



WHAT INSPIRES THE ACADEMY: BOOK REVIEWS AND BEYOND

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A Christmas Carol: A Reflection on Organization, Society, and the Socioeconomics of the Festive Season

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Generally speaking, Christmas is not a time of year that management academics are much given to writing about. While historians (Connelly, 1999; Marling, 2000), cultural anthropologists (Lévi-Strauss, 1993; Miles, 1912), and even the occasional economist (Waldfoegel, 1993) have expended both time and energy on the season, those in the field of management and organization studies have, with the odd exception (Rosen, 1988), tended to ignore it. In this article I want to move some way toward addressing this imbalance and, in doing so, adopt a slightly different approach to the season. For while Christmas is a highly significant event both economically and commercially, it is also one deeply embedded in the cultural imagination. As such, it is to the arena of cultural expression—namely, literature—that I want to turn as a source of inspiration for how we might think about the importance of the festive season not only for the realm of commerce and its management but also for the organization of society and its relationship to business more widely.

I commence with what I hope is a reasonably convincing, albeit if brief, account of why Christmas is something that can and should be written about in the pages of a management journal. My attention then turns to the value of what can broadly be termed art—particularly literature—to the creative evolution of management and organizational analysis before introducing the specific medium of my discussion—namely, Charles Dickens' 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol* (referred to hereafter as *the Carol*). The subsequent discussion of the text emphasizes, among other things, how *the Carol* might help focus our creative thoughts on the societal role that Christmas has played, and continues to play, in relation to

the impact of industrialization and those social and economic issues that have emerged in its wake.

THE COMMERCE OF CHRISTMAS

The claim that the annual festival of Christmas—a festival increasingly recognized and indeed celebrated across the globe—is of significance to a community of scholars concerned with management and organization should hardly be a contentious one. Nonetheless, because of its associations with youthful whimsy or an apparent lack of scholarly gravitas, it is a topic that has largely been neglected in our field. Yet purely in economic terms such neglect hardly seems justified. Today, Christmas plays what is arguably an inordinately significant role in the legitimation and continued functioning of free markets. Spending over the festive season, for example, continues to function as a barometer for the health of many national economies, with both retailers and service providers seeing their average turnover rise from anywhere between 25 and 70 percent¹ during the months of November and December, an increase often vital to their survival. Nor is its importance for what might be considered the new growth areas of the economy any less significant. Certainly, nowhere is the economic impact of Christmas felt more keenly than among the new breed of online retailers. Whereas Black Friday was once the main street shopping event in the run-up to December 25—an event that now extends beyond the United States—it is increasingly being surpassed by online activity, especially on the Monday following Thanksgiving, dubbed, since 2005, “Cyber-Monday.” Add to this the growth in Christmas-specific services, such as home decorators, event organizers, and even training schools for Santa Claus, and the picture becomes even more compelling.

¹ See <http://www.rbs.com/investors/economic-insight/transcript/transcript-031209.ashx>.

Not surprisingly, such intensive activity also has important implications for other areas of the economy. Consumption, as we well know, relies on production in one form or another. Gifts, decorations, and all the other material excesses of the season depend not only on local but also on global networks of manufacturing and supply. Labor—and its management—is also of more general significance during a season when, in the United States alone, companies such as Amazon reported a recruitment drive for more than 100,000 temporary employees over the 2015 Christmas period.² Such workers, in turn, require what is often costly training and managing, while for younger employees this is frequently their first chance to establish themselves in the labor market. Add to this a host of other organizational costs and opportunities associated with the season, from managing the stress of Christmas deadlines to the financial and psychological demands associated with corporate Christmas parties (cf. Rippin, 2011; Rosen 1988), and its disciplinary interest, if not indeed importance, is evident.

Nor is the flow between Christmas, commerce, and organization one way. Rather, the influence of commerce on how we actually celebrate the season has itself a long history. Storey may somewhat be overstating his case when declaring that the popularization of the festival during the nineteenth century was “first and foremost as a commercial event” (2008: 20), but there can be little doubt that business was, more often than not, firmly in the driver’s seat. As Christmas became increasingly popular among the prominent urban classes of the Victorian era, a host of seasonal goods started to appear in shops on both sides of the Atlantic. These goods became closely interwoven in the fabric of the Christmas celebration to the extent that their purchase and use defined, for many, what constituted an “authentic” festive holiday. Certainly, by the end of the nineteenth century, Christmas had already become the most economically active and profitable time of year.

