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## Ford's Metaphysics: On the Transcendental Origins of Henry Ford's Fordism

“Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; ... An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson 1969)

### Introduction

Since it was first articulated by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935), ‘Fordism’ (*Fordismo* in Italian) has become a conduit for a contested set of discourses. Receiving attention from a host of contexts and perspectives (Antonio and Bonanno 2000; Link 2012; Greenstein 2014), the expression is broadly understood on two interconnected levels. The first denotes a set of industrial principles associated with *Ford Motor Company* under the leadership of its founder, Henry Ford, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is understood to be premised on an attempt to resolve the challenge and complexity of human organization through the systematic rationalization and standardization of the production process. At this level, Fordism is understood as the technological intensification of Taylor’s (2003 [1911]) ‘scientific principles’ through the ever-closer alignment of ‘men and machine’ (Haber 1973; May 1975; Wilson, Pilgrim, and Tashjian 1986; Hughes 2004). In the *Ford* factory system, Fordism comprised of the harmonious organization and integration of three component parts:

- 1) The production of standardized commodities (the first mass-produced automobile model, the Model T),
- 2) The systematic process of their production (via the moving assembly-line),
- 3) The labour-relations approach and compensation scheme that such a process required (Ford’s ‘Five Dollar Day’).

However, due to the expansive capacity of this systematic mode of industrial organization, Fordism has evolved to describe something that goes beyond *Ford’s* Highland Park and River Rouge factories. By the time Gramsci wrote in 1934, the term was available to denote an epochal shift in organizational practice at both a national, transatlantic and hemispheric level (Allen et al., 1992; Jessop, 2005; Wilson & McKinlay, 2010).

It is at this second level that Fordism is understood as a cultural-phenomenon that extends the structure, principles and effect of Ford’s factory system –i.e., the decomposition of tasks, the specialization of tools, the assembly of tools into the machine, and even of machines into the machine system (Clarke 1990) – to a techno-economic paradigm of influence (Harrington 1987; Foster 1988). From this it has come to be used to describe the central hegemonic process behind ‘emergent’ (Fordist) and ‘late’ (post-Fordist) modes of capitalist production and expansion (Jessop 1991; Foster 1988; Sayer 1989). For Gramsci, the hegemony of Fordism meant the term not only referred to the principles of Henry Ford’s

personal organizational approach, (i.e., the system of production to which his name aligned), but something that is also representative of a national ideology. In notebook twenty-two, ‘Americanism and Fordism’ (1934), Gramsci writes: ‘[i]n generic terms one could say that Americanism and Fordism derive from an inherent necessity to achieve the organization of a planned economy’. He therefore interpreted the rationalization of American production not merely as a mechanically determining economic ‘base’ but rather as part of a complex ‘historical bloc’ (Gramsci 1988, 275–76). By aligning the notion of one man’s (Ford) personal convictions and organizational practice with a national ideology (‘Americanism’), Gramsci positioned Fordism as a “passive revolution” that takes the implications of the process (mass production) and its impact (mass consumption) beyond America’s geospatial confines to an ‘empire without frontiers’ (Grazia 2005).

By addressing the notion in the way that he did, Gramsci acknowledged Fordism comprised of individual, institutional and national responses to the historical forces underpinning the capitalistic imperatives for progress and development through perpetual technological innovation (Hounshell 1985, 264, 376). In doing so, he also made a subtle historiographical judgment (see Bates 1975); namely, that Fordism is an inevitable phase in the movement of history, based on a response to evolving conditions of work and economic life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Shenhav 2002). However, while there is terminological consensus regarding what ‘Fordism’ has come to signify (with a host of ‘readers’ and ‘edited collections’ dedicated to the subject), questions remain largely unanswered regarding how this concept relates to the individual whose name it bears. This is this paper’s focus. Such a focus does not seek to undermine or directly challenge this consensus, but rather to consider how certain ideas are formulated and continue to develop and evolve over time (Lovejoy 1936). This can often come at the expense of understanding the influences, ideas and forces that align individuals’ lives (in this case Henry Ford) to larger social, cultural and historical terminology and phenomena.

### ***Paper Aims and Positioning***

The topic of this paper is Henry Ford’s philosophy of industry (which will be referred to throughout as ‘Henry Ford’s Fordism’). The paper explores the relationship between the personal worldview, influences and convictions of Henry Ford (1863-1947) and the ‘ism’ which came to bear his name. The paper considers the extent to which Henry Ford’s Fordism was premised on a specific interpretation of the writing and thought of the American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). In doing so, a reading of Henry Ford’s industrial principles and personal values is offered that at first appears to challenge the notion that Fordism has its cultural-historical roots in the rational-materialist ideology of America’s Progressive Era (Haber 1973).

By providing a focused account of these spiritual principles and their influence on Henry Ford’s personal philosophy of industry, the paper seeks to uncover and analyse the key tensions at the heart of

the first iteration of what has become a highly-pervasive, contested and over-extended concept. In addition to offering a critical and historically-nuanced reflection on the philosophical foundations of this central concept in the history of managerial thought (Wren 2005), the paper seeks to contribute to the respective ‘historical’ and ‘cultural turns’ in Management and Organization Studies (Durepos et al., 2019; Rowlinson and Hassard 2013; Booth and Rowlinson 2006). In particular, it is the intention that this paper can be read alongside recent attempts to ‘rethink’ the foundations of key managerial ideas and concepts (Bruce 2006; Hassard 2012; Wilson 2013; Cummings et al., 2016; Bridgman et al., 2018) to reveal new implications and historical truths for management research and pedagogy (Cummings and Bridgman 2011; 2016). By returning to original texts, sources, and contexts these studies go beyond mere historical accounts and attempt to rethink and challenge normative understandings of taken-for-granted phenomena associated with ‘traditional’ textbooks (Fineman and Gabriel 1994; Jacques 2006). In the case of this paper, historical attention and philosophical analysis is brought to an early and historically-specific intersection to analyse the link between organizational practice, social theory and theological thought (Sørensen et al. 2012; Giacalone 2010; Milbank 2008; Bell 2008; Sandelands 2003). This paper aims to contribute to this evolving discourse by offering fresh insights into the philosophical basis of Fordism. What were the influences on Ford’s industrial philosophy? How much of what Fordism has come to signify are in tune with these ideas and convictions? What are the tensions that lie at the heart of one man’s philosophy and the ‘ism’ that bears his name? What does this mean for the study of Fordism in Management and Organization Studies today?

### **‘Extremes meet’: Ford’s encounter with Emerson’s writing and thought (1913)**

Henry Ford was introduced to Emerson’s writing and thought by the American literary naturalist John S. Burroughs in 1913. Burroughs is not read much today and has fallen out of critical favour over the past century, however in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Burroughs was considered a figure whose literary significance and readership was equivalent to Walt Whitman (who he had a life of correspondences (Barrus 1968b), Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (for an overview of these authors’ correspondence, meetings and literary overlap, see Warren 2010, 14–41).

