



THE
POPULAR
CULTURE
STUDIES **JOURNAL**

2014
Volume 2
Numbers 1 & 2

MidwestPCA/ACA

THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL**

VOLUME 2

NUMBERS 1 & 2

2014

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The Popular Culture Studies Journal Interview with GEORGE EDWARD CHENEY

About George

George Cheney (PhD Purdue University, 1985) is an internationally recognized scholar who has worked at and visited a variety of universities in the U.S., Europe, Latin America and New Zealand. Cheney's primary area of study is organizational communication, and he has helped to broaden the boundaries of that specialty to include connections with culture, the economy, ethics, and social issues as well as to contribute to the internationalization of the field. His major interests center around identity, participation, work life, ethics, consumerism, globalization, and peace. Working solo or collaboratively, Cheney has published 10 books and more than 100 articles. His most recent book is a co-edited anthology *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization* (2014), which is the first volume of its kind in bringing together a wide range of examples that challenge our ways of thinking about how to do business and other activities in society. He especially enjoys team-based approaches to research and bringing together scholars and practitioners from a variety of specialties. He has won numerous awards for teaching, research, and service.

Cheney has held several administrative positions, he has helped to develop multidisciplinary as well as communication curricula, and he is an advocate of community-based research and civic engagement. At the University of Utah, he directed both an innovative program in peace and conflict studies, and a human rights center with a strong outreach

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1&2
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component. At Kent State University, he coordinated and further developed an integrative doctoral program across areas of communication and information.

Cheney is also an associate investigator with the Ohio Employee Ownership Center at Kent State University, USA and a reference professor at Mondragon University in the Basque Country, Spain. Both of those associations relate to his work on employee ownership, cooperatives, and economic solidarity. In addition, Cheney is collaborating with colleagues in Canada and the USA on projects in the arenas of sustainable economic development, emphasizing mechanisms of participation and bonds of solidarity.

He has also visited Denmark many times, where he has collaborated extensively with Lars Thøger Christensen, now at the Copenhagen Business School, on a series of essays on identity, the integration of internal and external organizational communication, and transparency. With Christensen and with two colleagues now at Massey University, New Zealand, Cheney has published and is now revising an innovative textbook on organizational communication. *Organization Communication in an Age of Globalization* (Waveland Press, 2011) book draws from many examples in the cultural milieu surrounding organizational life in order to treat a variety of sub-topics.

Cheney is committed to translating theoretical ideas for popular venues and everyday practice, and he enjoys speaking about a range of issues that include consumerism, career development, and business ethics. In his consulting and partnering with organizations, Cheney promotes high levels of employee participation, group facilitation and problem solving, and shared leadership. In his writings, Cheney tries to be playful with the uses of terms and concepts, recognizing that knowledge itself is a network of concepts and that insights can sometimes occur with making the familiar unfamiliar (take the terms “efficiency” or “corporate

personhood,” for example) or juxtaposing ideas in novel ways (e.g., considering the downside of “professionalism”).

Currently, Cheney is an adjunct professor in the following units and institutions: the College of Communication and information at Kent State University, the Department of Communication at the University of Utah, the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Department of Management Communication at the University of Waikato, NZ.

In September of 2014 he will be presenting a paper on connections between health, work, community and wealth at a conference in Denver, and in November 2014 he will be a keynote speaker at a conference on cooperatives and mutuals in Wellington, NZ. Together with Ashley Hernandez, a consultant in Houston, Cheney is completing a study of best practices in worker cooperatives that will flow into the development of a manual on employee ownership.

How did your academic career begin?

I didn't set out to be a professor, and I didn't really know much about the field of communication until I embarked on my master's degree. My journey was from the sciences (I was a pre-med major) to the social sciences and then the humanities. I am happy to have been exposed to so many different disciplines, and to this day I draw upon multiple epistemologies, or ways of knowing, in my work. I was thankful for the long period of exploration that began when I was an undergraduate: there was time to check out different professions as well as to study in a variety of fields. Along the course of my master's work, I realized how much I enjoyed university life and then slid into a PhD program at the same institution, Purdue University.

What areas of study and ideas initially attracted you the most?

