *German Ideology* ([1846] 1970), held it to be the projection of a ruling class consciousness that justifies the domination of subordinate classes within a given society. This consciousness represented as ideology is made up of concepts, ideas, values, meanings, discourses and proclamations, which combine to present a false understanding in people holding subordinated positions within the world they inhabit. In so doing it serves to reproduce and

perpetuate their social and economic domination by the ruling class; a true instance of ‘the force of the fake’, as noted by Umberto Eco ([1973] 1986). The traditional Marxian strategy for emancipation thus seeks to reveal the true realities of domination concealed by the ruling class consciousness, thereby making people aware of the injustices associated with their subordinate position and moving them to overthrow the institutions and instruments of their domination (Marx and Engels [1846] 1970).

There is a range of contemporary criticisms of this view of ideology. One challenge casts doubt on the possibility of accessing any singular truth, or even the existence of such, much less one hidden by a ruling class ideology (Lyotard, [1979]1984; Foucault, 1980). Another suggests that whatever interpellative influence resided in a ruling class ideology long ago dissipated under the scale, scope and growth of various multimedia (Bogenhold, 2001). The argument here is that all such media have combined over time to fracture any class-based understandings about the socio-political world in which subordinate subjects inhabit, as well as to inform them: *ala Moore (1999–2000)* and his ‘Awful Truth’. Still another criticism is directed at the assumed faith that subordinated subjects hold towards the institutions and instruments of their domination. If this faith was ever necessary for ideological domination to be made possible, then it is one that is held to have long faded with the advancement of liberal cosmopolitan discourses and thinking (Kendall, Woodward, & Skrbis, 2009; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). The sum of these criticisms is to assert that we now live in a post-ideological age, one in which the influence of ideology as a means of control and domination are no longer apparent or viable. Indeed, the turmoil and deaths of the twentieth century under two world wars, the resistance brought against European imperialism and the global machinations of the Cold War, bear witness to the calamitous outcomes of an age driven by ideologies. Such events have combined, as it were, to now offer widespread disdain for all ideologies, culminating in the unfolding of a new millennium that is said to be beyond their inducements (Fukuyama, 1992). Those arguing this position do not deny the continued existence of dominant and subordinate positions within society, but the coordinates for these positions are no longer said to be established by ideological means; their sources and causes are simply seen to reside elsewhere.

Recalling the earlier mentioned naïve impulse that asserts the ideological neutrality of managerialism and the non-ideological credentials of its application, it is not hard to see how it sits easily with notions of a post-ideological age. It is these notions that Žižek ([1989] 2008) rejects, who, in his own enigmatic way, argues that we are far from being free of ideology. Indeed so pervasive is ideology, he suggests, that it now serves to structure much of what we do in our daily working and waking lives. Such an argument thus presents an obvious challenge to the non-ideological predicates so often asserted or assumed of managerialism.

### 1.2. Not so naïf; not so believing, but still ideological

The German political philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk ([1983] 1987), and his best-selling *Critique of Cynical Reason*, is a useful and usual place to start in any exposition of Žižek’s concept of ideology. Žižek himself draws significantly on a formulation of ideology posed by Sloterdijk that counters the well-known maxim given in Marx’s *Capital*: ‘They do not know it, but they are doing it’ (Marx [1867/87] 1992, p.125). In moving beyond this formulation, Sloterdijk, ([1983] 1987) provides a compelling case in his *Critique* that opposes the proposition that subjects are naïvely imbued with a ‘false consciousness’ because of the veil of ideology. His study tracks the history of discontent in Western culture and how it has assumed a new quality in contemporary settings. The Enlightenment discourses of rationality and modernity, he argues, have combined to

