



The New Severity: On Managerial Masochism

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abstract

In the paper, it is maintained that both management and masochism are characterized by formal relationships, by a reliance on indisputable rules, and, finally, by a belief in the popular idea that soft can be hard and hard can be soft. To see whether this is more than just a superficial analogy some philosophical ideas about masochism are juxtaposed to populist understandings of management practices. More particularly, an analysis of masochism might shed some light on the work of management gurus from the past and is a severity which, in rather unexpected ways, opens up to certain humorous forms of resistance.

If you love me, be cruel to me. (Sacher-Masoch, 1999: 186)

“Soft can be hard.” This is a famous quote in management literature. Peters and Waterman (1982) used this formula a long time ago to argue for the importance of culture, customers, humanity, and other aspects they believe were oftentimes ignored in the world of business and management. Looking back at the success of *In Search of Management*, one of the authors commented that...

you could boil all of Search down to one idea: soft is hard. Up until then, everybody assumed that hard was hard. ‘Hard’ numbers told you everything that you needed to know about dealing with hard assets such as factories, machinery, and buildings. But Search said that everything soft is hard. People, customers, and relationships – they make up all of the real stuff that determines what really gets accomplished... (Peters, 2001: *unpaged*)

Here, I do not wish to enter into whether Peters and Waterman are right or not. I am rather interested in the formula itself. The analogy with the epigraph that I have chosen for this article intrigues me. The formula and the epigraph both seem to imply that nothing is what it seems: soft can be hard and love can be cruel. This suggests an analogy between certain convictions in management on the one hand and masochism on the other. Softness as such cannot be justified in organizational settings and can only become tolerable if it is somehow cloaked as hardness. In a masochistic relationship, love is only acceptable when it is disguised as cruelty. What to make of this analogy? Can organizational scholars learn from it? And, more importantly, is it more than just an analogy? It is not my intention here to suggest that managers are masochists or that masochists are managers, but I surely wish to maintain that there are important family

resemblances between masochists and managers. More specifically, what managers can learn from masochism (rather than sadism) is a certain form of humorous resistance towards the situation in which they find themselves. I will end by briefly discussing two continental managerial mistresses – Judith Mair and Corinne Maier – whose work has found an amazing appeal among (male and masochistic) managers.

Masochism in Organizations

Let me start by stating that the conundrum about softness and hardness is by no means a coincidence. People in organizations indulge in oxymoronic language that is used, I suggest, to capture the paradoxical nature not only of organizations but also of the feelings that working for them might arouse. An autobiographical note might be in order here. Apart from being an academic, I also work for a company that sells, among other things, psychology-based training and education programs for public and private organizations. Most of the professionals working in the company have a psychological background. They more or less despise the world of big business and clearly think that the organization should be much more than a money-making machine. Yet, they are submerged in a world where capitalistic economics does play a major role. What can their mission be in a world like this? The answer to this question was formulated already early in the history of the company: the company's mission in the world is HEART/HARD. Even nowadays, when under economic pressures company policies have become harder rather than heartier, everybody still seems to be very happy with the mission statement. When soft can be hard, it becomes very important to believe that the reversal also holds: hard can be soft.

The insight that oxymoronic pairs such as idealism (heart) and cruelty (hard) should somehow be matched is not only characteristic of my own company. In fact, I think it is widespread in contemporary organizations. Take, for example, the popularity of such a concept as 'tough love'. In a piece about one remarkable business leader, a certain Sir John Sevens, I found the following quote somewhere on the internet:

But leaders also need to expose those who are not doing their job properly. 'It's tough love,' says Stevens. 'You must give praise where it's due but don't, for heaven's sake, give it where it's not due.'

The concept of 'tough love' is used elsewhere as part and parcel of a human resource strategy that is suitable for times of economic crisis. It is often argued that as soon as the bubble bursts, paternalism should be replaced by tough love as part of a new evolving workforce deal. It is not difficult to add many more examples that illustrate how people in organizations are trying to reconcile what is perhaps irreconcilable.