As a naturalist and ornithophile (*Escañaba Morning Press* 1914; Lewis 1976, 56; Brauer 1995), Ford was a keen reader of Burroughs. In his 1922 memoir, *My Life and Work*, Ford claimed to have ‘had read nearly everything he had written’ and on Burroughs’ death in 1921 he declared that Burroughs’ writings were “superior to that of any author who had ever lived.” (Westbrook 1921) The 1913 meeting was on Ford’s request. Burroughs was invited to Highland Park after Ford learnt that Burroughs had publicly criticized his industrialism on account of its potential to desecrate America’s natural landscape (Barrus 1925, 2:185). Ford reached out to Burroughs by gifting him a Model T as a token of gratitude for the writings that Ford had enjoyed over the years (Brooks 2014, 29). After making Ford’s acquaintance, and learning more of the man, his machinery, and the logic and convictions that lay

behind their generation and organization, Burroughs and Ford became friends, and their extended ‘vagabonding’ trips (made possible by the *Ford* automobile gifted to Burroughs by Ford (Brauer 1995; Guinn 2019) were documented in Burroughs’ subsequent letters and literary journals (Burroughs 1921; see Brinkley 2004, 123–24). It was on one of these trips that Burroughs suggested that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s oeuvre on individualism, nature and God were in line with Ford’s personal ideals and convictions, particularly his understanding of the relationship between Nature and Technology. As documented in Lacey’s (1986) extensive biographical account:

It was Emerson’s concept that God resides in the soul of every man – “a man contains all that is needful to his government within himself” – which appears to have offered Henry Ford a new/guiding vision of how he might come to terms with his own restless spirit. “As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens,” runs a passage on one of the marked pages [in Ford’s edition], “so there is no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, creases, and God, the cause begins.” Emerson’s recipe for releasing the divinity that resides within each of us was that we should escape from the stultifying limitations of reason and surrender to the more erratic, but also more creative, impulses of our own particular genius (p. 113).

Following Burroughs’ recommendation, it is understood that from 1913 onwards Ford devoured the work of Emerson and used his system of thought as a blueprint through which he could justify his past achievements; and how he would continue to enframe his ‘philosophy of industry’ in the future (Curcio 2013, 75). However, Burroughs gave Ford much more than a mere recommendation. His introduction came with a very specific interpretation of Emerson which Burroughs had developed through the course of his career as America’s foremost literary naturalist (Renehan Jr. 1992). Burroughs didn’t just read Emerson as a key figure in the history of ideas and America’s literary canon, or as a precursory writer to the work of American Pragmatism, but rather as a ‘prophet and philosopher of young men’, whose appeal to ‘*youth and to genius*’ (Burroughs 1904, 202, 205 italics in original) was contained in the mysticism and idealism of his early visionary works (*ibid.*, 1904, 182). These early, Transcendentalist texts, he suggested, could be read ‘in a sort of ecstasy’ appealing to an individual’s ‘spiritual side’ and allowing ‘his boldness and unconventionality’ to take a deep hold on the receptive individual (Barrus 1968a, 1:41). As Payne (2007) notes, a journal-entry of Burroughs’ dated three days after Emerson’s death describes Emerson as his ‘spiritual father in the strictest sense. It seems as if I nearly owe all or whatever I am to him.’ (referenced in *HBJ* 87-88 Payne 2007, 196).

This is crucial for understanding how Emerson came to be read by Ford. In 1929, Ford declared that Burroughs had taught him to ‘know Emerson’ (Lane, Ford, and Crowther 2015, 315), and it has been acknowledged that what he came to know *in* and *through* Emerson was a conception of God (or the

idea of a divine ‘Over-Soul’) which would inform Ford’s mode of production, the treatment of his employees, and be understood as expressed in his commodities (Lacey 1986; see also Benson 1923, 331; referenced in Baldwin 2001, 47). Palestini (2011, 90) claims that from Ford’s first contact with Burroughs onwards he became ‘a devotee’ of Ralph Waldo Emerson and symbolically fashioned his management philosophy on Emerson’s ideas: ‘Ford and Emerson were in accord in believing machines like the motorcar were in harmony with nature as long as they were designed and used with integrity.’ He found in Emerson’s work a source of ‘solace and spiritual renewal’ (Renehan Jr. 1992, 25), so much so that he was known to carry with him ‘a small, light-blue paperbound two-inch-square pamphlet of Emerson excerpts, titled *Gems*, to be pulled from his pocket for inspirational reference as needed’ (Baldwin 2001, 46).

From the various accounts of Ford’s engagement with Emerson and the works listed in his private collection (archived at the Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan. Accessions 1, 13, Box 9), there is enough evidence to suggest Ford’s principles were cognate with an interpretation of Emerson beyond any question of direct influence or systematized attempts to bring his divinely aligned sensibilities to bear on American and organizational life. However, before discussing the implications of Emerson’s influence on Ford, it is important to qualify the perspective on Emerson offered in this paper. The following section will demonstrate how Ford’s understanding of Emerson is one inherited from Burroughs, which is a very different interpretation of Emerson from that offered by contemporary Emerson scholars.

### **Ford’s Emersonianism and Emerson’s Transcendentalism**

Although Burroughs was a contemporary of Emerson, by the time he became known as America’s foremost literary naturalist, Emerson was in the later stages of his career. Emerson’s immediate philosophical legacy and influence is more commonly analysed through those who came to be known as the American Pragmatists (Menand 2002). Emerson’s philosophy is understood as a precursor to an early instance of this characteristically American philosophical orientation (Dewey 1970; Goodman 2008), with a number of significant works making the genealogical connection between Emerson and Pragmatism explicit (West 1989; Poirier 1987, 17–18, 178; 1992), and providing a foundation on which others have contributed to this growing consensus (Cavell 2003; Lentricchia 1994, 26–29; Gunn 1992; Goodman 1990, 68). From Emerson, the early American pragmatists – namely, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-1952) – acquired shared affinities and associations with Emerson’s later works (Shusterman 1999), took up his central ideas (Cavell 1996) and extended his notion that ‘the American philosopher must begin and end with experience ... [and] must accept, understand, reconstruct and deepen this experience’ (Stuhr 1997, 26, 88–116).

For many, the Pragmatist reading of Emerson has kept his work relevant through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries alongside broader developments in American Pragmatist and Neo-Pragmatist thought (Kateb 1992; 2002; Albrecht 2012). In the early 1990s, a “renaissance” of American pragmatism was heralded (Gunn 1992). This followed a hiatus after World War II and during the Cold War (Bernstein 1992; Capps 2003; Talisse 2008). This late-twentieth-century revival gave new prestige to what Buell (2009, 220–21) has called the “Emerson-to-Pragmatism story”, which, he argues, has been made all-the-more compelling by the more concerted attempts to “de-transcendentalize” Emerson by dismissing his early Transcendentalist writings as precursory efforts that lacked the sophistication and seriousness prior to his so-called “pragmatic turn”. This has led to an intensified interest in Emerson’s midcareer social activism and preoccupation with the ‘conduct-of-life’ issues associated with his later works. However, such an understanding hasn’t been without contestation. Friedman (2007), for instance, warned that such readings risk obfuscating the metaphysical nature of his early writing, removing it from the cultural-historical climate in which he lived, and his ‘lifelong attempt to safeguard the idea of the soul in an age of scientific advancement’ (Corrigan 2010, 433). More recently Urbas (2016) has extended this criticism to warn that to ‘detranscendentalize Emerson’ is to ‘dehistoricize him’ (ibid., xxx) – which, in turn, risks overlooking ‘History’ itself as ‘one of the cornerstones of the Emersonian world view’ (Pearce 2007, 41; see also Dolan 2014).