produce a lethargic form of cynical reason, one deemed to be reflected in a so-called ‘enlightened false consciousness’ (pp.5–6, 251–2, 546). It is an analysis that draws on a distinction between this type of cynicism (identified with a ‘c’ in its spelling) and another referred to as kynicism (identified with a ‘k’ in its spelling). Of the two, *kynicism* has the longer history in the plebeian rejection of the ruling culture by means of irony and sarcasm, and is likened to Diogenes’ dog-philosophy of pissing in the marketplace and other nefarious activities used to challenge conventions and subvert authority (pp.158–68, 194–6). It is a philosophy that rejects shared social and cultural values, and by virtue of doing so, undermines the legitimacy of authority by which such values are established and maintained. *Cynicism* differs in that it accepts shared conventions and the legitimacy of authority, but the availability of knowledge and education serves to reveal their subjective and partisan traits, leading to doubt and scepticism about the veracity of their worth (pp.xi, xxii, 3–6, 111–16). For Sloterdijk, this is now the dominant mode of reasoning, and has been adopted by the ruling culture as a means of responding to plebeian challenges to its legitimacy and authority (p.218). It does this by accounting for the doubt and scepticism that lies behind the mask of ideological universality, at the same time finding and propagating reasons to itself and others for retaining the mask and carrying on regardless. Thus, for Sloterdijk, the counter formulation to the earlier mentioned Marxian maxim becomes: ‘They know very well what they are doing, but they go on as before’ (p.102; see also, pp.5, 183, 218).

In his seminal study, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek ([1989] 2008) picks up the reins of Sloterdijk’s analysis, arguing that if ‘cynical reason’ is the dominant cultural mode as a result of our becoming ‘enlightened’, then the traditional critique of ideology requiring the shedding of veils to reveal a reality to the unenlightened no longer applies (pp.3, 220). Indeed the classic Marxian critique of ideology is itself now more naïve than the ruling consciousness it has so long sought to expose (chapter 1). What is needed is another kind of *ideologiekritik*. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis relating to fantasy, he asserts that ideology itself has become a constituent of social reality. As such, the new entrance is better gained through a focus on what people actually do rather than what they believe or claim to know. For Žižek, there is certain duality at play here, one that explains the appeal of irrational sacrifice and fatal attraction subjects seem to feel towards authority (for its organisational manifestation see: Baines et al., 2014; Cope, Jones, & Hendricks, 2016; Alversson & Spicer, 2016); a division, between knowledge and behaviour, between what people say they know, and what they believe as revealed through their actions (p.39).

Thus, people readily know that multinationals are exploitative of both people and planet, that capitalism advantages industrial owners over waged labour, and that corporations dominate the political process to the disadvantage of the populace. ‘They know these things, but still they carry on as if they did not’ (p.30), leaving globalisation, capitalism and parliamentary democracy to carry on as they always have. Žižek ([1989] 2008) gives an illuminating account of how this duality operated in the former Yugoslavia under Tito. The official ideology proclaimed a party unified in ruling solely in the interests of the common good, the end-game of which was to be a country governed by full socialist ‘self management.’ But it was widely recognised by the population at large that the party bureaucracy was rent with internal power struggles, which caused shifts in the priorities of the party line and ever-more draconian demands issued that all conform rigorously to such changes. Regardless of the official ideology, people knew well enough the reality of the state; that it acted more in the interests of securing its own survival than furthering the cause of popular sovereignty. They

consequently kept a cynical distance from accepting the official ideology, at the same time conformed to the institutional rituals and requirements of the bureaucracy (pp.185–6; 210–11, 225–6); a distance that was amply reflected throughout the Eastern Bloc of countries in the well-known witticism: ‘So long as the bosses pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work.’ For reasons of survival the ruling regime similarly kept a cynical distance from the brand of Stalinism it proclaimed to follow and the end-game to which it was officially committed (p.81).

### 1.3. The paradox of ideological cynicism

The interesting thing to note in the Yugoslavian example given by Žižek, is that people were not deceived by the official ideology, for they knew well what lay behind the mask. Yet this knowledge had no impact on the political status quo or people’s loyalty to it. They instead acted as if they did not know, like ‘there was no reason to challenge the authorities to make good on their promise to cede power’ (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010, p. 43). For Žižek, what they were practicing was a form ‘enlightened false consciousness’, *ala* Sloterdijk, to which he extended the designation of ‘ideological cynicism’ (p.26) to account for their compliant actions and behaviour. The example given thus confirmed that ideology no longer operated as a ‘lie experienced as truth’ by the naïve, and indeed for its political administrators it need no longer even be taken seriously (p.27). Of course, in a society where political opposition is open to violent oppression, cynical compliance with an ideology may be conceived of as being driven by little more than people seeking to survive. But for Žižek, there was also a paradox at play in the way that the practice of ideological cynicism provided people with the necessary space to justify voluntarily their active and on-going support for power and authority structures that effectively operated against their true interests (pp.164–5, 198–9). The mask of cynicism in effect rendered the official ideology all but redundant. Political pronouncements about the nature of reality were no longer considered ideological at all, they being replaced by subjectively-based fantasies that allowed people to justify any actions taken in accordance with bureaucratic mandates was as a matter of genuine and unmediated choice. In short, they knew, but the operation of ideological fantasy served to structure social reality in ways that provided reasons to carry on as if they did not.

