

Organizing Christmas

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Organization

18(6) 737–745

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DOI: 10.1177/1350508411428214

org.sagepub.com



The origin of this Special Issue are to be found in a two-day event, entitled *Organizing Christmas: A Festive Symposium* that was convened jointly (and festively) by the Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden) and Warwick Business School in December 2008. The ambition of this event was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to bring together scholars of organization in order to discuss and critically evaluate the potential interconnections between organization, as both an economic and cultural process, and the demands and expectations that accompany what is an increasingly global festival of production and consumption. Secondly, it was to tackle the very simple truth that it is extremely difficult for Christmas to be taken seriously as an event of organizational or even, in some quarters, economic significance. For love it or loathe it, what it is difficult to deny is that Christmas is almost inevitably rendered trivial within most academic discussions.

Now, why this is the case is open to question. It may simply be because as an event that encourages us to cast off our serious orientation to the world, anything connected with it is necessarily reduced to the realm of the flippant or kitsch. Alternatively, though not unrelated, it could be due to the widespread association between Christmas and childhood. As such, in one fell swoop not only is the subject matter rendered immature, but any serious interest in it can be identified as a symptom of, at best, a childlike whimsy and, at worst, a form of regression in response to an inability to deal with the demands of a mature and credible academic discipline.

Yet, whatever the reason, this is one of those somewhat rare cases when the skepticism and dismissals simply do not stand up to the facts of the matter. Taken from a purely economic perspective, Christmas is immensely significant. In those countries where Christmas is a state sponsored festival, for instance, it performs an inordinately prominent role in the legitimation and continued functioning of consumer capitalism. Nor is this in any sense a recent phenomenon. While Storey (2008: 20) may somewhat overstate the case when he declares that ‘Christmas was invented first and foremost as a commercial event’, certainly for those (Golby and Purdue, 1986; Miller, 1993; Pimlott, 1978; Storey, 2008) who consider the 19th century to be the age in which Christmas was rediscovered or reinvented—depending on one’s historical preferences—it was a festival centred

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as much on supporting a fledging industrial economy as it was on promoting Christian celebration and social altruism. Certainly it was during the Victorian era in particular that a host of Christmas specific goods started to appear in shops in order to encourage consumers—on both sides of the Atlantic—to overcome any aversion they might have to purchasing the newly mass-produced products as what were supposed to be individualized and *sacred* tokens of love and respect (Marling, 2000). So, for example, the first specific ‘Christmas card’ appeared in 1843 with mass production well underway by the 1860s. Indeed, as Sansom (1968) observes, by the late 19th century Christmas had become what it is today; the most frenzied shopping period of the year with, as Belk (1993: 90) notes, it also being around this time that US business in particular introduced the practice of paying their staff Christmas bonuses. This was in turn, an idea that quickly spread, further inflating the Christmas economy while maintaining the idea that such spending utilized special or even, once again, sacred money.

Throughout the 20th century the relationship between an increasingly Fordist regime of mass production and consumption, and Christmas, continued unabated. By the 1930s, department stores such as *Macy’s* in New York and *Harrods* in London were putting on lavish Christmas displays, while Haddon Sundblom’s iconic images of Santa Claus for the Coca-Cola Company ensured that what has come to be referred to as the ‘Anglo-American Christmas’ (Golby and Purdue, 1986; Miller, 1993) began to represent a model of global economic ambition and cultural aspiration. Indeed the increasing significance of Christmas to Western economic performance over the course of the 20th century is no better illustrated than by the acquiescence to business lobbyists by President Roosevelt in the recessionary year of 1939 and his controversial decision to move Thanksgiving in the USA back to the penultimate Thursday of November. This was in order to elongate the Christmas shopping period which traditionally started on *Black Friday*, the day after Thanksgiving.

Today, in the 21st century, when we are once again in the midst of global recession, Christmas spending continues to account for around a third of the annual retail turnover in many Western economies. In the UK, for example, retail sales, according to analysts at the *Royal Bank of Scotland*, remained 30% to 40% higher in December than during the rest of the year, while department store turnover increased by over 70%.¹ This phenomenon is particularly favourable for the new breed of on-line retailers such as Amazon. Paralleling the aforementioned Black Friday in the US, the 7th of December was designated Cyber Monday in the UK, with British consumers spending around £350 million on-line in a single day. Nor should we underestimate the role that Christmas plays in injecting money into the consumer economy. Christmas bonuses, as we have already acknowledged, have long been an integral feature of Christmas for some, often functioning as a barometer of the financial, and indeed cultural health of an economy. Even in these recessionary times, the latter can run to significant six figure numbers. In the UK Goldman Sachs, for example, was reported to be rewarding its 443 partners with an average Christmas bonus of more than 3 million in 2008 (Duke, 2008).