But is it irreconcilable? The epigraph – 'If you love me, be cruel to me' – stems from a novel by the Austrian professor of history Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1835-1895) called *Venus in Furs* which was published first in 1870. One of the many things that you may get from reading this novel is that its heroes seem to resemble management leaders and gurus in at least one respect, to wit, their firm belief that there is a zone of

transition between hard and soft and soft and hard. I submit that it is only this belief that might ultimately allow one to reconcile both sides of the opposition.

When I suggest that there is perhaps a secret link between managers and masochists, I do not intend to imply that managers are suffering from a symptom that, for example, psychiatrists or psychoanalysts have referred to as ‘masochism’. The extensive literature in these disciplines usually describes masochism as a kind of (sexual) perversion that is premised on a wish to suffer pain, humiliation, and even torture. The words ‘masochism’ and its counterpart ‘sadism’ were coined by the 19th century psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), a contemporary of Sacher-Masoch. Since then, these words seem to have a ‘natural’ place in psychopathological or psychiatric discourse (see, for some excellent discussions on this particular type of discourse: Weinberg and Kamel, 1983; Grossman, 1986). It is important, however, to note that both Sacher-Masoch and Marquis de Sade were figures of literature rather than of the medical sciences. This opens up the possibility of an understanding of these phenomena that evade overly clinical or pathological interpretations. Perhaps, we should even consider the possibility that masochism and sadism are not phenomena in the normal sense of the word, that is, they may not lend themselves to straightforwardly empirical or clinical observation.

Second, neither do I wish to imply that working in organizations necessarily involves masochism. Of course, there is a long history of pain, discipline, humiliation, repression, (malignant) narcissism and abuse of power which is well-known in the field of organizational theory. Organizational scholars have extensively reported on these phenomena (*e.g.* Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994; Hearn, 1994; Gherardi, 1995; Fineman and Gabriel, 1996; Hearn and Parkin, 2001). Tony Watson (1994: 180) provides us with the interesting example of a manager who might be argued to refer to a variety of perversions in order to express his anger after having been repeatedly humiliated during meetings:

You saw me the other day leave that meeting in a hurry. Do you want to know why I left? If I had stayed I would have ruddy thumped that know-it-all bastard. Just you wait, though, when I get the chance I’ll really piss in his chips. I’m no delicate flower and I can shout my mouth off with the best of them at times. But I don’t think I could ever do that: sit there and talk to blokes who are flogging their guts out as if they were dozy school kids. You’ve got to respect people who are doing their best. He was just showing contempt for us and all we are doing. But he thinks he knows best. Just let him come near me and look down his nose at my operation. I’ll flatten the bastard.

Admittedly, this does not tell us really anything about someone’s predilections, but the language – thumping, shouting, pissing, flogging – has certainly a suggestive appeal. However, the observation that humiliation and contempt might be rampant in organizations and in the language spoken there should not lead us to jump to conclusions about the presence of a sadistic or masochistic routine. Most organizational scholars will probably assume that organization and perversity are not natural partners. For example, Hearn and Parkin (2001: 81) claim that

ordinary and extraordinary tactics perpetuating oppressions – bullying, isolation, exclusion, harassment, physical violence, emotional assault, demeaning actions, along with cultural ideological and symbolic violences – need to be named as violations.

In other words, they believe that pain and perversion are infringements upon organizational order. It is what should not be there in organizations. And if they occur in organizations, they are often understood as symptoms of an underlying illness (abusive power relations, gender trouble, ideological constraint, and so on).

What is then meant by my suggestion that management and masochism might share some assumptions, for instance, the idea that there are zones of indetermination between the soft and the hard and the hard and the soft? Well rather than treating masochism as symptomatic of a rather exceptional situation in which managers may find themselves, I wish to explore the idea that management and masochism do have a secret link. Their relationship involves more than just an analogy. At face value, this seems to be in accordance with at least some contributions to organizational theory. Gherardi (1995: 61), for example, has maintained that “various forms of sexuality, one of which is sadomasochism” find their structural basis in hierarchical dependencies. This implies that organizational structure does not cancel out pain and perversion but rather produces both as a normal rather than as a merely exceptional effect. But for all its normality, sadomasochism is still treated as a symptom of something that represents the dark side of organization.