So what are the mechanisms of this paradox? Ideological cynicism draws sustenance from a certain ‘constituent naiveté’ common to the classical interpretation of ideology; namely, that to act as a source of interpellation an ideology must be *unrecognised* as such; that the understandings involved are not hiding some reality of the world that is different to the one held by subjects (pp.24–5). Why? Because people are simply disinclined to accept representations of the world they feel are misleading. Indeed no one truly taken in by an ideology has ever consciously thought they were being deluded by a false set of beliefs or validations issuing from its presuppositions. Ideology is what people impute to others to account for *their* misunderstanding of the world, at the same time proclaiming for themselves a true reckoning gained through a soundness of reasoning untainted by ideology. Those on the political left see the right as being duped by ideology when proclaiming the existence of a natural community order in the manner of Plato’s ‘noble lie’. Those on the political right see the left as being similarly duped when proclaiming the moral virtues of utopian egalitarianism (Sharpe, 2017). Thus, for people to accept a reality that is sublimated by ideology, it must be presented as a common sense set of propositions that any reasonable person employing sound thinking will readily accept. It must also be a reality perceived of as being incapable of

ideological manipulation by others, and most particularly by those holding positions of power. It is precisely the constituent naiveté represented in the assumption of a post-ideological age, suggests Žižek, that makes ideology all the more pervasive, all the more influential, in serving the interests of those who would seek to dominate and control (pp.xxxi, 27–30).

But there is a more important element to the constituent naiveté in which the ideological cynicism advanced by Žižek plays a crucial role. Whether presented through the media, educational, economic, public and political discourses, the operation of cynicism exercised by subjects towards such discourses must allow for their *voluntary acceptance* of any reality entailed by ideology. Subjects must believe their acceptance of a proclaimed reality is a ‘free choice’ (pp.185–8); that they always had the option to choose otherwise. Althusser’s (1971) understanding of ideological identification holds no such free expression is possible, or at least likely, given how subjects are wholly interpellated into accepting the reality as defined by the dominant ideology and its ideological state apparatuses. Žižek believes it wrong to think that domination relies on subjects being effectively brainwashed into thoughtless automatons. Indeed quite the opposite. The success of an ideology instead depends upon subjects maintaining a distance from any representations of reality issued by those holding power (pp.30, 225). This ‘distancing’ is not only the province of individual subjects, nor is it confined to countervailing alternatives to the ruling ideology. For Žižek, as in the Yugoslavian example given earlier, a cynical distance is as much a part of ruling ideology as it is in the ideological critiques of the powerless.

This distancing however is not of an order that allows subjects to recognise the ideologically-based truths of a proclaimed reality, much less challenge them in any substantive way. For if ideology is to be effective, it will rarely be ruthlessly false. Its abstract elements will be rooted in the day-to-day living experiences of subjects prior to their becoming objects of contemplation. Hence, ideology functions through a form of consensual false consciousness, as it were. Cynicism is simply that latent acknowledgement that there is concealed content behind the proclaimed reality entailed by ideology, but it makes no effort to break out of it. Indeed, whenever contradictions emerge to create an imbalance, the subjects themselves find new reasons – a secondary ideology – to retain the mask and carry on as before. This is because it is peculiar to individuals that they need some form of ideology in order to make sense of the world around them. This need leads them to adopt what Žižek calls an ‘ideological fantasy’, in which a double illusion operates. The first structures the way they live, the second simply ignores the fact that there are illusions in life (pp.27–30). This act of ignoring the existence of ideology is its own form of delusion. For in keeping a distance from the web of power spun by the proclaimers (the ‘big Other’ to employ Lacanian terminology) of a truth entailed by ideology, subjects themselves become truly caught in it (pp.225–6). The core of their collective subjectivity is thus imbued by fantasies deployed to plug the distance between their acceptance of a proclaimed truth and their beliefs borne of experience. Indeed it is what keeps people going, what allows them to cope. As such, truth no longer lies outside of ideology, but is instead embedded within it (pp.30, 38–41, 44).