Subsequently, through the years of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this is a relationship that has only intensified, with marketing and advertising frequently creating new activities and characters that have quickly been incorporated into the fabric of the season. Today, Christmas is

a global festival that is continually reinvented through everything from Hollywood movies to the availability of the internet and cheap air travel. How we work, shop, and relax over the season is being redefined by new technologies, consumer expectations, and organizational demands, while, at the same time, continuities that stretch back nearly two hundred years, if not far longer, continue to be defended and indeed nurtured.

To explore and understand Christmas, therefore, is to explore a nexus of organizational and socioeconomic relations—a nexus not only where practices of consumption, management, and organization can be seen to intertwine but also where the relationship of business to society and those practices by which individuals form and sustain their own identities as producers, consumers, and members of civil society become increasingly less opaque. In the remainder of this article, I consider one means by which management and organization studies might at least start to engage with this globally consequential festival—namely, through the medium of literature in general and, specifically, *the Carol*.

STUDYING A CHRISTMAS CAROL

As De Cock and Land (2005) have observed, there is a notable history of literary texts helping to illuminate various facets of organizational activity, reaching back to at least the nineteenth century. Contemporary work in particular has used, among other things, literature as a pedagogic tool both to sensitize management students to the complexities of management work (Knights & Willmott, 1999) and to encourage them to reflect on their own production as subjects of managerial knowledge (Sliwa, Sorensen, & Cairns, 2013). In this article I approach *the Carol* in quite an open manner in order to explore the ways it has inspired my own interest in and research into the topic of Christmas, as well as how it might guide others to also ask questions about the season’s importance in how we think about and respond to the challenges the season presents for management and organizational scholarship. In particular, I want to emphasize the ways *the Carol* has helped focus many of my own thoughts on the societal role that Christmas continues to play, specifically in relation to the impact of industrialization, and those social and economic issues that emerged in its wake. As scholars such as Davis (1990) have observed, while it is a story that

² See <http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=176060&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2098390>.

touches on many issues, it is more than anything a tale about the consequences of industrial modernization and how Christmas, a much diminished festival at the time of its writing, might illuminate these. Furthermore, it achieved this in ways that, even today, many writers on organization and its management may find difficult to do as a result of a host of both academic orthodoxies and institutional expectations.

The Carol, of course, holds a particularly prominent position not only in contemporary popular culture but also in Dickens' own oeuvre. The novella is largely considered Dickens' most well-known and popular story, and the writing of it is an interesting story in itself. In 1843 it was apparent to Dickens that his ongoing serialized novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, was not being as well received by the public as he had hoped (Davis, 1990). As such, he feared that both his literary reputation and his financial security were in jeopardy. He therefore turned his mind toward writing a short Christmas story to generate some much-needed income. As Callow (2012) has observed, however, matters were not quite so simple. For alongside Dickens' own financial needs sat a sense of social indignation brought about in particular by his reading of the recently published government report on the conditions faced by working children in the United Kingdom. Thus, *the Carol*, written in only six weeks, between October and November of that year, combined both a popular story featuring many traditional if neglected Christmas motifs alongside a powerful social message. Alas, while the message was widely and well received, financially, *the Carol* was not quite the income generator Dickens had hoped for. It almost immediately sold out its first print run of 6,000 copies, but because of the high cost of production largely borne by Dickens himself, it netted him only a fraction of the £1,000 he had expected and felt he needed (Davis, 1990).

Nonetheless, it quickly became his most significant and widely loved work, which has carried on to this day (Callow, 2012). Its continuing global popularity, as exemplified in the international success³ of its most recent cinematic incarnation, the animated 2009 version starring the voice of Jim

Carrey, illustrates the timelessness of both its story and its characters. It has become what Davis (1990: 4) described as a *culture-text*. Across theater, radio, television, and cinema, it has undergone an untold number of performances and adaptations, dating back to before Dickens' own reading tours of the 1850s. Many of its more contemporary incarnations have featured theatrical stars in the role of the aged miser, including Alastair Sim (1951), Albert Finney (1970), and Patrick Stewart (1999). Numerous animated versions, including comical reinterpretations such as Disney's *Mickey's Christmas Carol* (1983), sit side by side with contemporary reimaginings, perhaps the most well-known being *Scrooged*, the 1988 movie starring U.S. comedian Bill Murray as a selfish TV company president who is visited by the festive spiritual trio in order to encourage him to mend his parsimonious ways.