Brewis and Linstead take a somewhat different view in that they insist on the paradoxical nature of sadomasochism for “... it seeks to disorganize, to transgress, to shatter, *but in a disciplined and regulated fashion*” (2000: 127; italics in original). In other words, S/M is a way of organizing, indeed, a “radically new way of organizing” that should arouse interest, if not enthusiasm, among organizational scholars (2000: 145). They emphasize the dialectical, contractual, ritual, and theatrical nature of S/M and also claim that the writings of De Sade and Sacher-Masoch have no direct bearing on contemporary sadomasochistic practices (2000: 140). They may be right in this, but the problem is that there are so many varieties of consensual sadomasochism that it is very difficult to see what it is that we, as organizational scholars, should be interested in or enthusiastic about.

Deleuze on Masochism

In his exemplary study on masochism and sadism, Deleuze (1999) has argued that reading Sacher-Masoch and De Sade is crucial for our understanding of the phenomenon. More particularly, it is only the “*literary approach*” (1999: 14) that allows us to escape from the tendency to talk about pain and perversion in clinical terms. Deleuze makes a useful distinction between a *symptom* and a *syndrome*: whereas the symptom is a specific sign of an underlying illness, the syndrome can be described as “a meeting place or crossing-point of manifestations issuing from very different origins and arising within variable contexts” (ibid.). In Deleuze’s view, sadomasochism is a syndrome where two totally different phenomena, sadism and masochism, meet. The problem with some syndromes is that they all too easily allow for quick analogies between or common labels for fundamentally different disturbances. Deleuze is, as always, exceptionally clear:

Biology warns us against over-hasty acceptance of the existence of an uninterrupted evolutionary chain. The fact that two organs are *analogous* need not mean that there is an evolutionary link between them. We should avoid falling into 'evolutionism' by aligning in a single chain results which are approximately continuous but which imply irreducible and heterogeneous formations. An eye, for example, could be produced in several different ways, as the outcome of different sequences, the analogous product of completely different mechanisms. I suggest that this is also true of sadism and masochism and of the pleasure-pain complex as their allegedly common organ. The concurrence of sadism and masochism is fundamentally one of analogy only; their processes and their formations are entirely different; their common organ, their 'eye', squints and should therefore make us suspicious. (1999: 46; emphasis in original)

Analogies are not enough to suggest any commonality. This then opens up the question whether management and masochism are not more than two concepts that in spite of all their differences meet in a syndrome. Deleuze clearly shows how different sadism and masochism are, but the way he describes masochism is, I would argue, fascinating for management scholars. Central, says Deleuze, is the idea of the contract:

A contract is established between the hero and the woman, whereby at a precise point in time and for a determinate period she is given every right over him. (1999: 66)

Deleuze enters extensively in the gendered subtext of masochism. He argues, for example, that part of the contract consists in the woman's task to exorcise, within a narrowly defined timeframe and by repeated beatings and other acts of humiliation, the dangerous image of the father that is still visible in her victim. But in the present context, I will not enter into gender issues. Here, I am more interested in what Deleuze describes as the entirely formal relationship between two persons, something which he believes exceeds physicality and morality:

Fundamentally, masochism is neither material nor moral. (1999: 74)

Now, these are qualities – immaterial and amoral – that surely have been used, more than once, to describe managerial work. Managers, after all, do not work with their hands and are, if anything, in the business of formal thinking (planning, strategy, and so on). The manager should also be a morally neutral functionary: ideally, pain (negative feedback, bad news, layoffs, and so on) can only be inflicted if there is no intimate or personal relationship between the persons involved (duGay, 2000). Lust and pleasure are, of course, strictly forbidden when you are inflicting pain upon others. What also strikes me here is the idea that pain should always be limited to a precisely defined timeframe. In other words, pain is a project.

