

Zarathustra and beyond: exploring culture and values online

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Abstract Illusions of control and fantasies of power are important themes in human history and culture. The first objective of this paper is to explore Zarathustran fantasies in the information society, and our dreams of God-like control and mastery over ourselves and the Universe. This paper does not try to be faithful to Nietzschean philosophical concepts of Zarathustra, but instead explore cultural themes, which can be related to a mythology of God-like control and omniscient perception. It draws together strands from science fiction, anthropology, philosophy, technology development, systems engineering, socio-technical systems, finance and e-business to set out how we have fallen for the technocultural illusions we have created. The paper then shifts gear, and in an attempt to address these technocultural problems, identifies an intellectual trajectory centred on an anthropological perspective. Using examples from e-business and Schwartz's universal model of human values, applied into a technocultural context, the paper shows how it is possible to create meaningful systems of organisation that utilise advanced technologies to help provide a deeply value-laden cultural system. Our world is changing fundamentally and dramatically, and we desperately need new approaches to help us understand these transitions. The paper's primary contribution is to critique both human-centred thinking, and mechanistic, Taylorist views of organisation and technology. It stimulates debate concerning the relationship between technology and culture as it is worked out in the information society. Shifting the perspective from humans as social, functioning creatures, this paper offers a new human-

centred approach based upon humans as cultural, valuing beings.

Keywords Culture · Values · Integral systems · Systems failure · Socio-technical systems · Information systems development · Systems engineering · Anthropology · Information society · Complexity · Philosophy of technology

1 Introduction

Then man... will be going over to Superman: and the sun of his knowledge will stand at noontide.
Also Sprach Zarathustra, Friedrich Nietzsche p. 85.

Zarathustra is a complex cultural figure. In Nietzsche's prologue to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Homo sapiens are a transitional species between higher apes and the superhuman Zarathustra. For Nietzsche, 'Man' was something to be overcome. In its positive sense, Nietzsche's (1885) supermen/over-humans ('Übermensch') were not simply about power over others, but the power over oneself necessary for creativity and innovation, for bringing forth something beyond ourselves. As the great Apes brought forth hominids, so must we bring forth something more than Homo sapiens. In the twentieth century, misreading of Nietzsche contributed to fascist fantasies of a super race, a new world order and a millennialist mythology. In science fiction, the Daleks of *Dr. Who* saw themselves as a master race, which had to purge the Universe of lower life forms. In *Star Trek*, we were the super race, exploring strange new worlds as technologically enabled *Übermensch*.

'Technoculture' refers to the deeply embedded relationship between technology and culture. The earliest use

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