The importance of *the Carol* cannot simply be reduced to its popularity and longevity, however. As I have stressed, its influence is multifaceted, having the ability to inform not only scholarship in relation to the season but also how one might conceptualize the relationship between and among commerce, organization, and society more generally. Below I provide a brief overview of the story, along with some of the history and subsequent scholarship that surround it. I then develop more individual reflections on the tale and how it has informed my thinking and others' on Christmas, and also how it might, in both form and content, be informative for management and organizational scholarship more generally, especially in relation to broader concerns about the place of business in society.

MARLEY WAS DEAD, TO BEGIN WITH

Now, in the possible event that anyone reading this is not familiar with the story, I will attempt to summarize it as briefly as possible as an opening to the following discussion. *The Carol* was not the first time Dickens wrote about Christmas, nor was it to be the last. Prior to the novella's publication in 1843, Dickens had written what were equally idealized if more rural scenes of Christmas, in both his early "sketches" (1833), under the pseudonym of Boz, and the stories published as *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). Following publication of *the Carol*, he wrote other short stories and articles that both were published during and touched upon the season, including

³ Although met with mixed reviews, in the United Kingdom it topped the box office on two occasions—when it opened and then at five weeks—and grossed \$315,709,697 worldwide (see <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Disneys-A-Christmas-Carol#tab=summary>).

The Chimes (1844)⁴ and *The Haunted Man* (1848). Nonetheless, *the Carol* remains the story that most closely ties Dickens to the season and indeed has even elicited the moniker of “the man who invented Christmas” (Standiford, 2008).

The story is set on Christmas Eve, beginning at around 3 p.m. in the afternoon. It focuses on the activities of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man seemingly wedded to the acquisition and hoarding of wealth. Originally one-half of a money-lending business⁵ in the City of London, Scrooge now runs the business alone—apart from the services of his ill-treated clerk, Bob Cratchit—following the death of his partner, Jacob Marley, seven years earlier on Christmas Eve. From the outset, Dickens describes Scrooge in the most unflattering terms:

He was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! . . . The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice (2006/1843: 10).

At the end of the day, having scorned all those who have professed any allegiance to the finer sentiments of goodwill or charity associated with the season, Scrooge makes his way home, only to be visited in his rooms by several ghostly apparitions. The first is that of his deceased partner, Marley, who warns him of the torment that will befall him in the afterlife unless he changes his miserly ways. Marley then goes on to tell of three further visitations.

The first of these, the Ghost of Christmas Past, forces Scrooge to revisit earlier festive seasons in his life, demonstrating that while he was once a happy and carefree soul, he eventually allowed his greed to isolate him both from those he loved and from the joys of life. The second, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes him on a contemporary tour of the streets of London, forcing him to witness how both rich and poor find joy in the companionship of the season, albeit, for the latter, in often difficult circumstances. The final visitation is that of the Ghost of Christmas Future, the most forbidding and foreboding of the three apparitions. Among other things, Scrooge is shown how, at his own Christmastime death, he goes unmourned and how, in fact, in some instances joy

and mirth are the response to his passing. In the aftermath of this, Scrooge awakens in his bedchamber on Christmas morning, a changed man. He is now generous to all, and he embodies the Christmas spirit, becoming a paragon of care and “as good a friend, as good a master and as good a man” (2006/1843: 83) as anywhere in the world.⁶

THE CAROL AND THE MODERN CHRISTMAS

The Carol was a huge commercial and, indeed, critical success. This was the case even though, owing to the high cost of its production, it did not reap vast financial dividends for Dickens. More important, however, its legacy has been incalculable, with some, as I noted above, even believing that it was itself responsible for inventing the modern Christmas (Standiford, 2008). Whether this is an accurate proposition depends on a number of assumptions, perhaps the most notable being what version of Christmas one is referring to. Across Europe, in particular, Christmas and the style in which it is celebrated takes numerous forms, with many unique local traditions having stood the test of time. To credit Dickens' tale, however popular, with the emergence of these would simply be wrong. If one is referring to what is termed in academic circles the Anglo-American Christmas,⁷ however, then the accuracy of this belief becomes more complicated. First and foremost, the response partly rests on the answer to another question—namely, is the the Anglo-American Christmas simply an invented tradition of the Victorian middle classes? For Storey (2008: 17), the answer is an unequivocal yes. Not only that, but he can date its emergence to between 1830 and 1880 and, with it, a direct connection to “the processes of industrialisation

⁶ While this summarizes the primary plot, adding too much further detail brings with it its own difficulties. This is a tale that has undergone numerous retellings and, as such, rewritings that go back to the story's very early days, when, as Davis (1990) observed, pirated versions of the book appeared within weeks of its publication. Even Dickens himself was not averse to manipulating the original narrative of *the Carol* in order to make it more palatable to those who visited his extremely successful reading tours in the United Kingdom and United States in the years following its publication.

