

“Modern Madness”

(Examining the dark-side of competition through the optics of psychodynamics)

by

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For

23rd Annual meeting of the *International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of
Organizations,*

to be held in Amsterdam, 19-25th June 2006

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As investigative keys to aspects of social standing and perhaps more importantly, social understanding, we draw upon the works of Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Burkhard Sievers, Douglas LaBier and others, to examine the emotional fallout and clinical challenges organisations should confront as a result of a society that embraces competition as its economic driver.

Freud argued for the understanding of a dual instinct theory consisting of two classes of instinct named after the life and death ‘gods’, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, that “are fused, blended, and alloyed with each other” (Freud, 1923/1984, p. 381). As such, they manifest themselves in psychological representation and account for much of our behaviour that includes competitiveness and competition (Freud, 1920/1984, 1923/1984).

Freud’s emphasis on the constant struggle between the individual’s desire for instinctual gratification and the dynamics of social repression was a crucial starting point for Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse (1955, 1964) wanted to understand the psychological embeddedness of society’s antagonistic character and the manner in which this was reproduced both *within* and *over* the individual. Using Sigmund Freud’s terminology and some of the same conceptual framework, Marcuse subsequently argued that each society has material conditions that operate as a *reality principle* that takes different forms in different societies. In capitalist societies, the reality principle is one based on a *performance principle* - under whose rule “society is stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members” (Marcuse, 1955, p. 44). And, like many of the performance principles “of advanced industrial societies have been based on the destructive energies of Thanatos” (Luke, 1994, p. 194).

In the work of Marcuse we can readily discern how the creative energy of *Eros* is harnessed in the service of achieving an ‘ego-ideal’ (through identification, to be

subsequently replaced by an 'organisational-ideal') that pivots upon competitive performance. Unfortunately the destructive energies of Thanatos that act to engage repressive agencies will be shown to be *the* ideals to be realized through the creative energy of Eros:

Immortality is a scarce resource, available only to the happy few; and immortality of the enterprise as well as of its few members can only be achieved and maintained at the cost of many others and their lack of immortality. (Sievers, 1999, p. 57)

When individuals can no longer separate good from bad work interests, Eros and Thanatos become fused in a manner that negatively impacts psychological health (Carr & Lapp, 2005) It is within in this context we introduce the psychodynamic underpinning of La Bier's (1986) *Modern Madness*.

"Modern Madness" means some people appear sick but are normal and others appear normal, but are sick. La Bier explained this paradox in terms of a *psychostructure of work*. He specifically argued that in their work situation, "well-adapted winners" show little sign of their sickness "because their career environment, in effect, requires disturbed attitudes and *passions* for success" (1986, p. 7). "Passion" has significant parallel to Erotic and Thanatic manifestations: "we have forgotten that our lives are often driven by hidden passions ... passions, in this sense, are forces within us which we may not comprehend or be aware of" (La Bier, 1986, p. 17).

By analyzing past and more recent case-studies (Carr, 1996; Carr & Lapp, in press) we examine 'evidence' that confirms existence of psychostructures that we contend are best comprehended in terms of how well Eros and Thanatos are psychically managed. Specific approaches to auditing psychostructures in organisations will be discussed as will the manner in which therapists and organisation consultants might be able to ameliorate and change the emotional fallout of the excesses of another 'god' called *competition*.

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