In addition to this, there is the impact that festivals such as Christmas have on work and employment more generally. In most cultures, there exists at least one major festival that is treated as a holiday from work, creating a major cost to corporations. Those companies and organizations that cannot, for whatever reason, completely cease operations, are forced to pay significant amounts in overtime and temporary workers. For young workers, Christmas is often a period when one can pick up extra work, and even a chance to establish oneself on the labour market. To this add costs related to with rushing production to meet Christmas deadlines arising from the aforementioned holidays as well as the monetary and psychological costs associated with corporate Christmas parties (cf. Rosen 1988, see also Rippin in this issue). Simply put, for both organizations and their

members, Christmas may come but once a year, but it does not come without significant organizational costs.

Christmas as *Lacuna* in organization studies

With this in mind, it remains astonishing to realize that there is precious little serious research conducted on Christmas from an organizational or economic perspective. While there exists relevant research on the season from sociological, anthropological and cultural studies perspectives (cf. Edensor and Millington, 2009; Miller, 1993; Thompson and Hickey 1989; Whiteley, 2008) these all represent fields that quite naturally study the joint rituals of our societies. Marketing and consumer studies have also been quite prepared to study the festival, as ritualized over-consumption and gift-giving obviously generates many fruitful avenues for research (cf. Belk and Bryce, 1993; Fischer and Arnold, 1990; Kimura and Belk, 2005; McKechnie and Tynan, 2006). Even here, however, one occasionally discerns a certain flippancy, a tendency to facetious comments and telegraphing that on some level, this is more 'fun' than 'serious'. In a similar manner, journals such as *BMJ (British Medical Journal)* has published research on whether Santa Claus is a public health pariah (Grills and Haliday, 2009), utilizing the mirth of Christmas to present 'fun' things for, one assumes, the benefit of readers needing a smirk rather than for the sake of research. Serious engagements from disciplines such as economics have also been few and far between, unless we count the delightful Joel Waldfogel's valiant fight against 'the deadweight loss of Christmas' (Waldfogel, 1993, 2009)—although there seems to be a tendency among newsletters in economics, particularly those taking more of a free market-approach, to also write humorous pieces on festive matters around the Christmas period.

In all this, a pattern emerges. In the more general social sciences, Christmas is an accepted field of study, as these do not tend to discriminate against phenomena. In the hard sciences, such as medicine, Christmas is something one can study as a joke—Roger Highfeld even wrote *The Physics of Christmas* (1999). In those fields somewhat unsure of themselves, a fluid assignation that fits economics beautifully for instance, Christmas can be studied, but preferably with a wink and a smile. OK for a newsletter, maybe one article for a journal, for a laugh, but nothing more. But where does this leave organization studies?

In organization studies, the silence has been almost total—Michael Rosen's article from 1988 still remains a key reference—and although there are some articles that make allusions to the festival (cf. Bartunek, 2006) it would seem that the collective of organizational researchers have reached the conclusion that overall, Christmas is not worth studying. Exactly how this conclusion was reached, however, and on what grounds, remains shrouded in mystery. As we have observed, to deny that Christmas has organizational properties and economic consequences seems odd, as it is clear that all organizations work very hard to organize labour, processes and tasks for and around the holidays. Furthermore, it is clearly a period of exceptional entrepreneurial importance, as Christmas has always been a time when we are predisposed to experiment with new products and services. All in all then, there seems to be very few objective reasons to explain why Christmas has not been studied in the field that claims to be interested in the manners in which human beings organize their institutions. Which would obviously leave the sphere of subjective reasons.

As already alluded to, Christmas may be significant, but that does not mean that it is serious. It is a festival of all the things that organization studies has problems with: excess (see Rehn and O'Doherty, 2007), frivolity, children (see Kavanagh et al., 2011), gifts and the home. In the symbolic economy of research, it represents things that are considered trivial and mundane. Studying it, it would seem, even makes the researcher who engages with it appear trivial, and as researchers

in organization studies are acutely aware of how they are viewed, Christmas is one of those things that is ignored not so much because it is irrelevant, but because scholars in the field are more interested in how they are perceived than with little details such as whether the field is actually studying all it can, or indeed cannot.