⁷ The Anglo-American Christmas was broadly characterized by Miller (1995) as an increasingly dominant variant of the season that (1) is predominantly secular, (2) focuses on gift consumption and giving, (3) presents Santa Claus as a unifying figure, (4) prioritizes children and the family, and (5) celebrates the exercise of charity.

⁴ This story was actually set on New Year's Eve.

⁵ While never explicitly stated in the original story, it is now commonly accepted that this was Scrooge's occupation.

and urbanisation" of the time. For historians such as Connelly (1999), however, this view represents, at best, an exaggeration; at worst, it betrays an ignorance of the continuities that characterize the Anglo-American Christmas from medieval to modern times.

In order to sidestep such debates for the time being, however, it is perhaps best to say that both positions contain an element of truth, and, indeed, *the Carol* is, in many respects, paradigmatic of this. Influenced by the earlier and ongoing work of fellow festive travelers, such as Walter Scott's (2015) 1808 poem *Marmion* and Washington Irving's (2009) American essays, *the Carol's* images of family merry making, social solidarity and altruism, and a level of civic significance not enjoyed in England since at least the mid seventeenth century certainly helped popularize an idealized version of Christmas—one that while possessing authentic historical roots appeared to have largely fallen out of favor in the towns and cities of the age. As Standiford observes in this regard, the book's publication was itself risky when

there were no Christmas cards in 1843 England, no Christmas trees at royal residences or White Houses, no Christmas turkeys, no department store Santa or his million clones, no outpouring of "Yuletide greetings," no weeklong cessation of business affairs through the New Year, no orgy of gift-giving, no ubiquitous public display of nativity scenes (or court fights regarding them), no holiday lighting extravaganzas, and no plethora of midnight services celebrating the birth of a savior⁸ (2008: 103).

Nonetheless, *the Carol* tapped into a popular sympathy for Christmas that was clearly resurfacing, even if it is evident that when one compares the list above with the content of the story, there is far more of what we might take to be usual content of the modern Christmas that is absent from *the Carol* than is present. Hence, while it was perhaps not, as some might suggest, a handbook for the Victorian, and thus contemporary, Christmas, the story almost certainly did set the tone for the manner in which Christmas was to be celebrated not only on both sides of the Atlantic but increasingly globally—a matter to which I shall shortly return.

⁸ Christmas trees had, in fact, been kept by the British royal family since around 1800, but these were displayed only in private.

ORGANIZING CHRISTMAS

In order to properly contextualize the following discussions, it is perhaps necessary to establish a little more background to my own scholarly interests in Christmas. In 2008 I organized, alongside Professor Alf Rehn, who at the time was attached to the Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden, a symposium entitled "Organizing Christmas." Speakers from the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and the United States discussed a number of topics at this event. These ranged from the domestic organization of Christmas festivities to the symbolic and political significance of seasonal workplace gift giving; a special issue of the journal *Organization* (Hancock & Rehn, 2011) was published as a result. More personally, however, it helped affirm what was to become an enduring fascination not only with the organizational character of Christmas but equally with the manner in which Christmas itself contributes to the organization of significant aspects of the economic, cultural, and political life of people across the globe.

It is within this context that *the Carol* has subsequently played a prominent role in my thinking on both the season and the role literature might play in helping shape my understanding of the relationship between Christmas and organization. Not that I am the first person to have thought about *the Carol's* significance as a resource for understanding Christmas. For a host of prominent scholars, *the Carol* is a touchstone for understanding the character of the season on both sides of the Atlantic and, increasingly, globally (cf. Belk, 2001/1993; Davis, 1990; Forbes, 2007; Golby & Purdue, 2000/1986; Harrison, 1951; Marling, 2000; Miller, 1995). As Belk has observed, for example, it has become something of a "sacred" text and "the most often repeated secular Christmas tale on both continents" (2001/1993: 85). For Golby and Purdue, *the Carol* is "one of the greatest Christmas texts, for in it Christmas becomes a bridge between the world as it is and the world as it should be" (2000/1986: 45). My particular concern here is not so much with its empirical influence on how we celebrate Christmas but, rather, with the ways *the Carol* also illustrates what might be considered the underlying organizational logic to the season, one mediated in and through Dickens' own particular concerns about the trajectory of Victorian society.