In those days, many graduate students in communication came to the field via forensics, meaning debate and individual speaking events. As an undergraduate with many different interests, I had some preparation in both the social sciences (including psychology, sociology and political science) and the humanities (particularly English and philosophy). With extemporaneous and impromptu speaking, which became my favorite events at speech tournaments, I dealt with a lot of contemporary issues (from war and peace, to educational policy, to energy and the environment), and then learned that there was a big discipline "attached" to forensics (as I viewed the relationship then!).

I also developed a strong interest in work and economic issues even though coursework in economics and accounting didn't draw me at the time. As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to do research in the community of Youngstown, Ohio by interviewing newly unemployed steelworkers and employed autoworkers. That was a powerful experience that awakened my concern for the many types of people and jobs that comprise our economy. This was the beginning of my academic interest in organizations and the workplace. In addition, because of how questions of identity surfaced in those interviews as well as in observations during my part-time jobs (at a shoe store in a local mall, in door-to-door sales, and on an assembly line), I started to think about what work means to people beyond the obvious paycheck.

You have observed that Kenneth Burke and Max Weber are two of the theorists who have influenced you the most. How do you see their works as relevant today?

They are two of the most important sources of influence on my thinking, to be sure. From Burke, I acquired sensitivity to language and symbols. He captured this well, especially towards the end of his long life and career, in discussing how "literature is equipment for living" and how much we can observe about human relations from relations between *terms*. For example, consider how the notion of "revolutionary" was tied to the left part of the political spectrum before 1980 and then became bonded with the right after that time. The film *Bob Roberts* portrays this symbolic shift very well. Burke also called attention to the fact that while precision is important in many contexts where we use language (think of air traffic control) ambiguity is a major resource in many kinds of communication. This we see especially with words for values and identities, where it is often in people's interest to be somewhat vague and therefore more inclusive.

Weber's insights into the logics of the modern world were amazing, especially considering they were described a century ago. He helped us to understand that rationality is not just one thing, but it is in certain ways relative (that is, there are different types of rationality), just as are relations of authority and power. He also showed us how organizations and parts of them such as rules, regulations, and procedures, can take on lives of their own and move away from their intended purposes.

Who would you describe as your mentors in graduate school, and how did they influence you?

I was very fortunate in graduate school. 1980-85 was an exciting time to be in the Communication Department at Purdue. I had the opportunity to take a wide array of courses and co-author papers with Phil Tompkins and Linda Putnam (both leaders in organizational communication). There were several other professors with whom I learned a great deal there. Plus, I was part of a terrific cohort group. A number of my fellow graduate students are well-known scholars in communication. One of the key things I learned from both my formal and informal mentors is that knowledge itself can be seen as a network and that if we conceive of disciplines and “inter-disciplines” this way it helps us to understand better how ideas and collaborations develop.

What is your philosophy of mentoring, and how does that related to organizational communication?

This is a very important question. I believe in transformational leadership in the sense that the best thing we can do is to encourage and empower others to succeed and become leaders in their chosen areas of study and work. I also believe that effective mentoring is necessarily adaptable to different people, career stages, and situations. I would say that mentoring occurs in a variety of contexts, including small-group discussions and in peer relationships. Finally, I would stress that there is no substitute for collaboration, and that’s something too that’s very helpful to model because a lot of people don’t have ready examples in their experience.

Regardless of the type of mentoring, I think it should be value-driven as well as centered on developing expertise. By this I mean trying to model the highest professional standards and always remembering that the

workplace is inhabited by human beings and not robots or objects. Organizations should be designed to serve people and the world and not so much the other way around. We can apply this same principle to the economy in general, which often seems removed from basic human concerns. In this respect, communication has a lot to say about economics, but that leads us to other questions.

What are some of the major trends in higher ed. you have observed over the course of your career? How do these relate to your primary area of study, organizational communication?

This is of course a huge question, and I'm actually considering writing more about it in the coming years. Two very positive trends, in my view, have been the move toward community engagement in many universities and colleges and the synthesis of theory and practice in the communication discipline. I am happy to have been a part of both of those developments. I'm not a big fan of the so-called "ivory tower," although I would defend the metaphor's relevance insofar as universities and colleges should provide "space" for faculty and students to "stand back" from various parts of the world and then reflect on and analyze them. In both of these ways—engaged scholarship and teaching and the conversation between theory and practice--academe has become more responsive to a broader constituency. That's very positive.