All of this could be interpreted as an outcome of an Emersonian imperative itself; to perpetually reform one’s thought anew, to be in a constant state of “Man Thinking” (the ideal articulated by Emerson in his 1837 address, “The American Scholar”) and for this mode of being to be tied to the lived experience of one’s cultural-historical moment has meant a very narrow and anti-metaphysical understanding of Emerson has come to dominate his place in Neo-Pragmatist discourse and Emerson Studies. This is despite others reading Emerson in reverse, viewing his later pragmatist works as containing the original threads of ‘Self Reliance’, ‘Compensation’, ‘Nature’, ‘History’ and other essays collected in his *First Series* to which he kept returning (Buell 2009, 2; Corrigan 2012, 19; Versluis 1993, 60). This was how John Burroughs read Emerson, as he put it in some of his last written words:

‘The themes around which his [Emerson’s] mind revolved all his life—nature, God, the soul—and their endless variations and implications, recur again and again in each of the ten printed volumes of the Journals. He has new thoughts on Character, Self-Reliance, Heroism, Manners, Experience, Nature, Immortality, and scores of other related subjects every day, and he presents them in new connections and with new images.’ (Burroughs 1922, 27)

The ongoing pragmatist understanding of Emerson has therefore been necessarily modified and interpreted in response to the changing social demands and unfolding of American life since Emerson's death in 1882. The implications of this for understanding different emphases on the importance of his oeuvre is the basis of Robinson's study, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* ([1993] 2009). As the title suggests, the focus is on the Pragmatist legacy of Emerson's later writing. The work both charts and contributes to previous studies concerned with positioning Emerson in relation to notions of the 'moral life', the ethics of democracy and the discourse of self-development (*bildung*), and moral character through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century (West 1989; Cawelti 1988; Hans 1995; Stuhr 1997; Lysaker 2008; Shusterman 2016).

Robinson (as summarised by Jacobson 1995, 282–83) recognises that the reception of Emerson in Neo-Pragmatist debates, and questions of 'moral living' and 'ethical purpose' in Emerson Studies more generally, predominantly focus on such 'later works'. To position his pragmatic focus, Robinson contextualizes the remit of his study through a schema which profiles the vast works of Emerson in terms of three distinct periods of his creative life and career:

- 1) an early visionary optimism, rooted in an ecstatic relation to experience and mystical philosophy inherited from his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson (Feltenstein 1953; Barcus 1977; Cole 2002).
- 2) the collapse of that vision in the 1840s (his last and somewhat desperate stance on Transcendentalism). (Thomas 1996; Gelpi 2007, 90)
- 3) A turn to concerns for social reform and the post-Transcendental ethics of moral purpose/public morality of his later pragmatist writings (West 1989; Jacobson 1993; Levin 1999; Goodman 2008; Robinson 2009).

Crucially, this schema shows Emerson as a transitional figure (Levin 1999), a variation on what Albrecht (2012) describes in broad terms as his intellectual development from 'obsolete idealism' towards 'emerging pragmatism'. Jacobsen (1993) sees this as beginning as early as 1841 following his *First Essays*<sup>1</sup> and an oration entitled "The Method of Nature" in the same year. For Jacobson, this oration marks the beginning of his 'transitional' semblance contained in his *Essays: Second Series* (1844) – said to have 'muted the optimism [and Transcendentalism] of his early lectures and publications' associated with his *Essay: First Series* (Gelpi 2007, 90) – which is finally resolved with the mature viewpoint expressed in *The Conduct of Life* (1860). By emphasizing the different phases of Emerson's evolving thought, one can begin to consider which texts influenced Ford's philosophy and worldview (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>



	Early Emerson (Visionary)	Middle Emerson (Crisis, despair and transition)	Later Emerson (Pragmatic)
Collections	<i>Essays, First Series</i> (1841)	<i>Essays, Second Series</i> (1844) <i>Representative Men</i> (1850) <i>English Traits</i> (1855)	<i>The Conduct of Life</i> (1860) <i>Society and Solitude</i> (1876) <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> (1875)
Notable Works (individual essays)	<i>Nature</i> (1836) "History" ( <i>First Series</i> ) "Self-Reliance" ( <i>Essays: First Series</i> ) "Compensation" ( <i>First Series</i> ) "Spiritual Laws" ( <i>First Series</i> ) "The Over-Soul" ( <i>First Series</i> ) "Circles" ( <i>First Series</i> )	"Experience" ( <i>Essays: Second Series</i> ) "Art" ( <i>Second Series</i> ) "The Poet" ( <i>Essays: Second Series</i> ) "Politics" ( <i>Second Series</i> ) "Character" ( <i>Second Series</i> )	"Fate" ( <i>The Conduct of Life</i> ) "Power" ( <i>The Conduct of Life</i> ) "Wealth" ( <i>The Conduct of Life</i> ) "Considerations by the way" ( <i>The Conduct of Life</i> ) "Works and Days" ( <i>Society and Solitude</i> ) "Courage" ( <i>Society and Solitude</i> ) "Success" ( <i>Society and Solitude</i> )
Lectures and Addresses (Later compiled in various collections)	"The American Scholar" (1836) "Literary Ethics" (1838) "The Divinity School Address" (1838) "Man the Reformer" (1841)	"New England Reformers" (1844) ( <i>Second Series</i> )	"The Comic" ( <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> ) "Progress as Culture" ( <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> ) "Social Aims" ( <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> ) Quotation and Originality ( <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> ) "Inspiration" ( <i>Letters and Social Aims</i> )

Table 1: Table of Emerson's essays and published lecture structured accord to how they relate to his early, mid, later period: his 'movement from visionary ecstasy to despair and then to pragmatic ethics' (Jacobson 1995, 283).

Charting the development and changing orientation of Emerson's writing over the three periods of his creative life and career has significant implications for the version of Emersonianism that influenced Ford. One of the few remaining copies of Emerson's works is archived at *The Henry Ford Museum* in Dearborn, Michigan (a volume of Emerson's *Essays: First and Second Series*, Oxford University Press's 1936, 11<sup>th</sup> edition).

It is this edition which Lacey (1986, 113) identifies as '[giving] some clue to the chord that was startlingly struck in the carmaker by his exposure to the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the summer of 1913', and Nye (1974; 1979) employed to excavate the complexity of Ford's character by identifying certain lines and pages as being 'marked by Henry Ford in his personal copy' and linking these to

biographical detail. The essays Nye cites are ‘Art’ (ibid, 7, 126), ‘Self-Reliance’ (ibid: 7, 57, 126) ‘Circles’ (ibid: 57), ‘The American Scholar’ (ibid: 78), ‘Compensation’ (described as ‘Ford’s favorite Emerson essay’, ibid: 93, 104, 107), and ‘Spiritual Laws’ (ibid: 93, 94-5). However, in addition to pages marked by Ford’s hand, there are additional notes on the inside cover of his copy (Accession 1, boxes 14-7). By detailing the instances of Ford’s commentary and markings, one can begin to get a sense of the period of Emerson’s thought that Ford was particularly drawn to and influenced by (Table 2).

Emerson Essay	<i>First Series</i> (1841) or <i>Second Series</i> (1844)	Pages referenced or marked by Ford in his private copy	Additional words or comments (i.e., written in the dust- jacket in Ford’s hand)
<i>History</i>	First	✓	
<i>Self-Reliance</i>	First	✓	
<i>Compensation</i>	First	✓	
<i>Spiritual Laws</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Love</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Friendship</i>	First	✓	
<i>Prudence</i>	First	✓	
<i>Heroism</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>The Over-Soul</i>	First	✓	
<i>Circles</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Intellect</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Art</i>	Second	✓	✓
<i>The Poet</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Experience</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Character</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Manners</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Gifts</i>	Second		
<i>Nature</i>	Second		
<i>Politics</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Nominalist and Realist</i>	Second		

Table 2: Markings in Ford's copy of Emerson's *First and Second Series of Essays* (Henry Ford Archives, Accession 1, boxes 14-7).