To justify this idea, it is necessary to leave *the Carol* behind for a few moments and, building on the opening of this article, consider a broader

organizational history of Christmas. For while Christmas remains ostensibly allied with the birth of the Christian savior, it also has another, more agnostic history. Scholars—both religious and secular—largely agree that the origins of the modern festive season lay not in the story of the Nazarene birth but in the primitive human response to the dark and deprivations of winter (cf. Forbes, 2007; Harrison, 1951; Sansom, 1968). Mid-winter festivals were a way of binding together and sustaining communities through what Forbes describes as an experience of “walking into death, hoping we will emerge on the other side” (2007: 4). However, December’s subsequent adoption by the Roman Church around 350 AD as the month in which the Christ child’s birth would be celebrated is also widely accepted as having been an act of largely political expediency. By identifying the Christian nativity with a series of pagan midwinter festivals—most notably the Dies Natalis Invicti Solis—the Church and its emperor patron, Constantine, anticipated that support for the recognition of such a sacred event and the religion to which it belonged could be more easily secured. This is not to suggest that the significance of this period of celebration was simply spiritual and political, however. After all, even then it was a season already associated with economic excess. As the Greek sophist Libanius wrote, it was a time when “the impulse to spend seizes everyone. He who the whole year through has taken pleasure in saving and piling up his pence, becomes suddenly extravagant” (cited in Miles, 1912: 109)

Then, as the Christian church started to spread across Europe, Christmas served as something of a loss leader for this emergent transnational organization. In 601 AD Pope Gregory, for example, reportedly instructed his missionaries in England not simply to forbid established pagan activities and festivals but, rather, to gradually turn them to the worship of the Christian God (Forbes, 2007). Thus, local midwinter festivals, such as Yule, were incorporated much as their Mediterranean counterparts had been into the nativity celebration. Such an incorporation of Christmas into the organizational and political of priorities continued throughout the Middle Ages—most notably under the English Tudors⁹—and

⁹ Elizabeth I, for example, insisted that the landed classes returned to their country seats at Christmas in order to “keep hospitality among their neighbors”—a measured action designed to ensure loyalty and order among her subjects who benefited annually from noble largess during the season.

into the seventeenth century, where it even became a medium through which the English Civil War was fought.

By the time we enter Dickens’ nineteenth century, however, such seventeenth-century Puritan rule in England and Scotland, along with its influence on parts of the Eastern seaboard of the United States, had combined with the growth of a more self-consciously rational worldview to diminish the popularity of the season. Yet for Dickens and many of his contemporaries, this was an age crying out for a new vision of Christmas. Dickens, though no revolutionary, was very much a reforming liberal who drew on his own often impoverished upbringing to empathize with the plight of the Industrial Revolution’s less fortunate souls. Yet Dickens was also indicative of a wider mood among the more observant of the Victorian middle classes that perhaps all was not well in this new industrial Jerusalem. As expressed by Golby and Purdue, this ascendant class had its own “preoccupations”:

These preoccupations were the opportunities and problems of increased wealth and leisure time, a growing belief in the importance of the family unit and, despite the material benefit that industrialisation was bringing to them, a reaction against the ugliness of some of these developments, the obvious poverty of the unemployed and unskilled, and the threat of social conflict (2000/1986: 51).

Add to these a recognition of the need for a new kind of large-scale, nonutilitarian consumption economy in order to support the increasing scale of industrial production and, for Dickens, a receptive climate for his work was clearly falling into place.¹⁰

GHOSTLY VIRTUES OF CHRISTMAS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

As I have already intimated, my intention here is not to claim that Dickens’ novella invented the Anglo-American Christmas, nor do I claim that it

¹⁰ Not that these concerns were unique to the British side of the Atlantic. Washington Irving’s tales of traditional English Christmases, alongside his reinvention of myths surrounding St. Nicholas and the family character of the season, have equally been identified in several quarters as part and parcel of an attempt not only to control seasonal working class revelries (cf. Davis, 1982) but, ultimately, to help bring such lower orders into the newly emerging embrace of the Christmas spirit of buying and giving.

alone represented the sort of concerns I alluded to above. Nonetheless, what I am laying claim to is that its influence on my own approach to Christmas has largely been through its ability to encapsulate these concerns, enabling me to integrate them into my own research (Hancock, 2013, 2016, in press), alongside aspects of my teaching, on the subject of Christmas. As such, whatever formative role it might have played in the production of such concerns, it provides a beautifully written and accessible expression of them. In doing so, it encapsulates the ways the nineteenth-century Victorian Christmas exemplifies the season's complicity, both in form and content, with practices of social and economic organization that continue to resonate with any meaningful understanding we might have of it today.