On the down side, from my perspective, the sheer pace of work for faculty and students has accelerated such that extended conversations that provide time to reflect are at a premium. This change is one of the by-products of efforts at greater "efficiency" that are sometimes rather narrow in that the need for reflection about what we are doing can get pushed off the table. Technological developments are double-edged, I feel: on the one hand, there are more opportunities for online and hybrid courses; on

the other, there is a certain clutter in today's communication environment as well as less face-to-face interaction.

Another thing has occurred, predictably but also ironically: the embrace of the student-as-consumer metaphor. There are big problems with this, as several colleagues and I wrote about in the 1990s. Among them is that fact that the metaphor places the student outside the process of education much as it places most consumers outside the process of creation and production (although there are obvious exceptions to those through systems that incorporate customers' preferences). The point, though, is that education ought to be a highly participatory, dynamic enterprise of co-creation.

Your work is multidisciplinary in orientation and reach. What are some important works you would recommend to others who would like to understand organizations, work and society?

In terms of understanding how organizations and work developed in the contemporary world, there are no better resources than works by Marx, Durkheim and Weber. A few contemporary writers who bring together work, economy, and culture very well are sociologist Richard Sennett, economist Juliet Schor, political scientist Gar Alperowitz, former corporate executive David Korten, social critic Naomi Klein, climate activist Bill McKibben and scientist-activist Vandana Shiva. These are writers who not only move easily across disciplinary boundaries but also help us to reflect on how different trends work together or may be in opposition to one another. Above all, they challenge us to think beyond the present and inspire us to reconsider our own patterns of living and working in relation to our communities and our planet.

How do you see work and organizations as related to broader cultural trends?

Work and culture are intertwined in several ways, and there are influences in both directions. For example, ideas about competition and success that circulate in the wider society really do affect how people see their jobs and approach colleagues in a job. Think of the work and professional values represented in *The Apprentice* series, as my colleague Dan Lair has examined. The dramatic scenes and catch phrases of that both reflect ideas that are part of popular consciousness—for example, “It’s just business” or “You’re fired”—and then contribute to discussions that may shape individuals’ perceptions of work by either reinforcing existing perceptions or contributing to a sense of irony.

Conversely, experiences of betrayal, exploitation or abuse at work have ripple effects not only individuals’ lives but also, for example, in portrayals of work to be found in television, film, cartoons, and websites for career development. Experiences that are retold become part of the pool of symbolic resources that are available to individuals and groups. Consider for example how negative stories about working for some of the Fortune 500 companies are becoming widely known—sometimes to the point that the companies themselves feel the need to polish their images or even change policies. Part of the reaction to trends in the corporate world, of course, appears as catharsis and satire, which may or may not motivate social change. The cult film *Office Space* and the long-running Dilbert cartoons are good examples. Unfortunately, there are probably more negative assumptions and examples than positive ones, and this fact in itself contributes to cynicism about jobs, careers, and work in general. This is why true stories of “success” as defined differently than high status and fat paychecks are so important today.

In your teaching and writing about professional ethics you have talked about connections to culture. What are some observations you would make along these lines in light of conditions in the global economy in recent years?

One of my pet peeves is that with every scandal in any sector--whether in business, politics, organized religion, social services, etc.--the reaction is generally to talk about "bad apples" rather than to examine the bushel or the orchard. The film *The Corporation* brought this out vividly in 2003 and at the same time exposed some of the absurd implications that emanate from "corporate personhood." Very recently, columns and blog posts have appeared where people have declared themselves "corporations" to emphasize that they might be better off as "legal persons" than "natural persons." But, that leads us to a whole other discussion of how terms, policies, and even Supreme Court rulings have impacts far beyond anything imagined up front. Back to ethics: especially in the U.S. we tend not to think about ethics in cultural or systemic terms but rather try to identify "good guys" and "bad guys." Also, western ethical theory unintentionally encourages us to see ethics as "abstracted" or apart from everyday life. Ethics is both removed and elevated.