In other words, Christmas may be a prisoner of the politics of organization studies, where laurels are given not for studying what exists and affects people, but rather on the basis of whether the current power-structure in the field supports an area of research or not. Organization studies has, overall, been less interested in whether something is significant, and more interested in if it raises the status of the field, leaving Christmas out and, bizarrely enough, keeping things such as a continuing obsession with call-centres in. Were it possible to claim that Christmas lacks impact, this might be understandable. Once again, however, this is palpably not true—certainly not in the West, and in truth, not globally either.

The global impact of Christmas

Indeed, it would be unwise to simply consider Christmas in terms of its impact on Western economies. The Anglo-American Christmas, driven by mass marketing and other cultural media—most notably cinema (Connelly 2000)—is a truly global phenomenon, touching in one way or another all corners of the planet. In Japan, for instance, where Christmas is not an officially state recognized holiday, it has firmly established itself as a festival of largely romantic pursuits (Moeran and Skov, 1993), combined with the consumption of Western Christmas icons such as lavish variations on the ‘Christmas Cake’ (Kimura and Belk, 2005). Here young people celebrate Christmas Eve, in particular, by exchanging expensive gifts, indulging in romantic activities such as meals, with the evening often ending in shared hotel rooms. On Christmas Day, the family meal often consists of a Festive Bucket of *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, promoted and often perceived as the traditional Western Christmas dinner. In China, a similar pattern of youthful celebration has also started to emerge, most likely influenced by the activities of its Japanese neighbours. Perhaps more importantly, however, Chinese youth closely associate Christmas with the secular and commercial values and lifestyles of Western capitalism, viewing its celebration as a symbolic realignment away from the staid traditions of their families and the Chinese state. Indeed more is now spent at Christmas in China than during the traditional Duanwu and Mid-Autumn Festival, while in its major cities one can witness shopping malls and streets adorned with Christmas decorations and invitations to consume and celebrate much as Levi-Strauss (1993) observed was the case in 1950s France, as the Anglo-American Christmas offered an antidote to post-war austerity there.

The global spread of Christmas would also appear to have, alas, far darker economic and organizational consequences, however. Staying in China, for example, questions have been raised as to the ethical complexion of its capacity to meet the West’s colossal demand for Christmas goods and decorations. In 2007, for instance, it exported \$13.4 million worth of artificial Christmas trees and \$142.6 million worth of Christmas tree ornaments to the US alone. In that same year the National Labour Committee in the US published its report, *A Wal-Mart Christmas Brought to You From a Sweatshop in China* (2007), which highlighted the dangerous and poorly regulated working conditions within which some child labourers were required to work in order to produce the West’s festive trinkets:

Wal-Mart Christmas ornament workers toil 10 to 15 hours a day, seven days a week, going for months without a day off. Many workers earn as little as 26 cents an hour—just half of China’s legal minimum wage. Workers handle toxic chemicals without protective gear. Some children as young as 12 worked in the factory.

More generally, Christmas results in a vast absorption of environmental resources and the production of significant quantities of waste, both of which have been condemned by numerous environmental and anti-consumerist organizations. For example, in 2005 *The Australian Conservation Foundation* reported that in keeping this Northern Hemisphere celebration in the style enjoyed by their colonial ancestors, Australians' were costing the environment 20 litres of water and 3.4 square metres of land for every Australian dollar spent on clothing as Christmas gifts. The report also revealed that Christmas gifts such as DVD players and coffee makers produced around 780,000 tons of greenhouse pollutants, even before they were unwrapped and used. More recently, in the UK, *The Vegetarian Society's* 2010 report, *The True Cost of Christmas*, highlighted the dire consequences of mass production for those animals that traditionally provide for the Christmas table including regular mutilations such as beak trimming in Turkeys and the unsupervised teeth clipping and castration of piglets. And this is in a country that reportedly spent an estimated £100 million on their pets over Christmas in the same year.

Christmas as an arena for innovation and identity work

Returning for one moment to the capacity of Christmas to generate economic value, however, in parallel with the continued importance of Christmas for the consumption of goods, both general and seasonally specific, there is also a new kind of Christmas marketplace opening up; that of the specialist Christmas service provider. In a culture of the relatively cash rich and time poor (Bauman, 2000), the provisioning and packaging of Christmas services has become a lucrative industry in its own right. At one level this can be witnessed in the host of magazines (and indeed websites) that appear every November—some special issues of established titles, some unique to the season—offering efficiency tips and tricks for 'having the perfect Christmas' or for making 'Christmas simple and relaxing for everyone'. Yet while such publications trade on techniques to save, and therefore, make time across the festive period, clearly for some such efficiency practices are not enough to combine a busy working life with the pursuit of the perfect Christmas. It has been in response to this need that a host of Christmas industries have emerged including specialist on-line domestic party organizers, home Christmas decorating services and a range of Christmas themed events, leisure activities and even theme parks.