Although Ford’s edition contained both the *First* and *Second Series* of essays, his engagement is weighted in favour of the *First Series*, suggesting Ford was drawn, for the most-part, to the early, visionary work of Emerson. This emphasis was one he shared with the figure who introduced him to Emerson’s writing and thought (Renehan Jr. 1992; Kanze 1999; Tallmadge 2007; Warren 2010, 14–41). Writing in his *Birds and Poets* (1904 [first published in 1887]), Burroughs explained that ‘Emerson’s quality has changed a good deal in his later writings ... He has now ceased to be an expansive, revolutionary force, but he has not ceased to be a writer of extraordinary grip and unexpected resources of statement.’ (Burroughs 1904, 182)

Having positioned Emerson's works in relation to developments in Pragmatist philosophy, Emerson Studies, and Ford's own engagement, the next section will address the context from which Emerson wrote and developed the various periods of his thought, and explain why even his early Transcendentalist works could be understood and translated into a justification for Ford's industrial philosophy and practices.

### **Emerson in Context: The Relevance of Emerson for Ford's Industrial Philosophy**

The period in which Emerson wrote (roughly beginning with his essay *Nature* in 1836 and ending with his *The Conduct of Life* in 1860)<sup>3</sup> has been understood as coinciding with the emergence of America's market-based economy around which its citizens have continued to negotiate their national identity (Bellah 1985, 42–43; Sellers 1992; Birch 1995; Plotica 2017) and experiment in democratic self-government (Tocqueville 1862). As Emerson scholars and historians of 19<sup>th</sup> Century America have identified, Emerson was of a time 'when capitalism came of age and entrepreneurship became the primary model of [the] American identity' (Sandage 2005, 3). This has led to his writings being considered central to both the political character of 19<sup>th</sup> Century America (Augst 1999) and a precursor to the contemporary debates and understandings of selfhood in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Taylor 1992; Lysaker 2008; Bloom 2001). This context also means that Emerson's oeuvre can be read through the intellectual tensions between individual self-culture and the imperatives of an emerging market-based economy and social relations. Living from 1803 to 1882, Emerson was 'witness to the majority of the nineteenth century' and came of 'intellectual age' during the transformative Antebellum period when '[c]ommercer and industry were becoming common denominators of the American experience ..., [o]rdinary life came more and more to depend upon market participation, and the modes of such participation became more deeply and thoroughly internalized.' (Plotica 2017, 98)

In line with material production becoming central to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century understandings of American individualism, a new type of national hero emerged in the form of the 'entrepreneur'. Through strength of character, hard-work and industriousness such individuals became associated with the self-reliant, 'rags to riches' narratives of Horatio Alger Jr., and were celebrated for having earned their freedom through wealth from external constraints (Wyllie 1966; DiBacco 1988; Cawelti 1988; Bellah 1985, 42–43; Decker 1997). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Ford's name was added to the list of such figures – Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), John D. Rockefeller (1839 – 1937), Solomon R. Guggenheim (1861 - 1949), and William Randolph Hearst (1863 - 1951)– who were idolized as inspirations by great swathes of the population (Lubin 1968, 306; Weiss 1988, 6). When Ford died in 1947 it was remarked that '[r]arely before had the nation's daily press so nearly approached unanimity in its evaluation of the work and character of an entrepreneur' (Diamond 1955, 1:159).

Rather than a coincidence, the emergence of Emerson's writing at a time when American capitalism and entrepreneurship 'came of age' has profound cultural and historical implications, which was revealed through the specific way in which Emerson's writing and thought relate to these economic functions (Teichgraeber 1995; Plotica 2017; Kern 1940; Gilmore 2010). This is both in what early industrial entrepreneurship was widely perceived as allowing for in material terms – '[f]or Emerson, entrepreneurship and invention were liberating alternatives to either slavery for some or hard labor for all' (Nye 2004, 106) – and the way Emerson's sage articulation of his individualist philosophy was interpreted as its national and intellectual justification (see West 1989, 25–27). This sense of the 'American identity' is defined by its cultural *preoccupation with* and historical *commitment to* innovation and progress (Hughes 2004). The relevance of Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance to understanding the spiritual basis and influence on Henry Ford's Fordism is perhaps best encapsulated through Emerson's account of 'genius' in his essay, 'Self-Reliance' (1841). For many, it was this notion that remained Emerson's leading idea and the basis of his doctrinal thought, i.e., 'Emersonianism' (Ward 1881; 1887; Urbaş 2016). In the opening to this essay Emerson writes, '[t]o believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius' (Emerson 1969, 265). Through these words, Emerson put forward an early understanding of 'the American self' which has since become realised in the figure of the highly individualistic and self-driven *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault 2008, 225–227). In neoliberalism, this enterprising individual takes the form of the ever-pervasive 'entrepreneur of the self': a central character of the Modern Age (Taylor 1992; Bröckling 2015).

However, contained in Emerson's notion of self-reliance is an understanding of the individual in relation to the world, be it the world constituted as God, Nature, other people, or artefacts, traditions, customs and institutions that are inherited or passed down through history. Emerson understood the notion of individual 'genius' as being based on the common and transcendently universal over-spirit of man (Geldard 2013). Such a genius was expressed through that individual's creative output (broadly defined) from the divine spark that was understood to dwell within the most private part of one's individual self. This was by no means an entirely new philosophical statement (Remes and Sihvola 2008; Hadot 2004), however its specific articulation in relation to the emerging market-based economy of America's Antebellum period meant that Emerson's articulation registered at a level that proved pertinent to the collective imagination of America and its sense of national identity and destiny. What becomes crucial for understanding Emerson's significance for Ford is that the 'genius' of Emerson's self-reliance is not 'genius' by way of sovereign agency determined by one's uniqueness, difference, or superiority over others, but rather one determined by its essential *compatibility with* and *transcendence to* the rest of humankind (i.e., humankind as constituted by Man as a 'mass').<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the egalitarian declaration of Emerson that individual truth is revealed in its mass acceptance can translate into both the principles which came to be known in culturally hegemonic terms as 'the Fordist Deal', namely

‘ever increasing standards of living in exchange for a quiescent labour force accepting alienating work’ (Gabriel and Lang 1995, 9) and of individual self-belief and -reliance. In Ford’s words:

“When you once get an idea in which you believe with all your heart, work it out. Do not take it to others for their opinions about it, for if you do, before you know it, that idea will be all cumbered up with other people’s modifications and changes and additions, and it will no longer be your idea. Go ahead and work it out the way it came to you.” (Stidger 1928, 1)

Parallels can clearly be drawn between Emerson’s philosophy and the world-view that Ford espoused throughout his life, which culminated in his auto-biographical writings and memoirs published in the 1920s and early 30s (Ford 2012 [1922]; 2002 [1926]; 1929 [1931]; Ford and Crowther 2013 [1930]). Specifically, the notion of ‘genius’ that Emerson equates with the ‘self’ of his “Self-Reliance” (1844) is one he uses interchangeably with expressions from others works, which ultimately fall under his doctrine of the ‘Soul’ (which consists of the organic faculty, the intellect, and the moral sentiment. See Bishop 1964). Whichever word he used is to be understood in terms of ‘spiritual evolutionary advancement’ (Obuchowski 1979, 151) and referring to ‘the invasion of God’ and the creative output of that genius through an individual’s actions is to be considered *that of God*. Therefore, an individual’s genius should not to be understood in bourgeois terms as a simply private or individualistic affair, but rather something measured by a mass form of ‘recognition’: the recognition that the truth in one’s private heart is only true if it is revealed as true for everyone else. It is therefore the recognition of one’s place in the world, and how one’s private thoughts and individuated self is a mere particle of a common mould within a divine order (Conner 1949). For Emerson, such a recognition reveals to the individual that they are ‘part or particle of God’ (Emerson 1969).