The contract within a masochistic relationship can differ according to what the involved parties wish. Deleuze provides some examples of different kinds of contracts. On the one extreme, we find explicit formulations as to the time limit, reciprocities of duties, or the preservation of certain inalienable rights; on the other extreme, we see more 'slavish' contracts that give more and more right to the master at the expense of the victim (who might very well lose the right to his name, his honor, his freedom, and so on). Generally, the partners in a masochistic relationship go through an entire series of increasingly extreme contracts, a process during which one party, paradoxically the initiator of the contract, loses more and more rights. But no matter how rights are being lost, the point of the contract is that it is always premised on the consent of both parties.

This is where sadism falls short. The libertines in the novel of Marquis de Sade are deeply hostile towards the very idea of the contract. They work rather by dint of institutionalization. It is thus important to make a distinction between ‘institution’ and ‘contract’. Deleuze claims that the juridical distinction between both is well-known:

the contract presupposes in principle the free consent of the contracting parties and determines between them a system of reciprocal rights and duties; it cannot affect a third party and is valid for a limited period. Institutions, by contrast, determine a long state of affairs which is both involuntary and inalienable; it establishes a power or an authority which takes effect against a third party. (1999: 77)

But there is an even more important distinction which involves the relationship between contract/institution on the one hand and the law on the other:

the contract actually generates the law, even if this law oversteps and contravenes the conditions which it made possible; the institution is of a very different order in that it tends to render laws unnecessary, to replace the system of rights and duties by a dynamic model of action authority and power. (ibid.)

Perhaps one might argue that in masochism and sadism, there are two entirely different forms of sovereignty or power involved. In masochism (and, I would suggest, in management), trust is conveyed to an ordering power relation (*potentia ordinata*) in which the oftentimes painful relationships between two persons are regulated and organized by a distinctively formal appeal to law, order, and regulation; in sadism, on the other hand, rules and regulations are replaced by an absolute power (*potentia absolute*) which uses grace, arbitrariness, and physicality in order to reign supreme over the victims who then have to endure that the law that would protect them is routinely suspended.

Absolute Power and Ordering Power

The distinction between an ordering power and an absolute power is an old one and was used by scholastic philosophers to describe an ambivalence in the power of God. Philosophers like Thomas Aquinas wondered whether there could be any limitations to the omnipotence of God. Of course, God is free, but in His freedom He is limited to His essence which is then defined as goodness. His omnipotence is therefore restricted by His goodness: God cannot will evil and He creates because He is good (Gilson, 1956: 132-136). Already in the later middle ages, philosophers such as William of Ockham would resist what they saw as the moralization of God. We should not attribute anthropomorphic properties to God. Real omnipotence simply knows no limitation apart from self-contradiction or absurdity.

Although Deleuze discusses these problems extensively in his book on Spinoza (see: 1968), he does not refer to the distinction between the two divine powers in his study on masochism. Nonetheless, I suggest that it might be invoked to capture the two entirely different attitudes towards the law that the masochist and the sadist adopt. For the masochist, abiding by the law – that magnificently ordering power – is, in the end, the ultimate proof of love and morality. This results in one of masochism’s great paradoxes:

the urge to abide by contract and the law that is defined by it is premised on moral neutrality and repression of desire on behalf of the woman, but precisely this neutrality and repression of desire is what makes her so moral and so loving. This is, I suggest, one way to blur the distinction between hard and soft: acting formally becomes the pre-eminent token of love.