It is on the basis of this critique, that Žižek suggests that the purpose of ideology is not to brainwash the masses into accepting a given truth (though it may attempt or even achieve this). Its real purpose is to organise, arrange and orient people’s actual lived relations to fit in with the requirements of those who seek to dominate. Ultimately, it matters not what people know or believe, but what they do (pp.25, 28). In short, ideology is at its most powerful when it appears not to be ideology at all.

#### 1.4. *Naiv ty begets ideological fantasy begets managerialism*

With this in mind, we return to the concept of managerialism and its claims to a universality of practice based on the rigours of scientific technique and the rational analysis of calculable workplace data. Its very scientism is by definition rational, logical and objective, rendering it all-too-readily accepted by practitioners and scholars alike as lacking ideological intent, and by implication so also to be devoid of partisan consequences. Being both economically efficient and morally neutral, it is thus presented as serving the common good for all engaged in industrial enterprise and beyond (Greenwood, 2012; Phillips, 1999). The very esoterica of managerialism itself is conscious of its air of authority in lending substance to this end, it serving to justify managerial direction of the organisation and legitimise managerial control over its subordinates.

But let us test these understandings against Žižek's critique of ideology. Contemporary organisations are highly fluid entities. Their structures, policies and strategic priorities are prone to constant change, as much the result of internal power struggles and personal career aspirations as any calculated response to changing business conditions (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994). Perennial change, often circular or inconsequential in substance, creates demands that all conform to a moveable feast of reorganised and reordered priorities. All within are consequently kept unbalanced by its recurrent recalculations (Noon, Bylton, & Morrell, 2013), with managers using the endless turns of data to proclaim the necessity and merits of new changes to those in their charge, the expectation being that they be wholly understood, accepted and responded to by workers in both their behaviours and actions (Godard, 2014).

But managers know how things are. They know the folly of taking managerial esoterica, with its empty signifiers and abstract concepts, too seriously or too literally. They know also that the data portrays partial truths about the nature of organisational life, that it misses much of the incalculable world of work. They furthermore know that the proclaimed organisational realities revealed by the data are far from benign as to whom benefits (Abbott, 2015; Ackroyd, 2004). Yet they carry on regardless, playing their roles with solemn brevity, finding reason to do so in ideological fantasies that allow them to retain the mask of organisational compliance in what they do, despite what they know or believe to be true. Indeed doing otherwise runs the risk of dampening credibility among peers, undermining career prospects and subverting their authority over subordinates (Sahl n-Andersson & Engwall, 2002).

Such fantasies define their personal thinking and operates in tandem with the organisational representations of reality that define their organisational behaviour. The space between the two allow managers to embrace a constituent naiv t  towards the organisational truths revealed by the data, which in their managerial roles they are obliged to follow. It allows them also to retain the belief that their acceptance of such truths is a free choice, that they might have just as easily rejected them had they so chosen. As such, it enables managers to believe that any decisions reached and any actions taken are devoid of any manipulated ideological import. For Žižek, this combination signals the operation of ideological cynicism in its most potent form. The facts of data may be performative in resonating readily with the realities of daily working life, but they are well understood to be a limited portrayal. This paradoxical combination of resonance and limitation provides the means to justify compliance in outward personal conduct, which itself is situated deeply in an ideology not recognised as such. Hence, ideology does not stand outside of managerialism, or even above managers in ways that colonise their thinking and beliefs, as is sometimes attributed to its communist and neo-liberal

antecedents, but is instead an integral part of reality itself, the nature of which structures what managers do irrespective of what they might think or believe. Such a conception is far different to the type of disciplined manager who thinks rationally and acts objectively so idealised in the American managerial literature.