The essence of Emerson’s ‘genius’ being based on the belief that there is ‘God particle’ in each of us was one shared by Ford, revealing his Transcendentalist understanding of material things:

I believe that the smallest particle of matter – call it an atom or an ion or what you like – is intelligent. I don’t know much about atoms and the like, but I feel sure that they know what they are doing – and why. They swarm all around us. If a man is working his level best to do what he believes is right, these invisible elements pitch in and help him. If he is doing what he knows is wrong, they will work just as hard against him” (from the *Detroit News*, November 10th 1941, referenced in DiBacco 1988, 185–86).

In a market-based society, recognition becomes measured by the level at which an innovation is consumed and taken up by ‘the great multitude’. This is a material measure of a metaphysical principle

which meant for Ford any business should work towards serving a recognized social need. The notion of ‘service’ runs through all aspects of *Ford Motor Company*’s promotional material and personal writing (Accession 511), with employment and sales being premised on a notion of ‘service’ to humankind itself, which he explains in his *My Life and Work* (1922):

It was the application of these same methods to the making of the Ford car that at the very start lowered the price and heightened the quality. We just developed an idea. *The nucleus of a business may be an idea.* That is, an inventor or a thoughtful workman works out a new and better way to serve some established *human need*; the idea commends itself, and people want to avail themselves of it. In this way, *a single individual may prove, through his idea or discovery, the nucleus of a business.* But the creation of the body and bulk of that business is shared by everyone who has anything to do with it. (Ford 2012, 47 emphasis added)

It is through this understanding that Ford ascribed value to his production:

'... to get something worthwhile done, something that will benefit all mankind and put civilization in debt to the doer. That, to my mind, is success - and something worth striving for. What portion of progress is due to effort and what portion to the pressure of destiny no one can say. Men are pushed ahead oftener that they go ahead of their own will – that is, mankind in the mass.' (Ford 1929, 77)

What is clear from Ford’s claim here is that he recognizes a destinal and karmic component in an individual or individual business’s success which is recognized in the relationship between the individual and the mass (market). While Emerson described in poetic terms the notion that ‘[i]n every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty’ (Emerson 1969, 265–66), for Ford the fact that the ‘commercial success of *Ford Motor Company* has been most unusual’ was ‘important only because it serves to demonstrate, in a way which no one else can fail to understand, that the theory to date is right’ (Ford 2012, 1).

Emerson’s position was one based against the common understanding of America’s relation to history and the modes by which individual Americans were understanding themselves in relation to their constitution and the country’s established institutions (Pearce 2007). The dominant perception of ‘history’ as Emerson saw it being played out and related to in everyday life ran counter to the potential he saw in each ‘individual’ (i.e., everyone) to relate in an ‘original’ capacity to the past and the world into which they were born (Dolan 2014). For Emerson, ‘genius’ can take many forms but exists as a source of creative ‘potential’ lying dormant within each individual ‘self’: he believed that ‘[a] man

contains all that is needful to his government within himself. He is made a law unto himself... Nothing can be given to him, or taken from him, but always there is compensation' (Ward 1887).

The principle through which individuals can realize this inner potential and bring it forth into the world was understood to be determined by the reliance of that individual on the belief of their private convictions. Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance was based on the idea that what is true for one individual in his or her private heart is true for all men. From this idea, Emerson understood the measure of the individual to be based on the extent to which they are 'self-reliant' - 'Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age' (Emerson 1969b, 174) – and it is through this notion of self-reliance that he based his rejection of 'institutional religion' and 'academic history',<sup>5</sup> both of which he saw as residing on an engagement with past traditions and events against progress. Rather, he calls on his own and future generations to behold 'God and nature face to face', to 'enjoy an original relation to the universe' rather than live a life built on the 'sepulchres of the fathers' (Emerson 1969, 3). In *Self-Reliance*, he considers how,

Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; ... A man Cæsar is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius ... An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, Monachism, of Hermit Anthony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; ... all history revolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons. (Emerson 1969b, 174–175)

The suggestion that all the 'isms' that have shaped the historic unfolding of institutional Christianity have at their source the private genius of one individual, whose original relation to their spiritual and worldly circumstance cast its 'lengthened shadow' in the form of a reformed branch of Christianity. It is in relation to this context that we might finally consider Fordism in Emersonian terms as the lengthened shadow of one man, and how Ford's own understanding of Emerson makes such a reading so particularly acute. To this end, the next section will reconsider the basis of Henry Ford's Fordism and the impact his lengthened shadow is understood to have cast on the social, cultural and organizational life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Snow 2013; Smith 1993, 15; Murray 1988, 8).

### **Reconsidering Henry Ford's Fordism**

Henry Ford (1863-1947) is widely regarded as one of the best-known business leaders of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. One of the reasons for this is because Ford's reputation at the height of his celebrity was aligned with the organizational implications of his company's revolutionary social function: '[a] large proportion of articles concerning *Ford Motor Company's* actions and labour-relations policies focus on Henry Ford himself. The public saw any action taken by the *Ford Motor Company* as the

embodiment of personal decisions of Henry Ford' (King and Fine 2000, 75). *Ford* the company and Ford the man were therefore both respective embodiments of two aspects of the American Dream; an institutional ideal and a celebrated instance of what can be achieved through hard work and self-reliance (DiBacco 1988; Sward 1948; Diamond 1955, 1:143). This is the basis on which many popular biographical, company, and family treatise on Ford and *Ford Motor Company* continue to proliferate. Despite this, in such literature consideration rarely extends to the 'ism' which bears his name and is a central paradigm in organizational textbooks (Fineman and Gabriel 1994).

When Fordism is spoken of in terms of a personal 'industrial philosophy' (Jardim 1974; Ford 1929) it is in terms of the 'Fordist deal' (Gabriel and Lang 1995, 9), which does not acknowledge or consider the metaphysical logic which lay behind this outcome. Although it has been argued that Ford never applied scientific management on the assembly-line at Ford (Wren 2005, 268) and was personally sceptical of formal managerial structures (Batchelor 1994, 48; Link 2018), for many, Fordism, is still understood as a machine-based extension of Taylor's quantitative and scientific principles (Doray 1988), and therefore a mere method by which industrial tasks are broken down into component parts via time and motion studies to secure ever-greater technological efficiency (Taylor 2003 [1911]; Haber 1973; Hays 1999). This has led Ford's Fordism to be understood from an organizational perspective as a materialist concern with quantity as his fundamental category. By reducing nature to matter and man to machine, the three interconnected components of 'men, mechanism, and material' (Lee 1916, 151) combine to realise his ultimate social vision of 'build[ing] a motor car for the great multitude ... constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise (Ford 2012, 45). This ultimately became the basis of the organizational view of Fordism (Figure 1).

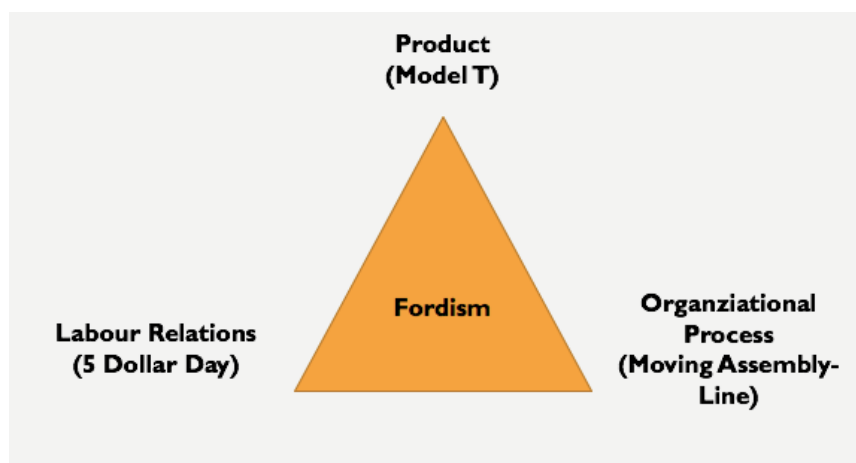


Figure 1: Henry Ford's Fordism represented as the systemic intersection between three component parts.