Perhaps the more counterintuitive of these is the way in which *the Carol* addresses the economic concerns of the period. I say counterintuitive because, after all, at first sight is this not a story that clearly sets itself against greed and financial accumulation, invoking the virtues of generosity and brotherhood above the pursuit of material ambitions? Well, in part, yes, indeed it is. Dickens is at pains, as I have previously observed, to portray Scrooge the miser in the most unflattering of lights, focusing on the ways his material greed has etched itself onto his body. What is also clear, however, is that Dickens the social reformer has no problem per se with the accumulation of wealth through business. Rather, what concerns him is that such wealth be allowed to return into economic circulation to the betterment of all. As such, Dickens was no ascetic of the type subsequently identified with Weber's (1976/1905) capitalist ethic. Instead, he was a clear believer in what contemporary liberal economists would describe as the virtue of the trickle-down effect—namely, that wealth acquired by the rich should reenter the economy via wages, consumption, and indeed philanthropy, and in doing so improve the lot of all.

Throughout the book, therefore, the virtuousness of consumption is a theme Dickens frequently returns to, portraying it either through the general notion that Christmas should be a time for plenty—drawing on medieval ideas about the season—or through the notion that Christmas goodwill is best communicated through gifts, preferably purchased in one form or another. This former point is emphasized by Carrier (2001/1993),

who observed how food and its consumption are central to the image of a hearty English Christmas for Dickens, perhaps best illustrated by the arrival of the second of the Christmas spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Present, who is described as sitting on a "throne" composed of

turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch (2006: 43).

Dickens presents the possession and consumption of such items not only as defining a hearty and joyful Christmas, however. More important is the belief that commerce itself was the means by which such delicacies would potentially be accessible to the masses. For as the same spirit leads Scrooge through the streets of London, his first observation is of the shops and stalls bustling with the goods and trade that only this season could produce. Spectacular images of stores heaving with delights of all sorts pervade the text, from meats to fruits, from vegetables to sweets, leaving Dickens to declare "The Grocer's! oh the Grocer's!" and to describe the event in unmistakably effusive terms:

The customers were all so hurried and so eager in the hopeful promise of the day, that they tumbled up against each other at the door, crashing their wicker baskets wildly, and left their purchases upon the counter, and came running back to fetch them, and committed hundreds of the like mistakes, in their best humor possible; while the Grocer and his people were so frank and fresh that the polished hearts with which they fastened their aprons behind might have been their own, worn outside for general inspection, and for Christmas daws to peck at if they chose (2006: 47).

While admittedly, as observed above in the quote from Standiford (2008), Dickens was writing in an age just before the appearance of industrially produced Christmas goods, and while there were "no gifts or gaily wrapped presents" in *the Carol*, his message is quite clear. To consume, and indeed produce and sell, on such a scale and with such positive enjoyment in its undertaking was integral to the happiness of the season. Furthermore, this is a motif that reappears at various points throughout the text, from the pleasure of a goose dinner for the Cratchits to the joy when the redeemed Scrooge is able to

demonstrate his care for his clerk through the purchase of the big "prize" turkey on what is now his fourth Christmas Day of the season. In part, therefore, Scrooge's redemption is brought about through a willingness to engage not simply in his relatively isolated practice of usury, albeit more benevolently, but to fully commit to the ideal of market commodity exchange as a means by which he may once again enter the social sphere. Christmas consumption, therefore, is represented both as a means by which individual redemption might be achieved and equally, if indeed not more important, a means of meeting the emerging need for a culture of consumption in a manner that is positively virtuous.

The centrality of individual virtue to *the Carol* is not limited, of course, to the pursuit of hedonistic consumption. Also pervading this work is the commonly acknowledged importance of charity and the altruistic responsibilities of the wealthy to the poor. For example, one of the earliest scenes in the story illustrates Scrooge's fall from grace through his refusal to contribute to a collection for the poor at Christmas, declaring that the premature death of such people would help "decrease the surplus population" (2006: 14). Equally, one of the first acts of his new life is to revisit said collectors on Christmas day, offering them an undisclosed but great sum designed to meet not only that year's obligations but his "many back-payments" (2006: 80) as well. As has been recognized, however, while there can be no doubt that Dickens sincerely believed in social reform for the good of those less well off in society, his views equally reflected the concerns of sections of the Victorian middle classes regarding the threat that growing urban destitution and inequality posed to their way of life.

Not that charity is the only response that Dickens presents. His emphasis on the importance of the family at Christmas, for example, acts as a spur to all quarters of society to focus what resources one has on the pursuit of, albeit merry, wholesome and domestically focused activities and concerns, rather than those that might lead one to ever greater poverty and ruin. Nonetheless, drawing on the aforementioned tradition of past centuries, when altruism to the poor was viewed as central to wise Christmas practice, Dickens was able to offer an image of the season as one when sharing prosperity should be seen as integral to the spirit of goodwill to all.