The interesting thing to note here is that workers themselves are far from deceived by these machinations, for they too know well enough what lay behind the mask of managerial refrains. They know the routines of fact-gathering miss much of their working lives; that it separates itself out all-too-readily from all-too-human characteristics, such as spirit, anger, annoyance, passion, jealousy, intuition, recollection, and all manner of emotions and subjective traits that defy precise measurement. They know also the vacancy of mission statements heralding them as 'most valued assets' when conformity and self-control towards directed ends are given priority over individuality and creative forms of self-actualisation (Casey, 1995; Godard, 2014; Matrecia, Shaw, & John, 2016). So they listen intently, try to reconcile the proclaimed truths of organisational reality with their personal working experiences, and in the end are left to feign interest and understanding. For they too have little means to resist in a language and rationale that will likely be accepted or understood by superiors steeped in managerialist thinking. Hence, like their managerial counterparts, they too find reason to carry on in their behaviours as if they did not know. Some, to be sure, do in fact blindly accept proclaimed organisational realities without reflection, whilst others bestow the benefit of doubt if only to make the tedium of subordinate labour less arduous. But most go on providing fealty to management in spite of what they know or believe to be true. In so doing, they embrace their own brand of ideological fantasy. It is one that finds its most prescient form, not in earnest storms of protest against the proclaimed organisational realities known to be both partial and partisan, but in the humour and carnival delivered in the rhetoric of irony and sarcasm; in the whispered natter between the like-minded that goes on in office corridors and factory halls when mocking the empty *noblesse* of managerial refrains (Abbott, 2015).

It is in the context these asides that cynicism becomes an ideological force, paradoxically and precisely because workers hold to the illusion that they are not the unwitting subjects of ideological obfuscation. It is what moves them to irrational sacrifice on the altar of managerial direction and allows them to cope in the banality of their calculated working lives. Thus, ideology stands not on the side of knowing or believing, but is instead on the side of reality itself (Žižek, 1997, p. 32).

## 2. Conclusion

What ideological cynicism does is short-circuit the prospects of any substantive challenge being mounted against the proclaimed truths revealed by organisational data, as well as the legitimacy and authority used to justify those truths when portrayed by managerialism in its applied form. Its market-based understandings, utilitarian view of human behaviour, instrumental logic and science-based methods resonate easily with the lived experiences and performative utterances of working life, even if the data gathered and gauged does not encapsulate them all. This gap between the two provides scope for subjective understandings on both sides of the organisational divide to find voluntary reasons to retain a mask of compliance. So long as all play their role in behaviour the system remains secure, akin to actors playing characters distant from their own, where doing is everything and knowing is nothing. In so doing, all deploy ideological fantasies to avoid declaring the 'emperor has no clothes' (Žižek, [1989]2008, p.25).

The currents of ideological cynicism that whirl around the contested terrain of workplace relations are thus generated by the very

epistemological realities of scientism under which managerialism operates, with the interplay of fantasies being an integral part of organisational reality itself when subject to managerialism's applied forms. Indeed it is the illusion of free choice afforded by this interplay that sustains managerialism and provides the very foundation upon which its applied forms are accepted by organisational members in their workplace conduct; and in ways no different to what sustained Yugoslavian political arrangements given in the example mentioned earlier. Indeed, were it otherwise, organisational members lacking in illusion would act in the manner of automatons; their identities so consumed by the proclaimed realities of organisational life that any creative or independent impulse would have little possibility of emerging, much less flourish. The organisations so managed would understandably display similar characteristics in their engagements with the world, akin to wolves walking amongst lambs, with all the obvious consequences to follow.

That this is not the case is because scientism is not the only, or even the principal, mechanism by which contemporary organisations operating under systems of managerialist thought are sustained. One practical implication of the Žižekian ideological critique given here suggests that the interplay of ideological fantasies may very well be the plug that fills the gapping hole in the much-heralded reliance of managerialism on the science of organisational life, thereby allowing its applied forms to function successfully. Moreover such fantasies might well be considered as forming an important part of what supports and sustains the power relations that exist between managers and subordinates. Another implication warns against viewing workplace cynicism as simply a deviant trait that only manifests itself in workers as a means of defending their self-hood or as a means of covertly resisting managerial control; something to be weeded out wherever it is found. Its influence is far more pervasive and widespread in embracing both superiors and subordinates alike, and on the argument presented here may even be necessary for managerialism to function effectively. Such implications are of course antithetical to the positivist epistemological approach favoured in the American managerial literature. And so the present study delineates itself in this regard in the hope of contributing to the humanist traditions of European managerial studies.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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