However, such a reading misses something quite different altogether. Contained in this triangulation is a specific organizational logic that seeks a productive harmony between the three component parts at a metaphysical as well as a material level. In Emersonian terms, the notion of an intrinsic ‘harmony’, ‘balance’ or ‘natural order’ between things is a central aspect of his Transcendental philosophy, especially in relation to his understanding of commerce and the emerging market economy (Cayton 1992; Plotica 2017). This theme is articulated most directly in his essay, ‘Compensation’ (1841). Of all Emerson’s ideas and writings, it is ‘Compensation’ that has been cited as having the greatest influence on Ford, and has been variously described as a ‘favorite theme’ that ‘permeated’ his life and work (Marquis 2007, 56 [1923]; Stidger 1923, 114). For Emerson, ‘Compensation’ (like ‘Self-Reliance’) is both a central theme of his work and the title of a single essay in his *First Series*. It describes the necessary balance between things for them to be rendered as ‘true’. Like the ‘recognition’ that is received in response to the truth of a ‘self-reliant thought’, it articulates his understanding that everywhere in life there is a dualistic force, akin to karma, where every action creates a reaction commensurate to and in balance of that original source. Here, he extends his early understanding of ‘truth’ being understood on what would later be developed on pragmatic grounds as what ‘works’.

It is from this perspective that, for Ford (and others), a product’s ‘truth’ is premised on it being as simple as needed, and the assembly-line as efficiently gruelling as his Five Dollar Day “compensation scheme” could afford to guarantee a steady level of commitment and employee turnover in the production of his motor cars (Ford 2012, 74–75). However, while ‘Compensation’ appears to have underpinned much of Ford’s everyday sense of order and justice (and indeed can be seen as explaining the attempt to balance and bring harmony to the three aspects of his system of mass production), it is understood to have informed one of the three aspects of his industrialism in particular: his ‘Five Dollar Day’ (Lee 1916; Meyer 1981).

Although the ‘Five Dollar Day’ (which Ford announced on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1914) has been regarded by labour historians as a temporary solution to Ford’s problem of labour turnover (Meyer 1981, 196–97; Dassbach 1991), for Ford there was more driving this ‘profit sharing scheme’ (Lee 1916) than the attempted appeasement of industrial strife or good publicity (King and Fine 2000, 73; Pietrykowski 1999, 179; McCraw 1997, 264; Alvarado and Alvarado 2001, 22; Lewis 1976, 213). Writing in his *My Life and Work* (1922):

‘The economic fundamental is labour. Labour is the human element which makes the fruitful seasons of the earth useful to men. It is men’s labour that makes the harvest what it is. That is the economic fundamental: every one of us is working with material which we did not and could not create, but which was presented to us by Nature.’ (Ford 2012, 3)

By declaring that ‘labour’ was the ‘economic fundamental’, the notion of ‘Compensation’ can be understood as just one of the Emersonian principles aligned to, and underpinning, Ford’s Fordism. As Dassbach (1991) has shown, the organizational origins of Fordism can be traced to the interrelated challenges of labour turnover and increasing market-demand for his automobiles, of which the Five Dollar Day was a ‘fundamental’ solution. Further, having discussed such issues with Ford in a 1923 interview, the Reverend William L. Stidger concluded that:

‘... the two dominant thoughts of his whole life are to lower the price of his car so that the consumer may profit, and to raise wages so that his workmen may profit by his efficient organization... His very organization is permeated with this ideal.’ (Stidger 1923, 114–15)

In summary, the ‘fundamental weight’ of labour-relations, informed by ‘Compensation’, places this Emersonian notion at the heart of Ford’s own ‘ism’.

Through this brief analysis, the peculiar deductive logic behind Henry Ford’s Fordism can be gleaned, which contains something much more nuanced and profound than how ‘Fordism’ has come to be understood in secular-material terms. Indeed, the three aspects that make up Ford’s personal system of mass-production (Fordism) were influenced by and therefore can be *understood as pertaining to specific articulations of Emerson’s ideas*.

It is beyond the economy of this paper to address each aspect of Ford’s productive organization through the specific writing of Emerson. However, the organizational logic behind the intersection of these component parts were not just material but in adherence to a metaphysical logic that is contained in the writing and thought of Emerson. Unlike the narrative that is commonly told about Henry Ford’s Fordism in management textbooks, Ford’s organization of labour along his moving assembly-line to produce a product in the most efficient manner was not done for the mere maximization of private wealth (Wik 1972, 11; Gelderman 1981; Davis 1988, 122; referenced in Berlet and Lyons 2000, 109). Nor was it done out of an unfettered act of conformity to Taylor’s ‘one best way’ (McKinlay and Wilson 2012; Wilson and McKinlay 2010, 761) and the Progressive ideal of scientific rationality (Shenhav 2002; Hays 1999; Lasch 1991). To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to delve further into the Transcendentalist view of Nature that informed Ford’s worldview (by way of Emerson) and how his personal ambition to ‘build a car for the great multitude’ was premised an attempt to bring about something quite different to the age of modern mass production and consumption so associated with his name and eponymous ‘ism’.

### *Emerson's implications for Ford and his 'ism'*

Having accounted for the context from which Emerson wrote and the way his work was likely to have influenced Ford, we can begin to investigate and come to understand the prospective implications that Emerson's thought had on both the personal decisions and life of Henry Ford, and how they elucidate a tension at the heart of Ford's attempt to align his Fordism with metaphysical ideals alongside the secular-material imperatives of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century industrial work organization. This attempt can be broadly seen across the two levels on which Fordism continues to be understood today: as the central industrial philosophy behind Ford's manufacturing organization, and the national ideal that has come to define the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For Ford, Emerson's acceptance of Man's engagement and manipulation of the Natural world is a central justification for the personal worldview he articulated and aligned to his organizational conduct. This is expressed most emphatically at various points in his auto-biographical writings and memoirs. In the opening to the most famous of these (*My Life and Work*, 1922), for instance, Ford writes:

When one speaks of increasing power, machinery, and industry there comes up a picture of a cold, metallic sort of world in which factories will drive away the trees, the flowers, the birds, and the green fields. And that then we shall have a world composed of metal machines and human machines. With all of that I do not agree. I think that unless we know more about machines and their use, unless we better understand the mechanical portion of life, we cannot have the time to enjoy the trees, and the birds, and the flowers, and the green fields. I think that we have already done too much toward banishing the pleasant things from life by thinking that there is some opposition between living and providing the means of living. (Ford 2012, 1)

What Ford describes here echoes a recurring sentiment and theme in Emerson's writing, that 'machinery and transcendentalism agree well' (1984, 307): the basis of a Transcendentalist view of 'that of God' and the mark of Man (as a creator), lying dormant in the machine his/her 'genius' brought into being. Throughout the extensive range of interviews and magazine articles published during Ford's life, there are numerous instances of him voicing similar Transcendentalist sentiments (King and Fine 2000, 73). As suggested previously, perhaps the most explicit and sustained alignment between this Emersonian sentiment can be found in his *My Philosophy of Industry* (1929). Elaborating on the fact that he did not 'consider the machines which bear [his] name simply as machines (Ford 2012, 1), Ford states emphatically that in doing so he 'make[s] *no difference between matter and spirit*. They are different degrees of fineness of the same thing. The one is becoming the other, through ascent and descent, and both benefit from the process' (Ford 2012, 16–17 emphasis added). This is ultimately a metaphysical declaration; that the mere material appearance of things is not their final justification (Dupré 1994; Heidegger 1999). As discussed in the previous section, what Ford is declaring here as a personal

philosophy can be explained through a context that allowed a very specific understanding of the relationship between Man and Nature which emerged with philosophical justification in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America (Marx 1999). Ford's Emersonian declaration here on the interconnectedness of the 'material' and the 'spiritual' should therefore not be read merely as a 'personal conviction'. Indeed, central to Emerson's doctrine of 'Self-reliance' is the notion that private convictions and thoughts have their 'truth' in their transcendental recognition in 'the other', broadly defined.