This was not solely expressive of his own moral concerns regarding the well-being of others, however. It equally reflected an awareness that if the casualties of industrial capitalism were to be reconciled to the normative order of the modern world, they would need to feel as if they shared in its benefits as well as its ills. Nowhere is this made more evident than in Scrooge's encounter with Ignorance and Want, the "children of man," hidden beneath the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present, and about whom the warning is clearly unambivalent:

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is *Doom*, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!" cried the Spirit, *stretching out its hand toward the city* (2006: 62, emphasis added).

Christmas is not presented in *the Carol* simply as an opportunity for Victorian society to redeem itself; rather, it is also presented as an opportunity for that society to protect itself from the uprising of an improvised and anomic urban proletariat. In Dickens' hands Christmas both becomes and reflects what would emerge as the increasingly prominent Victorian commitment to social engineering and cultural organization through philanthropy and voluntary associations. More than this, however, it continues to reproduce far older concerns surrounding the role Christmas could play as a functional and stabilizing force in society, with Scrooge embodying the message that, to cite Storey, "by learning to share a little, a great deal more will remain secure" (2008: 27).

None of this is to claim that Dickens did not see *the Carol* as a means of genuinely questioning the organization of Victorian society, especially the power relations that pervaded it. In particular, he was more than willing to challenge the established authority of the Church, specifically its doctrine of Sabbatarianism, something that he had taken to task in the past. For Dickens, Sabbatarianism—the enforced observation of Sunday as a day of worship and one not to be spent undertaking commercial or other recreational activities—merely reflected a desire by the powerful to deprive the poor of opportunities that were open to them other days of the week. In a dialogue between Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present, Dickens rails at the fact that such prohibitions serve to deny even the pleasure

of hot food to those who rely on commercial ovens to cook their meals:

"Spirit," said Scrooge, after a moment's thought, "I wonder you, of all the beings in the many worlds about us, should desire to cramp these people's opportunities of innocent enjoyment." "I!" cried the Spirit. "You would deprive them of their means of dining every seventh day, often the only day on which they can be said to dine at all," said Scrooge. "Wouldn't you?" "I!" cried the Spirit. "You seek to close these places on the Seventh Day," said Scrooge. "And it comes to the same thing." "I seek!" exclaimed the Spirit. "Forgive me if I am wrong. It has been done in your name, or at least in that of your family," said Scrooge. "There are some upon this earth of yours," returned the Spirit, "who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us" (2006: 48).

So while the supernatural is exonerated of guilt, Dickens ensures that the finger of blame is firmly pointed at those who, among the Victorian elite, manipulate and enforce such strictures for purely selfish and all too human motives.

THE END OF IT

The impact of *the Carol* has stretched, as is the case with all great art, well beyond the author's initial ambitions. Originally written by Dickens as both an attempt to stimulate the social conscience and a means of bolstering his own somewhat precarious financial position, it was certainly successful in terms of both the former and, albeit much later on, the latter. Indeed, throughout the remaining years of his life, Dickens increasingly toured Britain and America—where he was particularly well received after previous perceived indiscretions¹¹—giving sell-out and highly lucrative readings of his story to the paying public. What he perhaps had neither intended nor foreseen, however, was how the tale was to become the literary cornerstone of the contemporary festive season for so many the world over. There can be little doubt

¹¹ During an earlier visit to the United States, in 1842, Dickens had become somewhat notorious for developing a rather negative view of the country and its inhabitants—one that he made clear on his return to England in various writings, including the 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

that both aesthetically and commercially *the Carol* has dominated Western Christmas sensibilities for over 170 years. This is an influence that shows no signs of abating as the Anglo-American model of Christmas continues to become the default mode of both recognizing and celebrating the month of December across the globe.

More than this, however, *the Carol* stands as a testimony to the hopes and fears that emerged as a consequence of the rapid industrialization of the United Kingdom and beyond during the nineteenth century. Like Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* (1976/1848), it laid bare for its readers the all too often dehumanizing contradictions of an economic system that brought wealth to the few and increasing pauperization to the many. Unlike Marx, however, Dickens' mission was to save the bourgeois class from its own myopia, not condemn it to the graveyard. In this way the mold was cast for a seasonal industry that to this day articulates a very particular idea of the redemptive role the dark of midwinter can play, in even the most tarnished of lives. Be it through a childhood visit to Santa Claus—either in one's local shopping mall or in the purifying landscape of Lapland¹²—the giving of gifts tracked down online or among the hordes of Christmas shoppers, or a donation to charity of not only income but also one's time, Christmas always offers hope.

