

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Perverse Organisation and its Deadly Sins*, Susan Long, London, Karnac, 2008.

Reviewed by Amy L. Fraher\*

Perhaps no book published in organizational studies in 2008 is more helpful in understanding the global state of affairs during this cataclysmic time in history than Professor Susan Long's *The Perverse Organization and its Deadly Sins*. As the book's title suggests, Long analyses the unconscious cultural assumptions and collusions that contribute to the creation of perverse cultures in organizations worldwide. One only needs to pick up the newspaper in nearly any country, on any day, to find a ready application for Long's approach.

This week's *New York Times*, for example, chronicles the US financial markets' billion dollar bailouts, commercial airlines hiding managerial deficiencies in Chapter 11 bankruptcy and US 'big three' automakers' pleas for governmental assistance. Moody's Investor Services, the USA's oldest and most prestigious credit-ranking agency, admitted it inflated ratings of Countrywide Mortgage – a leader in the sub-prime mortgage debacle – causing foreclosures on hundreds of thousands of homes in order to attract investors. Generating revenue of \$1.35 billion in the first three quarters of this year alone, Moody's greedy executives questioned why they have become a 'punching bag' for angry, envious Americans lamenting, 'Why does everyone hate us so much?' (Morgenson, 2008). Even as the major US auto manufacturers travelled the 525 miles from Detroit to Washington, hat in hand, to beg for a government bailout, they could hardly contain their gluttony: each flew in a separate personal jet. New York Congressman Gary L. Ackerman inquired, 'Couldn't you all have downgraded to first class or jet-pooled, or something, to get here? It would have at least sent a message that you do get it' (Schwartz, 2008). How did we get here? Long's theories about 'the perverse organization' help shed light.

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In Chapters One and Two, Long clearly outlines the book's thesis in a manner that is intriguing to experienced scholars as well as inviting and accessible to beginners and students. Distinguishing an organizational culture of narcissism from a perverse culture, Long focuses less on a political/economic analysis and more on revealing how the dynamics of perversion get established and played out below the surface in organizations. Expanding the medieval metaphor of the seven deadly sins, she instructs the reader on how to search for systemic emotions made explicit in the roles of key players on behalf of the system, and lying at the basis of perverse organizational behaviour.

Consistently emphasized throughout the book, Long's five 'basic indicators of a perverse state of mind' are a culture which does the following: (1) reflects attainment of individual goals or pleasures at the expense of others' rights; (2) acknowledges reality, but at times denies it to facilitate 'not seeing'; (3) engages others as accomplices in the perversion; (4) turns a blind eye; and (5) breeds corruption (p. 15). Over the course of the next six chapters, she explores the application of this thesis in organizational life. For instance, she analyses the following: the 'corporate sin' of *pride* at Long Term Capital Management (LTCM) in America; *greed* at Parmalat dairy in Italy; *envy* in professional associations globally; *sloth* and *neglect* at Heath International Holdings (HIH) insurance in Australia; and *wrath* in the armed forces. In so doing, she provides a model with wide applicability.

One of the strongest aspects of the book is Long's ability to interpret and apply a wide range of social science theories to support her thesis. Intertwining the work of theorists as diverse as Wilfred Bion, Erik Erikson, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Eliot Jacques, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Christopher Lasch, Isabel Menzies Lyth, Karl Marx, Eric Miller, Harry Stack Sullivan, Max Weber and Donald Winnicott, Long creates a model she uses to examine the organization 'as if' it were an individual. She guides the reader along a winding path linking these authors' multiple perspectives to a precipice where the vista reveals the 'unconscious is not simply a place in the mind of an individual, but a web of social relations' (p. 153).

In addition to her clear writing style and wide application of central theories, making this an excellent text for university programmes, a third factor I find intriguing is the cover itself. It features denim with an open zipper inscribed with the author's name, and a large cylindrical building emerging from the fly. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol's 1971 album cover for the Rolling Stones' classic *Sticky Fingers*, which showed the lower torso of a well-endowed man wearing extremely tight jeans and included a moveable zipper, Long's suggestive cover

metaphorically evokes the opening of all kinds of possibilities just like the book itself does.

In closing, I have one reservation which I feel is important to note. While, overall, I find Long's book an extremely important contribution to the field of group and organizational study, I was dismayed that on occasion the book seemed to wander from its accessible language, particularly if one imagines a lay reader audience. For example, when discussing the important topic of splitting and how it applies during her second indicator phase, 'denial of reality', Long takes a tangent into Freud's original analysis of fetishism that I am certain would be lost on most students. Moreover, the ten pages discussing the intricacies of LTCM's financial wheelings and dealings detracted at times from that chapter's main point – the fascinating topic of 'pride and the phallic culture of Wall Street'. Although interesting, the denseness of language in these sections, especially juxtaposed with the accessibility of the rest of the book, felt incongruous.

I had hoped that Long had produced what our field has long lacked: an accessible application of psychoanalytic theories to organizations suitable for experts as well as laymen, business managers and college students outside of psychology. Aside from these minor diversions, she has accomplished this task, and I would highly recommend this book. Joining several other scholars in the field, such as David Armstrong, Larry Hirschhorn, Paul Hoggett, Christopher Kayes, Howard Schwartz, and Mark Stein, Susan Long has persuasively illustrated that psychoanalysis can live off the couch.

### *References*

- Morgenson, G. (2008) 'Debt watchdogs: tamed or caught napping', *New York Times*, A1, 7 December.
- Schwartz, J. (2008) 'Contrite over misstep, auto chiefs take to road', *New York Times*, A1, 2 December.