Beyond the case that Ford was personally influenced by Emersonian lines of thought, and the various accounts and evidence of Ford owning and engaging with his published works (Accession 1, boxes 14-7), Emerson's ideas are central to the formation of America's national character which informed the time and context of Ford's activity (Hughes 2004; Goodman 2008). Therefore, in line with the values of entrepreneurship, work, works (i.e., products designed for consumption) and consumption all have the potential to contain and reveal 'that of God' to Man. This means that Ford's industrial project to 'build a motor car for the great multitude' (Ford 2012, 45) can be understood as an egalitarian gesture, and his 'Fordism' as an attempt to reconcile a conflict at the heart of American life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century – between Modernity's promise of progress through technological development being in alignment with Judeo-Christian values and imperatives. This conflict is due to this gesture inevitably concentrating power in the hands of those with the means of bringing about such change (i.e., those who, in traditional Marxist terms, own the means of production). This has been well-documented as being rooted in the notion of American 'individualism', which was gaining traction at the time of Emerson's publication of 'Self Reliance' (1841). Despite the term 'individualism' not occurring in his essay, Emerson was writing during the period of America's emerging market economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Cayton 1992; Plotica 2017), This contributed to the severing of the organic connection between production and consumption (Arendt 1958, 79–174), which would be central to the notion of the 'Fordist deal.' This has led several cultural commentators to suggest that there is a vulgar tendency in twentieth and twenty-first century interpretations of Emerson to be little more than a rhetorical means of justifying capitalistic expansion, individual profit and bourgeois individualism (Newfield 1991; Mitchell 1997). Charles Sellers, for instance, dismisses Emerson as a "paid lecturer to bourgeois/middleclass self-improvers" who heralded a "new order [of] untrammled capitalism" dressed up as spiritual elevation (Sellers 1992, 378, 380). This view aligns to a broader critique that contemporary invocations of Emersonian thought (be them literary, philosophical or managerial) are little more than appropriations that permit powerful and wealthy individuals (like Ford) to mobilize a rhetoric that advocates the rationalization of production techniques for the benefit of 'the many' while justifying a private monopolization of a specific market segment for concentrated private profit (see, for instance, Mitchell 1997). Arguments contrary to this being Emerson's intention have done little to palliate his detractors, who have described him as the 'prophet of piratical industrialism' (Tate 1948, 200) and 'capitalism's poet-philosopher' (Hughes 2005, 38), whose central notion of Self-Reliance left

him unable to see how his optimistic rejection of Puritan theology dissipated any tragic potential for American culture (Warren 1928, 400).

Unlike European Romanticism's steadfast rejection of industrial progress (Manzari 2012; Runkwitz 2011; Carman 1968), Emerson's Transcendentalism has been interpreted as having a more receptive relationship to the tension between Nature and Technology (Nye 2004; Marx 1999). At one level Transcendentalism can be interpreted as extending the preoccupations of European Romanticism (Chai 1987; Versluis 2001; Goodman 2008; Knirsch 2012), on another it is charged with justifying the mistreatment of Man and Nature, so long as the self-reliant antagonist believes that what they are doing is part of some larger divine plan or spiritual truth. In turn, the various technologies listed above lend themselves to narratives of the highest exaltation of the relationship between God's creation and humanity's ingenuity – the conflation of 'Whiggish history, manifest destiny, and technological conquest' (Nye 2004, 14) – which, along with the emerging market-based society of the period (where notions of laissez-faire economics and "progress" emerged) consecrated the belief that such processes were not only historically inevitable (Butterfield 1931) but *divinely ordained* (Garvey 2005, 276). As Nye (2004) points out, 'Emerson's self-reliance was teleological, aiding an inevitable organic process' (p. 10) which leads to an understanding of nature and technology sharing a latent divinity. As Hughes writes, Emerson,

'... believed that the nation could express virtuous values as it created a human-built world. The technological transformation of nature gave clear evidence for [him] of the mastery of mind over matter... he believed that just as nature manifests the logos, or the word of God, nature transformed by humans expresses the perpetual creativity and imprint of the human mind. Ultimately, the world will be organized to reflect human mind and will.' (Hughes 2005, 37)

This is the basis of a tension that has been described by Leo Marx (1992) as the ambiguous social role of science and technology's relation to Nature, and has been explored by Nye (2004) via the 'foundation-' and 'counter-narratives' that were borne out of specific forms of technological advancement between 1776 and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Through his focussed accounts, Nye reveals how technological objects (and therefore, 'technology' as such) contain an essential formation of Man's relation to Nature, which in the American context is premised on a specifically Transcendentalist understanding:

'[t]he axe, the mill, the canal, the railroad, and the irrigation project all provided new ways for Americans to make use of 'God's' favors': 'This was the teleology of second creation. The natural world as God had made it was the first creation; man's

constructions were supplementary completion of the order that lay dormant within it' (2004, 154).

It was this relation of man to the world through labour that made Ford come to consider labour as the 'economic fundamental' (Ford 2012, 3); which he confirmed his ideological allegiance to in an interview with the novelist, Upton Sinclair (Sinclair 1919).

The idea that Nye puts forward through this account of 'technological foundation narratives' is based on the notion that 'contained latent' within Nature (i.e., the natural world) are the rudiments of a grand design, which it was *man's* destiny to carry out.' (Nye 2004, 154 my emphasis) In Emersonian terms, 'that of God' comes to be *contained in* and *revealed through* 'that of' his machine: a suggestion internalised by Ford and described by William J. Cameron (editor of Ford's *Dearborn Independent* from 1919 to 1927) as giving him a hermeneutic capacity to read machines:

“[Ford] could read in an old machine what the man had, what idea he had when he started it, what he had to work with, and just where he stopped and couldn't go any further because the methods weren't yet discovered or the material wasn't yet discovered. He could read those things; they were living things to him, those machines. He was really a poet. Everything spoke to him. He had a queer feeling about machines just as some men have about horses.” (quoted in Greenleaf 1964, 97).

This can also be read in Ford's own words from a chapter of his *My Life and Work* (1922) entitled, 'Machinery, the new messiah' (Ford 1929, 31–48; first published in *The Forum*, see Ford and Faurote 1928, 3–21):

'With the advent of the airplane, the radio, and the motor car, people are no longer compelled to stay in the house, but may travel about, economically, and see things... Machinery is accomplishing in the world what man has failed to do by preaching, propaganda, or the written word. The airplane and radio know no boundary. They pass over the dotted lines on the map without heed or hindrance. They are binding the world together in a way no other system can.' (Ford 1929, 44–45)

This view reveals how the Transcendentalist relation to Nature can be deemed potentially realizable *in* and *through* industrial organization and its mass material production. The view that there is a divine order lying dormant within Nature was taken up and reconstituted by Emerson in his specific brand of New England Transcendentalism, which understood nature (with a capital 'N') as containing 'that of God' in the same manner that he articulated his understanding of individual genius (Larson 2001).