Yet, despite this, I feel there is more at stake here than a form of critical Durkheimianism, in which Dickens' reimagining of the season simply offers up a new variant of the sacred, a civic religion that binds the community of the dispossessed to their betters and offers a cure for the anomie of the age by virtue of a shared vision of a festive humanity. However appealing this might appear to the skeptical academic sensibility, it does not tell the whole story. For what *the Carol* also offers is a window on certain contradictions and tensions that sit at the very heart of economic and social organization, contradictions that remain both accessible and indeed relevant to a contemporary audience.

It reminds us that the progress and wealth that modern industry and commerce generates

¹² Lapland is presented in Europe as the official home of Santa Claus, with its regional capital, Rovaniemi, as his official hometown. Rovaniemi and the surrounding resorts welcome around half a million visitors a year to meet this festive icon.

also come at a price. That Scrooge, despite being an exemplary illustration of the Protestant virtues of hard work and frugality in many respects, loses his humanity as a consequence. That generosity and goodwill at Christmas, while outwardly commendable, appear to be dependent on a message of consumption—of “Spend your money now! Have a good time today and don’t worry about tomorrow” (James McCaffrey, cited in Davis, 1990: 223)—which today might seem not only undesirable but environmentally unsustainable. And that, despite all its best intentions, *the Carol*, as with Christmas itself, risks an extension of disciplinary organizational and managerial forces that inevitably accompany any attempt at social engineering, however benevolent in spirit. In both teaching and research, therefore, Dickens’ tale does not simply offer a linear narrative from evil to goodness, or a simple condemnation of one particular form of economic and social organization in favor of another. Rather, the text encourages critical reflection on these issues. It challenges the reader to tease out the complexities of the relationship between economic and social organization and the possibilities these open up for how to act in the contemporary world.

More than even this, however, what *the Carol* also achieves is perhaps a genuine hope that no matter how far we have traveled down the road that leads us to abandon others, there remains the possibility that things might be otherwise. This, of course, is what in the field of management and organization studies Parker (2002), for example, would consider to be a utopian account of not only *the Carol* but Christmas itself. Yet, as the German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986/1959) would have it, it is precisely in such fantastical worlds that the spirit of hope and utopia might yet still be found. For Bloch, what he referred to as the “dream of a better life” (1986/1959: 156) can often be found in even the most seemingly repressive of cultural narratives. This was especially true of those stories manifested through folk tales and stories of the supernatural and other worlds. This was because while such stories often reproduced certain dominant cultural ideologies—as, in this instance, the simplistic idea of the redemptive power of Christmas in the face of capitalist avarice—they were also capable of transcending these, offering an albeit often sublimated vision of present but often unrealized hopes and values,

which he termed their “cultural surplus” (1986: 154). In this respect, as Jameson (1979) notes, what Bloch recognized is that by their very nature such stories must contain a utopian element—something that people might aspire to; otherwise, they could not appeal to those whose compliance they demand.

It is this very surplus at the heart of *the Carol*, therefore, that perhaps remains its greatest and most enduring influence. For while Dickens and his novella represent, at one level, all that is most contested about modernity and those organizational practices—be they social, political, or economic—that make it possible, *the Carol* remains a story in which a semblance of such hope for a better world continues. Beyond the crude sentimentality surrounding the Cratchits, and Dickens’ faith in middle class altruism and the power of the managed and regulated market, *the Carol* allows us a glimpse of another as yet unrealized possibility for a more humane way of organizing our lives together—one in which the needs, not simply the wants, of each individual are recognized by all, and where gifts are truly an expression of the bonds that we share rather than the need to outconsume the other. Of course, as it is with all utopias, this is an unrealizable ambition, a noplac or nowhere that exists merely within a “Christmas dream,” as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice might have it.¹³ Yet it might at least be enough to believe in it, not as an end in itself but as a spark of hope and the continued memory of a spirit—or three—truly worth celebrating before, once again, we are subsumed by the cares and demands of our age. If for no other reason, this alone makes *the Carol* an inspirational source of insight, not only for those who perhaps wish to better understand the importance of Christmas to their academic craft but for those who also wish to envisage other, perhaps more redemptive ways of managing and organizing and their implications for the practice of business in society.

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¹³ I refer here to the song “Christmas Dream,” written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice and sung by Perry Como for the 1974 film *The Odessa File*.

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