Deleuze points out that there is something profoundly tragic and humorous about the masochistic contract and the order it creates. What he means is quite simply this: in a masochistic relationship, a strictly formal application of the law shows the absurdity of the law – formality becomes love, cruelty becomes tenderness, and whipping does not prevent an erection but rather provokes it. The masochistic relationship lays open therefore the absurdity of the law. Analogously, any person's relationship with a good God might make him or her wonder why there is evil in a world that He has created. Here, however, we can see a difference between masochist and believer. Whereas the latter might be disturbed by the absurdity of a good and lawful God in an evil world, the former enjoys the absurdity that is the ultimate result of law abidance. It would indeed be a mistake to claim that the masochist loves pain and humiliation; it is rather that he loves the consequences of both, to wit, the demonstration's of the law's absurdity by meticulously applying it (1999: 88-89). It seems to me that this is not too far away from what managers know as 'working to rule' or from what they invariably describe as the idiocy of formal rules, protocols, performance audits and other bureaucratic measures that they themselves nevertheless help to perpetuate. It is sometimes hard to grasp why these people might still believe in these ordering endeavors.

The sadist libertine entirely disapproves of any contractual or law-like relationship. He argues that the law immobilizes actions by moralizing them and dreams of an institution – the libertine republic – which can function without frightened people constantly recurring to the law. Similarly, William of Ockham dreamed of a God beyond good and evil, that is, of a God without all kind of ordering and moral qualities. God cannot and should not be defined (see also: Deleuze, 1968: 47). The libertine echoes this understanding in that he dreams of a world "of free, anarchic action, in perpetual motion, in permanent revolution, in a constant state of immorality" (1999: 79). But here again, as in masochism, we find a strange reversal because De Sade delivers us a very moral argument for an immoral world:

I have infinitely less reason to fear my neighbor's passion than the law's injustice, for my neighbor's passions are contained by mine, whereas nothing stops or contains the injustices of the law. (quoted in: Deleuze, 1999: 86)

To explain this, Deleuze adds that tyrants are always operating by virtue of the law. De Sade sees this law as a mystification which is premised on "the infamous complicity of masters and slaves" (ibid.). The law should therefore, in ironical rather than humorous vein, be transcended so as to make permanent revolution possible.

At this point, it should be clear that from a juridical perspective masochism and sadism differ insofar as their respective attitudes towards the law (and what goes along with it, contract, abidance, morality, suppression, etc.) are concerned. The masochist knows perfectly well that a formal obedience to the law can result in a variety of ambivalent consequences whereas the sadist simply fears that such a formal obedience cannot result

in any ambivalence whatsoever and will in the end bring forth a frustrating immobilization and paralysis. The masochists argues that ordering power will sooner or later turn into ambivalence and absurdity; the sadist argues that ordering power will lead to tyranny and should therefore be replaced by a non-moralizing, property-less, and absolute power.

Resisting the Power of the Law

This discussion about the distinction between sadist and masochist attitudes towards the law is preceded by one about Kant's conception of the law. The gist of this discussion is that, at least according to Deleuze (1999: 82), Kant developed an entirely new attitude with respect to the law as an ordering power. Before Kant, for example in Plato and Aristotle, the law was dependent on the good. Kant reverses this and argues not only that the good is dependent on the law but also that *The Law = The Good*. But a law that does not refer to something that transcends it, for example the good or the righteous, becomes itself "unknowable and elusive" (1999: 83). The law becomes a pure formal principle that operates "without making itself known" (ibid.). The effect of this formalization of the law is that a person can abide by it without ever having the feeling of doing something good or of being righteous. As Freud noted in *Civilization and its Discontents*, "the more virtuous a man, the more severe and distrustful" he will be with respect to his behavior.

Far from being an abstract philosophical discussion about morality and law, this seems to me a perfect way to describe the uneasiness that managers experience themselves with the law. Economists who argue that abidance by the law and to moral custom is enough to warrant responsible behavior in business (e.g. Friedman, 1970; see for discussion: Jones, Parker and ten Bos, 2005: 97-100) are generally scorned upon. The law, it is argued, is clearly not enough and as a consequence there is a lot of talk in the world of business about special forms of ethicality that transcend the dictates of the law. We may interpret the discourse on business ethics as a new way of providing a formalized law with a new kind of transcendence that goes under a variety of names: the good, the righteous, or the socially responsible. The result of the endless moralization of business and organization is, however, a nigh-too infinite increase of ordering measures. The more one tries to escape the stranglehold of ordering powers, the more one seems to be enmeshed by them. Business ethics deteriorates in an exercise to formulate and follow ethical codes and all reorganizations that should undo bureaucracy paradoxically result, as I suggested earlier, in more bureaucracy. The point of all these exercises seems to be that one tries to resist the law with more law, rules with more rules, and bureaucracy with more bureaucracy. But this is, of course, not resistance: it is compliance.