This positions the ‘creative’ individual – be them an ‘entrepreneur’, ‘inventor’, ‘careful workman’, or ‘factory-manager’ – as being able to leave ‘their mark on a ship, mill, railroad, electric battery, and the chemist’s retort, which could then serve God’s purposes’ (2005, 37). This is therefore an early instance of the creative entrepreneur being considered and elevated, in mythological terms (Ogbor 2000; Wellington and Zandvakili 2006), to the status of a ‘demi-urge, a quasi-creator, or quasi-god’ (Sørensen 2008, 91). It was through this understanding that in Emerson’s later works, he contended that the selfish and cruel aspects associated with technological production were based on ‘mercenary’ (rather than ‘creative’) ‘impulses’ (Plotica 2017). In his essay “Farming” (1870, later published in *Society and Solitude*, 1876) Emerson cites the political-economic theorist, Henry Carey who, in *Principles of Political Economy* (1837) ‘defined economic production as “an alteration in the condition of existing particles of matter, by which the matter may be rendered more useful’ (Birch 1995, 400) providing a further instance in which Emerson’s philosophy was aligned with Ford’s vision of himself, his factory, and the world he hoped to create. In his *Philosophy of Industry* (1929), Ford extends this notion by arguing that because ‘everything is given to us to use’, there is ‘no evil from which we suffer that did not come to us through misuse’ (Ford 1929, 74). This has led to the problematic notion at the heart of Emerson’s thought that evil, like good, is contained in the intention of the individual, not the material object as such (see [Obuchowski 1979](#)).

Such a position supports the wider convictions that Ford held in relation to his work; namely his insistence that in his private heart he ‘made his money honestly’ (Wik 1972, 11), compensated his workers to achieve his vision through the massification of his genius. In this sense, both Emerson and Ford appeared to find hope in the potential of technology for society, but shared a concern regarding the impact of its materiality and the moral impulses it encouraged. Unlike the mercenary impulse for commerce as such (See Grusin 1988; Shapiro 1997), Emerson believed that ‘[a] creative mind and a good heart’ would infuse machinery with ‘love’ and create through the ‘powers of science and technology’ a ‘second creation’ which ‘would bear witness to the creative divine spark in its goodness and glory’ (Hughes 2004, 37–38). From his earliest discourse on *Nature* (1836) through to his later ‘pragmatist’ works, Emerson contended that the world lay broken because humans had not fulfilled their moral responsibilities as self-reliant creative beings. As Leo Marx brings to critical attention in his seminal text on the relationship between technology and the pastoral ideal in America (1964 [1999]), for Emerson ‘new inventions are evidence of man’s power to impose his will upon the world’ (1999, 230–31). ‘To create,’ Emerson writes, ‘is the proof of a Divine presence. Whoever creates is God, and whatever talents are, if the man cannot create, the pure efflux of Deity is not his’ (Emerson 1960, 5:341; referenced in Buell 2016, 30). Emerson’s writing therefore becomes the basis of a tension that Ford attempted to reconcile through his own life and work: a concern and tension regarding the reconciliation of Nature and mass society with Man’s ‘technological will’. It is this tension that is at the heart of Ford’s

personal relation to the organization and ‘ism’ which has come to bear his name.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper began with a quote from Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance’ which described how an institution can be understood as the ‘lengthened shadow of one man’. Ford’s Fordism can be read as one such shadow, and the basis on which it emerged has been the contextual and conceptual concern of this paper. The article has considered how a specific set of philosophical ideas were interpreted and came to influence Henry Ford and underpin his organizational worldview. The form these influences took in his later industrial practices became the basis on which a key term in organization and management theory was based.

By returning to the intellectual climate and ideas of this period, the paper has explored the extent to which the writing and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson influenced Henry Ford’s ‘Fordism’. It was beyond the economy of this paper to provide a comprehensive Emersonian reading of each element of Henry Ford’s industrial design (his products, process of production and labour relations practices), however the historical detail and analysis has detailed and contextualized key ways in which his interpretation of Emerson and Emersonian thought underpinned his worldview and the intentions behind his philosophy of industry at the height of his industrial and national prominence. In doing so, this paper has explored a set of contextual factors and insights that provide the basis on which further studies can be developed, both concerning ‘rethinking’ taken-for-granted understandings of key ideas, and developments in the theological basis of organizational thought (Sørensen et al., 2012), and the relationship between cultural values and economic behaviour (Dellheim 1987).

The paper has sought to contribute to an emerging range of cultural and historical works within Organization Studies which have sought to return to original sources of organizational phenomena and look deeper into their significance (Cummings and Bridgman 2011; Hassard 2012; Wilson 2013; Cummings, Bridgman, and Brown 2016; Bridgman, Cummings, and Ballard 2018). While this paper was not an attempt to oppose the way that Fordism has continued to be developed and understood as a political economic phenomenon (Gramsci 2005; Jessop 1991; Amin 2011), the focus has demonstrated how ideas travel; are taken up, refined, appropriated and often become removed from the source and their author’s (broadly conceived) control and original intention. For the two main figures in this paper – Emerson and Ford – the former’s thought and the latter’s engagement and translation of this thought into an industrial philosophy, can be read along similar lines of misinterpretation and representation; having taken on a semblance removed from their original intention through different historical contexts and climates. Therefore, this paper has attempted to serve as both an idiosyncratic account which intends to provide its own scholarly intrigue, but also an instance which draws attention to the way in which a specific organizational practice and theory were based on a set of principles seemingly at odds



with their common association with the rational-materialist ideology of America's Progressive Era (Haber 1973). By challenging this notion, this paper has sought to be an additional gesture towards a critical way forward in the cultural, theological and historical study of key managerial phenomenon in Organization Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson published his first essay, "Nature", in 1836. While it sold only one hundred copies in its first year, it would emerge with time as the charter of the Transcendental revolt stirring in Unitarian circles in the middle-third of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Gelpi 2007, 89). However, it was his collection of *First Essays* (1841) which were his first writings which were met with critical acclaim.

<sup>2</sup> As with the recurring understanding of his later works emphasising a specific strand of his thought, focused studies on his earlier period lead to very different interpretations (Versluis 1993; 2001; Corrigan 2010; 2012). In addition to Emerson's middle-period being described as his 'last', 'desperate' and 'muted' stance on Transcendentalism, the pragmatist's emphasis on his later period has been understood as an attempt to 'de-Transcendentalize' his earlier work (Buell 1984, 127; 2009, 220–21; see also Lopez 1988; Grusin 1989). By charting Emerson's various writings and publications across this schema we can begin to see the specific themes, emphases and orientations in the context of the time of his writing.

<sup>3</sup> Although Emerson published *Society and Solitude* in 1870 and *Letters and Social Aims* in 1875, the former contained seven essays and lectures that were published throughout his career. As detailed in its first edition, *Letters and Social Aims* was a compendium of uncollected essays put together with Emerson's begrudging permission at the request of a publisher rather than Emerson himself. It contained essays and lectures variously published in the early 1940s through to the time of the volume's preparation in the early 1870s, but cannot be read as indicative as a specific period of his thought.

<sup>4</sup> This goes some way to explain how an Emersonian understanding of Fordism might explain the shared interest in Fordism in the Capitalist West and former Soviet East. As Wright (2002) succinctly puts it, both Marxism and Pragmatism share an 'optimistic faith in man's rationality', which for Pragmatism was 'located in the individual; and for Marxism in a class of men' (*ibid.*, 146).

<sup>5</sup> There is certainly scope to read Emerson's view of history into Ford's claim that "history is bunk" (Wheeler 1916), and his attempts from 1929 onwards to curate various forms of Americana and technological heritage in his 'living history' site, Greenfield Village (Ford 1932; Simonds 1928; Upward 1979; Swigger 2008).