Conclusion: McKinsey as Cult?

‘Insiders at McKinsey like to think of themselves as a cross between Jesuits and U.S Marines’

McKinsey emphasises its difference from other firms: it is ‘unique’. It claims that its practices differ from that of dominant business ideology. Its staff have common beliefs and values, they are similarly ‘extraordinary’ and hardworking. Like any corporation, it will have a centralised authority structure, with hierarchical roles and routes of progression. It certainly makes a distinction between itself and other firms. It also distinguishes a clear ‘us’ which implies a ‘not us’ that is, a ‘them’. Further, the employees also identify with McKinsey, adopting the first person plural ‘we’ and arranging their lives around their work. Long hours and international relocation require that kind of commitment. There is further anecdotal evidence that staff are told how to dress, which public places they should frequent for entertainment and so forth. However, personal conversation with people in the industry suggests that this is more self-censorship than explicit control. The employees work in teams and are rarely left by themselves in a professional capacity (something usually remarked upon in ex-member accounts about cults). The commitment that is required means that separation from friends and family, especially if international relocation is involved, is inevitable. It is well known that, ‘the travel, the hours and the difficulty of maintaining a personal life’ are an intrinsic part of working for McKinsey. Further, the entire ‘consulting lifestyle, which often requires the consultant to log 50 to 60 hours per week and to be out of town for four days a week for months at a time, is hard to maintain over the long run, especially for people with families – or friends’.4
Being recruited into McKinsey involves being recruited into a way of seeing the world and of understanding McKinsey’s role in that world. ‘Among its employees and clients, McKinsey is know simply as The Firm.’ Being recruited into a cult requires the same things. McKinsey requires commitment in the same way that cults do. There is one large difference. The challenges and rewards that McKinsey offers, the innovations and differences it boasts, are not looked upon by the general public as deviant. The commitment that is required by McKinsey is seen as reasonable because of the rewards of money and status, the role of successful business person. The rewards that cults provide are less tangible (salvation, happiness and spiritual contentment) and therefore less valued by the dominant ideology. The sacrifices that are made, the potential harm to a recruit are the same. The reason we see it differently is that the McKinsey discourse does not come into conflict with other powerful discourses. If a business person suffers a heart attack, we are unlikely to sue the firm s/he works for. If someone joins McKinsey we are unlikely to question their sanity or attempt to have them rescued.

I am not arguing that McKinsey and similar corporations be subjected to the same vilification as cults (in the sense normally understood), though it is a tempting argument to make. I am merely suggesting that if the term ‘cult’ is to have any value at all, it has to be used consistently and fairly. It should not be the case, as Allan suggests it is, that a ‘“cult” is seen as a “cult” simply because someone chooses so to describe it, and while the word may be unsuitable it is the one with which we are stuck’ (1986: 15). We are not ‘stuck’ with words, and certainly not with their definitions. Their applications and definitions are open to argument and consideration. It seems that the application of cult to a group signals little more than a branding of prejudice.

It is worth examining the question of ideology and dominant ideology again to see how they figure in what is perceived as a fundamental difference between groups like McKinsey and groups largely considered to be cults. The difference that we perceive between McKinsey and cults is largely effected by the power of the dominant ideology. Norris and Whitehouse write,

The perfection of a totalitarian system lies not in its power to inflict punishments on a stubbornly resisting minority but in the means it possesses to marginalise that minority to the point where their ideas become simply inconceivable to the right-thinking mass of citizens (1988: 294).