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## The Age of Heretics: Heroes, Outlaws and the Forerunners of Corporate Change

by Art Kleiner

(401 pages, Currency/Doubleday, \$29.95)

Reviewed by **Barbara Presley Noble**

Someone I knew back in the early 1970's used to wear a discreet little button on his lapel that encapsulated the anti-linear, refuse-to-be-categorized Zeitgeist of the time. The words "Everything Is Everything" formed a circle in black letters on a white background. The idea was to read them, mantra-like, as "Everything Is Everything Is Everything Is Everything..." and so on and so on, into the vortex. Many people believed that then; most of them ultimately lost their faith.

One who didn't, apparently, was Art Kleiner, who has written a history of human resource management that links ideas more parochial thinkers might say have nothing to do with each other and concludes on a millenarian note that would not have sounded out of tune at a Baba Ram Dass retreat 20 years ago. Indeed, in the bio in the back of his peculiar but not uninteresting new book, "The Age of Heretics: Heroes, Outlaws and the Forerunners of Corporate Change," Mr. Kleiner says he brings "credentials" from both the counterculture and big business to his task, including co-authorship of the "Fifth Discipline Fieldbook" (Currency/Doubleday) with Peter Senge.

It might seem that the countercultural approach would cause the eyes of hard-driving executives to glaze over in droves, but let's not forget that hundreds of these same executives, or their companies, pay large fees to attend, for example, Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits" seminars, which, hair and clothing styles aside, bear a certain resemblance to a Baba Ram Dass retreat 20 years ago. Perhaps Mr. Kleiner is onto something.

He begins by likening the modern corporation to the monasteries of the medieval church. Monasteries, he says, were communities of similarly minded people, in but not of the world. They had rituals that set them off from the non-monastic world. While they did the work of God, they also provided an orderly structure for daily life. And, in a turbulent time, they used their considerable political influence to encourage the growth of civil institutions that would impose discipline on society. Eventually, as the external world grew more orderly, monasteries evolved into universities and became the model for great commercial enterprises. They were populated by a variety of types -- heretics, reformists, protesters and mystics -- that would long survive them.

Most writers would probably begin the history of human resources with the scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor, whose view of workers as interchangeable parts in a greater whole is now under attack in hundreds of companies experimenting with any form of work team, employee participation or empowerment strategies. Mr. Kleiner, however, mentions Taylorism only in passing. Instead, he tells his story by analogy to these religious archetypes.

The analogies get to be a bit of a slog, as when, for example, he compares the social scientists and psychologists in the 50's who developed the scientific art of group dynamics to a medieval sect of monks who believed, not in the prevailing doctrine of human fallibility, but in the ability of humans to perfect themselves. The monk who would eventually become St. Augustine, a fanatic believer in the worst of human nature, pursued the sect's leader for 20 years and had him tried for heresy. The message, even for management gurus who fall from grace, is elusive.

Happily, Mr. Kleiner remains on earth more often than he takes flight, and his summary of the evolution of human organization over the years is compelling. The early research on groups emphasized roles individuals assume as a group evolves. But by applying principles of group dynamics to resolving conflicts -- one of the earliest efforts was to help reduce racial tension in New Haven right after World War II -- researchers learned that groups could evolve predictably, as the members of the group analyzed its process and traded feedback with its expert-leaders. The New Haven project, known as the Connecticut T-Group, eventually became the National Training Center, which offered two- to three-week seminars in group dynamics for, among others, corporate managers.

A kinship chart of the group dynamics "family" of practitioners would put NTL at the top and spider down through several famous management projects of the 1950's and 60's, from Procter & Gamble to General Foods. As the movement grew popular, it inevitably thinned out. By the late 60's, the line between group dynamics and therapy -- the T in T-group originally stood for training, not therapy -- had blurred to such an extent that employee complaints about intrusions into their privacy finally killed off the groups.

Like any good spiritualist, Mr. Kleiner presumes that the intellectual zest behind T-groups stayed alive in the ether until it found a place to roost. Throughout the 70's and 80's, it found expression more through inspired individuals than schools of thought, à la the NTL. This approach makes it possible for Mr. Kleiner to bring together the stories of several people who share nothing except for the fact that he has classified each as a heretic, for which read "visionary."

Thus, Amory Lovins, a leader of the small-is-beautiful, soft-energy-path movement that had a fashion in the late 70's, appears, but so does Pierre Wack, a Shell executive with a major stake in the fossil-fuel energy path. And so do Saul Alinsky, the community organizer who dedicated himself to undermining capitalism and the established order, including the corporate elite at Kodak headquarters in Rochester, N.Y., and Tom Peters, the excellence-is-beautiful guru di tutti gurus of the 80's. Only when "everything is everything" could these two men be said to have anything in common. One suspects that Mr. Alinsky, who died in 1972, would have had a few salty words at being included in a book about corporate "heretics."

One of the book's more interesting revelations is that the cultish quality of many popular management trends is no coincidence. Some of Mr. Kleiner's heretics-cum-visionaries have come under the sway of real gurus, like the mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, and clearly believe in the power of the charismatic individual to influence world-historical events. The author does not explore this -- it would seem -- problematic aspect of leadership. Is a religious model, especially one in which a charismatic figure wields fervor, wanted in a corporate setting? Must managers become an apostle of the man -- with one minor exception, all the visionaries in this book *are* men -- in order to buy into the message?

Mr. Kleiner concludes by asking catechismically, why do corporations exist? He writes, "It might seem ridiculous at first, to answer that question by saying, 'They are here to remake the world.'" The question may seem a little over the top, but it's not ridiculous if you think corporations are like the medieval monasteries that were the only line of defense against demons and chaos. But isn't the current, stalemated debate over layoffs, C.E.O. compensation, shareholder value and corporate responsibility, if not about demons and chaos, really about the role corporations play in society?

Its idiosyncrasies aside, "The Age of Heretics" pushes that debate past good and evil into ambiguity, where it is really interesting.

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