And it is laughable. People in organizations know only too well that the endless proliferation of rules, codes, and audits has nothing whatsoever to do with any understanding of the good or the righteous (see also: Power, 1997). What holds for the Kantian law, at least according to Deleuze, may very well hold for bureaucracy as such: it has boiled down to a pure formalism and lacks object, substance, and determination

(Deleuze, 1999: 83). No one knows anymore what these laws are and what they are good for. In other words, members of the organization are in fact left behind in the state of determinacy that is, for example, characteristic of the heroes in Kafka's novels. They abide by all the rules and laws but do not know whether they are still doing the good. Rule-following is demanded but nobody seems to get a feeling of being righteous about it. In fact, and here I find myself in agreement with the Freudian analysis, the more managers are abiding by the law, the more they feel guilty about it. Guilty and ridiculous.

Cynical self-mockery and humour are rampant in our organizations. This is well documented in literature (Jackall, 1988; Fineman and Gabriel, 1996), but an anecdote from my experience with managers from a Dutch banking company is telling enough. In this banking company, people became thoroughly cynical after years of reorganization. A couple of years ago, the board of directors offered employees a nice amount of money when they would choose to leave the firm. Management expected 3000 people (out of 16000) to accept the offer, but in fact almost 8000 people opted for what they understood was a most attractive escape clause. Why would they want to work for a company that could not longer offer them a solid future and that offered only work that was, according to many people, deadly boring? Somewhat later, management decided to go into battle against the widespread cynicism. After some deliberation, they decided to organize an event with the telling name *Make My Day*, the idea being to congregate in several hotels throughout the country. But they made a mistake: they organized the day that would make everybody's day during the weekend and also made everybody's participation obligatory. This lead, of course, to another upheaval of cynicism. As one anonymous member of the organization explained on the company's intranet: *Make My Day. Fuck Off: Kill My Weekend*. Rumor has it that management has lost their battle even before it got started.

Mair, Maier, and Male Managerial Slaves

Irony and humour are two possible answers of people who are confronted with laws and rules that they do not recognize as helpful or as having any meaningful content. Irony is the sadist option: you transcend and subvert the law simply by arguing that there are more superior principles (nature, sovereign masters, absolute freedom, whatever...) and that only anarchy is the perfect state of affairs. This is probably not an option most people in organizations would choose, even though gurus like Tom Peters (1988) have pleaded for something called liberation management or organizational anarchy.

Humour is the masochist option: by gladly submitting yourself to the laws and rules of the organization where you work, you show nothing less than humorous contempt for the world you find yourself in. Let me quote Deleuze one more time:

We all know ways by twisting laws by excess of zeal. By scrupulously applying the law we are able to demonstrate its absurdity and provoke the very disorder that it is intended to prevent or to conjure. (1999: 88)

Unlike the sadist who wants to ironically transcend the law just to enter into a somehow lawless universe, the masochist tries to reduce the law in a humorist vein to its ulterior consequences. The best thing you can do is to laugh about the rules that you meticulously abide by. I submit that this is what many managers do nowadays. No longer do they believe in emancipation, liberation, let alone in sadist transgressions. But they increasingly seem to adopt a certain masochistic feel for the absurdity in which they find themselves. Rules will sooner or later become the new hype. In the Anglophone world, bureaucratic behavior has been eloquently defended by duGay (2000), but this is a text that is probably only known within academic confines and it is therefore rather humourless. Outside the Anglophone world, however, there is a remarkable upsurge in masochistic fashion. And analogously to what is going on in the books by Sacher-Masoch it is women who seem to adopt the dominant role here.