With all due respect to Immanuel Kant, whose theory of ethics I appreciate in many ways, the organized study and lay understandings of ethics often become a set of generalized principles that are seen as either unattainable in practice or insufficiently adaptable to people's lived experiences. This is fine for certain analytical purposes, but it leaves the formal study of ethics as dry and uninspiring to many students. This is why in our book *Just a Job? Communication, Ethics & Professional Life* (Oxford University Press, 2010) we deliberately take a broader perspective on ethics that sees it as "lurking" in everyday life and in popular culture even when we don't label it as such. Three contemporary examples are the long-running, multiple *Survivor* series, where lessons

about “teams” can be understood both conventionally and ironically; stories of criminals and others who violate ethical principles yet are able to express some set of standards to which they adhere (e.g., the killer in *No Country for Old Men*); and popular writings on and portrayals of the financial system that offer many different conclusions about “the way people are” and should act (think of the various films about Wall Street life).

What are some areas of potential synergy for the study of organizations, culture, and societal problems today?

There are many important opportunities at this intersection. One to cultivate is where popular imagination about work meets pressing social, economic and environmental needs. Now is a time to think about jobs, professions and callings we haven’t yet considered because of the demands facing us. Climate change alone calls for the most extraordinary forms of cooperation our species has ever seen, and we ought to be creating spaces for young people, especially, to do the work needed as we begin to stare catastrophe in the face. This is where popular books on work and careers—and there are many great ones in fiction as well as non-fiction—can play a huge role. The same is true, of course, for documentary film making.

One of the most inspiring and vivid resources in this regard is *Yes!* magazine. I mention this outlet because of how it addresses social problems by placing them in broader cultural contexts and features specific projects. *Yes!*, which appears both in print and online, does not leave one with despair or paralysis but rather says, “Hey, there are things that can be done and are being done about this problem, and here’s how to get organized and talk about the effort in a way that brings along others.” We need more communication vehicles like *Yes!*

When you talk about this type of synergy, the Mondragon Corporation worker cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain come to mind, don't they?

Yes, these are private businesses, founded almost 60 years ago on a commitment to shared equity and democratic control for employees. Today they are the largest single system of worker-owned-and-governed cooperatives in the world. They include industrial, financial, technical, and educational co-ops, with a university that has a program in cooperative development and solidarity economics! I've had the pleasure and honor of investigating and collaborating with the Mondragon cooperatives since 1992, when their encounters with market globalization became more pronounced. These co-ops can be understood on multiple levels, as we would expect for a corporation with more than 85,000 employees and many different constituent companies.

What is especially interesting today is how their struggle over core social values—equality, democracy, and solidarity—reverberates in their host communities, related to their work in other parts of the world (they have offices in more than two dozen countries), and in the financial and other media. There is a mythos surrounding the Mondragon cooperatives and, at the same time, there have been many cynical dismissals of their authenticity. The real answer to how they function and what they offer in terms of lessons for a more just economy is complex. Mondragon remains one of the most experienced, vital and hopeful laboratories for alternative ways to “do capitalism” that we have today. Interestingly, a colleague at the University of Toronto, Marcelo Vieta, is analyzing the prospects for employee ownership and the solidarity economy in part by “reading” important cultural narratives that can motivate communities. This is yet another example of where culture, community, economics, and work come together.

So, what's next?

I'm in a new phase of teaching, researching, and consulting but with a variety of institutional connections and without a single full-time position at the moment. I'm taking something of a break after several years of caring for my parents and full-time academic work. This is an important time of reflection for me but also a chance to consider more direct ways to connect my work to community and environmental needs. Also, I see myself as a facilitator between academic research and sustainable and just economic development. That's why I'm assisting several groups of cooperatives in the U.S., conducting a very practical study on best practices in employee ownership, and coordinating a team that's drafting a manual that will hopefully be of use to many people.

At the same time, my interests in topics like identity are not going away. That topic, along with many others, is featured in the organizational communication textbook that's co-authored with Lars Thøger Christensen (in Denmark), Ted Zorn and Shiv Ganesh (both at Massey University, New Zealand). I try to keep asking question about trends, as in work with Lars at the Copenhagen Business School about how the buzzword "transparency" and associated policies are used and misused in various institutions. I also try to live my commitment to mentoring by helping graduate students and other young scholars shape their research programs. I am fortunate indeed to be able to think about these things and work with so many wonderful people around the world.