In the UK, franchise companies such as *The Christmas Decorators* offer decorating services not only for corporate clients and venues, but even for the domestic home, providing a full service that includes not just the installation and dismantling of all one's decoration, but their rental as well. For some, therefore, long gone is the romanticized image of the family bringing down the treasured and gradually accumulated Christmas decorations from the loft, or the magical moment when the youngest child places the topper of choice on the freshly cut tree. Now, one phone call can ensure that professional expertise can take 'the hassle out of decorating'.² Similarly, the annual Christmas themed tourist attraction based in the south of England, *Lapland UK*,³ is promoted, in large part, as a more convenient alternative to those similar attractions based in the Sápmi region of Finland. Mimicking the authentic sub-arctic experience, *Lapland UK* is not only a more cost effective destination for clients from the UK and other central and southern European states who want to experience the authentic home of Santa Claus, it reduces excessive travel at a time of the year when time is itself a scarce resource.

Now, the growth in such service providers opens up what is another dimension within which we might wish to think about the various interfaces between the organizational and the festive within this particular context. *Organization*, while ostensibly concerned with critical research into organizational forms, has never shirked from exploring the realm of organization as a socio-cultural as

well as an economic process. And it is at this interface between that of Christmas and how we go about organizing both our beliefs about, and activities during, this seasonal hiatus, that perhaps offers some of the most telling insights into how the realms of commerce, organization and everyday life serve to produce and reproduce each other as common cause. The idea that the mundane and ordinary aspects of people's lives are now somehow subject to some all pervasive and highly organized logic of instrumentalization is of course, nothing new (cf. Hancock and Tyler, 2009). With its origins in Weber's recognition of the extension of formal rationality into the 'phenomena of social life' (Feenberg, cited in Crook, 2004: 5) it is a critique that perhaps reached its zenith in the Frankfurt School's condemnation of a world in which all human activity—even its most hidden desires and dreams—are subjected to 'rationalization and planning' (Horkheimer, 2004: 65) and the manipulations of the 'culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer (1979). Nonetheless, one cannot help but get the feeling that it is at Christmas that such phenomena are most starkly brought into relief for those who encounter and subject themselves to the demands of the season.

The celebration of Anglo-American Christmas is considered to be a time, at least in its established heartlands, of family unity, the precise enactment of established rituals and traditions, the preparation and consumption of often excessive quantities of food and drink, along with the carefully calculated exchange of gifts and cards. Yet this is a version of Christmas that only comes into being in this way through the mobilization of a host of what are essentially organizational practices. Despite the ideal, as Kuper (1993: 171) suggests, that Christmas represents an 'alternative reality'; one that celebrates spontaneity and an ethic of generosity and is shorn of the instrumental demands of the everyday secular world, it is an event that relies deeply on the continuation of such demands.

First and foremost, the gendered division of labour is one that appears almost untouched in many households (see Vachhani and Pullen in this issue). When it comes to Christmas shopping, for example, studies such as that by Fischer and Arnold (1990), justify what is perhaps the commonly held recognition that it is women who carry the burden in most families for ensuring that gifts of an appropriate character are purchased in plenty of time. Nor is gift giving itself an innocent or purely generous act of course. As Mauss (1923) reminds us, gift giving is itself a vital lubricant of social organization (see Lemmergaard and Muhr in this issue). Christmas cards and presents, especially when they extend beyond the immediate nuclear family, not only reaffirm the recognition of significant interpersonal relationships but also serve to enmesh individuals, groups and communities into significant networks of mutual obligation. Even the most seemingly mundane aspects of the Christmas experience, from the planning and preparation of the Christmas menu, to the collection and disposal of Christmas wrapping paper and other waste, can require extraordinary calculation and instrumentality when they involve not only immediate family but extended groups of relations and friends (see Warren and Brewis in this issue).

In other words, the contemporary Christmas is nothing so much as a total phenomenon—corporate and private, local and global, with both positive and negative externalities. A key driver in the global economy, and yet connected to the often female labour of organizing the home. Christmas is a complex activity, taking on many forms, and often transforming as one attempts to approach it and organize it, as this issue will show.