In Germany, Judith Mair's book *Schluss mit Lustig* (Stop the Fun!), first published in 2002 and translated in many continental languages, became a bestseller. Mair, a marketing and advertisement consultant, wants us to believe that all the emphasis on soft and emotional qualities in contemporary business organizations (you may think here of emotional intelligence, friendship, emotion management, and so on) is, to say the least, somewhat unreal. She claims that business managers should recur to old rules because organizations need rules, that they should embrace toughness because people in organizations need guidance from leaders, and, finally, that they should simply abandon the assumption that business organizations can somehow become places where people can work on self-actualization. In a nice reversal of Peters and Waterman's injunction that soft is hard, Mair argues that hard is, in the end, softer than soft itself. In one of the many provocative passages of her book, the reader is assured that WORK = WORK and that we should not make more out of it. She urges to abandon all fantasies about team spirit, ethics, and fun. She is in favour of strict rules, not only in terms of work but also in terms of social contacts and even dress code. Her popularity among managers in Germany and Holland is staggering. In a well-known Dutch business paper called *Intermediair*, she was on the front cover: a solemn and grim gaze, stylish blonde hair and an impeccable blue T-shirt and a headline saying *The New Severity* ('De nieuwe strengheid'; see also: www.womenontheweb.nl). On photos, she never smiles but that seems only to contribute to her popularity. Many managers think that she perfectly shows the absurdity of efforts to make business organizations more ethical or more humanistic.

In France, Corinne Maier's book *Bonjour Paresse* (*Hello Laziness*), which appeared in 2004, became an instant bestseller. Once more, we have a book that purports to write in unequivocal terms about the realities in business organizations. Maier, a Lacanian psychoanalyst who has a part-time job in business life, is at pains to show the absurdities of business ideologies and claims, among many other things, that business organizations clearly do not exist to help you in your self-actualization. What organizations want are highly intelligent yet docile and uncritical people, that is to say, 'neo-slaves' who do their stupid work in the middle layers of the organizations. *Bonjour Paresse*, an obvious reference to Françoise Sagan's famous novel *Bonjour Tristesse* (*Hello Sadness*), can be read as a wake-up call for these neo-slaves who waste their lives by doing boring jobs and attending boring meetings. Maier urges these people to be as lazy as possible without appearing to be so. Her cynicism is fascinating. At the

end of her book, which is in fact a document that meticulously describes her own frustrations in a business organization and which, moreover, sold more than half a million copies, she formulates ten alternative commandments for the middle layer. The first two go like this:

Employees are the slaves of our time. You know or should know that business life is not the right place for self-development. You work for your salary at the end of the month and, as people often use to say, that's it... Don't try to change the system: resistance merely enforces it, to make it a topic for debate makes it stronger... the revolution was for rioters during the 1970s and you well know how they ended up (bosses). (Maier, 2004a: 118-119; my translation from the Dutch version)

Mair and Maier (what is in their names?) stress the importance of rule following and, like the masochist, they embrace the rather sobering absurdities that this might entail. But they do so, admittedly, in somewhat different ways. For Mair, rule-following is actually more humanistic than allegedly humanistic initiatives: she points out that in organizations that know empowerment, informal decision-making procedures, teamwork, and so on, work becomes intolerably strenuous and cannot be executed anymore between nine till five. This is why for her soft is harder than hard. The abidance by formal procedures 'in her office' should put an end to the absurdities of softness. For Maier, on the other hand, rule-following is in fact what will inevitably lay bare the absurdities of life within business organizations. Questioning the system is, in fact, what one should not do: the system erodes itself and its demise is therefore unquestionable.

The immense popularity of Mair and Maier among managers hints at a certain masochistic appeal. Both mistresses hit hard at the working slaves but these slaves recognize that hitting hard might be the only way to help them out of their predicament.

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