This festive issue

The aim of this issue is to raise the topic of Christmas and festive seasons within organization studies, not in order to create a final word on the matter, but to raise awareness of the fact that the world still contains a number of issues of great organizational significance but which have received short

shrift from the field. Interestingly, the original call for papers advertised the title *Organizing Christmas and Beyond* and explicitly encouraged submissions that not only explored the organizational dynamics of Christmas, but all and any festive occasions. While a range of submissions were received in response to our call not one of them, however, sought to stray beyond the Christmas theme. In one way this might be indicative of a greater openness and awareness of the questions Christmas raises for the field of organization studies. What is perhaps more likely though, is that even despite the relative freedom a special issue such as this one offers, the risks and perceived lack of support for exploring organization above and beyond relatively narrowly defined parameters (albeit in this case that of Christmas) remains a difficult impediment to overcome.

Nevertheless, from those Christmas related submissions we did receive, we were able to cull the current set of articles. Covering areas ranging across corporate gift giving, festive headwear, female work, popular cultural representations and the issue of sacralization, not to forget the complex matter of Santa Claus, they showcase the different ways in which Christmas can be approached.

In the first article in this issue, 'Have yourself a merry little Christmas? Organizing Christmas in women's magazines past and present', Sam Warren and Jo Brewis engage with how the organizing of Christmas appears as a series of normative engagements in popular culture. Utilizing a strategy of closely reading historical and contemporary cultural representations of Christmas and the perfect execution of the same, the authors highlight both the manner in which female 'festive labour' is organized and how issues regarding the problem of gift giving have clear historical precedents. This latter topic is echoed in the issue's second article, where Jeanette Lemmergaard and Sara Muhr engage with corporate gift-giving and asymmetrical relationships. The corporate Christmas gift, which many might see as merely a trivial and ritualized exchange, is in this article studied as a phenomenon which can show how corporate relationships are organized as social. Analysing the complexities of reciprocity and debt, the authors show us that Christmas is far from unimportant in the corporate world, and can in fact be a time of expressing and strengthening the bonds of business relationships.

The third article in our issue, Robert Cluley's 'The organization of Santa fetishism', takes a somewhat different tack. Here the question is, how does Santa Claus—unquestionably the primary signifier of the season and commercially its most powerful icon—work? By this we mean that in this article, Cluley explores how this mythological figure, drawn from a myriad of sources and traditions, continues to have such a hold on the modern psyche. Drawing on classical Freudian psychoanalytical theory, he reinvigorates concepts such as fetishism and ambivalence in order to demonstrate the pivotal role played by parents in the psychodynamic organization of the Santa story in order to address their own wish fulfilment both in and through their children, and the continuation of its associated rites and rituals. This approach can be contrasted with our fourth article, where Jean Bartunek and Boram Do discuss how (American) Christmas commerce has been sacralized over the last centuries, to a point where this specific version of the sacred trumps the religious theme of the festival. By opening up some of the paradoxes of Christmas, in both a historical light and in our late modern age, the authors draw our attention to the inherent complexity of festivals in an assumedly secular age. Both sacred and profane, Christmas appears as an organization as complex as anything humanity has subsequently created.

Still, for many, Christmas is connected to the home, and to the notion of rest and time away from the world of organizations. However, nothing takes as much organization as appearing utterly effortless, something that Sheena Vachhani and Alison Pullen adroitly dissect in their article 'Home is where the heart is? Organizing women's work and domesticity at Christmas'. By way of a critical discussion of women's domestic work, the authors problematize the multitude of binaries that exist in the organization of Christmas, and show how an understanding of this can be fruitful for

exploring feminine subjectivity. Rather than accepting the simplistic view of Christmas as a space free from the power-relations that otherwise organize our world, the authors show how Christmas can show both oppressive sides and create a space for subversion of the same. Our issue closes with Ann Rippin's 'Ritualized Christmas headgear or "Pass me the tinsel, mother: it's the office party tonight"'. Here, the phenomenon of festive headgear—paper crowns, Santa hats, tinsel halos and reindeer antlers—are examined as instantiations of organizational rituals with links to the power structures of the corporation. The apparent frivolity that defines much of the season—and which is mirrored in the manner in which organizational scholars have turned a blind eye to Christmas—is in this article studied as a ritualized suspension of organizational rules that enables the organization to maintain the same over time. As Bakhtin reminded us, the carnival (and other festivals) might be most important in that it enables institutions to re-establish themselves. Festivals may be something more than merely organized merry-making therefore, they may be the thing that makes organization possible.

So, please enjoy this introduction to studying Christmas as organization and organizing. Mulled wine and mistletoe are, of course, optional.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.rbs.com/investors/economic-insight/transcript/transcript-031209.ashx>
- 2 <http://thechristmasdecorators.com/residentialdecorating.htm>
- 3 <http://www.laplanduk.co.uk/>

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Biographies

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