



Bridges, Barricades, Sandcastles

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review of:

R. Westwood and S. Clegg (eds.) (2003) *Debating Organization: Point-Counterpoint in Organization Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell. (PB: pp.432, £24.99, ISBN: 0631216936)

This review is not really a review. It does not attempt to offer a detailed critique of the specific contents of Westwood and Clegg's edited collection. Instead, the primary focus here is to consider this volume in relation to the genre in which it is located – i.e. field defining and field encompassing books in organization studies. More specifically, the extent to which the 'debate approach', based upon a series of point-counterpoint chapters, adopted within this text represents a significant and meaningful departure from the proliferation of more conventional 'organization studies handbooks' (see for example: Clegg, Hardy and Nord, 1996; and the books reviewed in this issue) is subjected to critical scrutiny.

There are two main parts to this paper. The first part contains a section dealing with the question of topic coverage and the processes of exclusion and inclusion at play in deciding what constitutes 'the field'. And then, a section unpacking the claims made regarding the benefits of debates in comparison to the more popular alternative of univocal renditions. The second main part of this paper comments on the potentially limiting effects, and unintended consequences, associated with the debate format advocated by Westwood and Clegg. It also proposes how we might consider moving away from debates and towards embracing other plurivocal, but less adversarial, modes of engagement within organization studies.

Bridges

Doing Organization Studies Texts: Exhaustive, Illustrative or Selective?

Whether implicitly or explicitly, many handbooks lay claim to the status of being definitive in nature. Those who adopt a slightly more modest position still, nevertheless,

are inclined to frame their work as being broadly representative of the field covered. In this regard, Westwood and Clegg's volume is refreshingly different in two ways. First, it does not profess to have handbook credentials and, as such, no outlandish claims are made about the content mapping the field.

Second, they resist the urge to resort to the familiar 'get-out-clause', used by volume editors, of asserting that the content is indicative or illustrative rather than extensive or exhaustive. Instead, Westwood and Clegg unashamedly confess that the contents of their book are selective. In doing so, they exhibit a level of reflexive engagement that is to be commended. In their introduction the editors acknowledge the degree of agency they exercise over the text, including addressing the politics of producing the book:

The issue of exclusion causes us to reflect on the role of editors in general, and projects such as this in particular. Editors clearly occupy a position of power – in the way a text is defined and framed, in the process of selection, and in the act of editing itself. (Westwood and Clegg, 2003: 16)

The level of openness in the editors' reflections exceeds what one might expect in an edited volume. This is exemplified in Westwood and Clegg's candid comments on the role publishers played in the production of the text: "Publishers enter the political process too; they indicated their desire to see 'known' people, with reputations, included in the project" (2003: 17).

In terms of the scope and nature of coverage of organization studies, Westwood and Clegg's *Debating Organization* provides a nice lead for other 'handbook-type' texts to hopefully follow insofar as it highlights the precariousness of claims to either comprehensive or representative content and reveals the partial and political nature of pulling together a collection of contributions. Other supposedly field-spanning volumes and handbooks within organization studies would undoubtedly benefit from similar editorial reflexivity and critical reflection upon the processes of 'text production' and 'text consumption' (Fairclough, 1995) at work. This reflection should also reach beyond 'what' is included to also consider 'who' is included. After all, as van Dijk reminds us, if we want to understand texts we have to ask: "Who uses language, how, why and when?" (1997: 2).

From Isolated Monologues to Engaged Debates?

At a fundamental level, *Debating Organization* offers welcome sanctuary from the positivistic, univocal accounts that continue to dominate in both teaching (e.g. textbooks) and research (e.g. handbooks) – a kind of 'intellectual safe-house'. The very process of introducing a countervailing perspective to the orthodox or dominant view has to be viewed as a good thing within organization studies. Not least, because it promotes deeper and richer understandings of the diverse, complex, polyphonic and contested nature of knowledge within the discipline.

The overriding rationale offered by Westwood and Clegg for a point-counterpoint format is that it facilitates "a more active and productive engagement between positions in OS [organization studies] that typically would not be engaged – indeed, would not even inhabit the same textual space" (2003: 17). They go on to suggest:

It struck us that too often debate is not met and opportunities for the productivity of thesis meet antithesis, or the mere juxtaposition of radically opposing perspectives are lost. Regrettably, certain institutional orthodoxies often collude with this isolationism and paradigm exclusionism. In other respects there is simple inertia, ego-defensiveness, or lack of opportunity. (2003: 17)

There are two aspects to Westwood and Clegg's assertions about their debate approach. One is the extent to which there is widespread isolationism in organization studies and the other is whether debate between antithetical positions is conducive to 'productive engagement'. In short, they posit that there is a lack of debate in organization studies and that debate is a good thing. The productive potential of debate will be examined in the subsequent section. For now, the discussion will address the question of isolation.

The message that Westwood and Clegg drive home in their introduction is that the book brings together and connects perspectives that do not normally interface or interact. This is highly questionable. The concept of debate is not perhaps as rare in academe as Westwood and Clegg would have us believe. In many ways debate is a fundamental part of university life. In terms of structured events, brown bags lunchtime sessions and staff seminar series, within universities, and international and national conferences, across universities, are obvious sites of debate. If we concentrate on written exchanges, we also find considerable evidence of debate taking place. For example, even within mainstream organizational behaviour textbooks, such as Huczynski and Buchanan (2003) and Robbins (2003), we find that a point-counterpoint format is utilized. Equally, a number of well-respected journals encourage debate via commentaries, responses and replies to previously published work (see, for example, the 'dialogue' section of *Academy of Management Review* or the 'speaking out' section of *Organization*). And within the context of this special issue, it would also be rather remiss not to point out that the subtitle for *ephemera* is actually *critical dialogues on organization!*

There appears to be a credibility gap between Westwood and Clegg's characterization of the field of organization studies and the absence of debate. In the introductory chapter, they talk of diversity and heterogeneity and depict the field as a "contested discursive terrain" (p.2). This raises the question of where and how this contestation manifests itself if there is isolationism and limited debate between perspectives. Surely, in academic circles at least, it is impossible to have contestation without debate?

The notion of isolationism and a lack of debate are also difficult to sustain if we glance at the list of contributors to the book. Many of the protagonists that have written chapters for *Debating Organization* have done so from an established and enduring orientation to the field of organization studies. As such, their respective positions have been well rehearsed and have, at least in part, been honed through ongoing exchanges with opposing and antithetical positions. If we take, for example, the work of Lex Donaldson we find evidence of a history of engaging in a debate with interlocutors. This is particularly apparent in the 'A Reply to the Critics' subtitle of *In Defence of Organization Theory* (Donaldson, 1985). Similarly, Chia's notion of a 'becoming ontology' (2003) has been subjected to extensive exploration, including via a four-part debate between interlocutors (i.e. with Martin Parker, Mike Reed and Haridimos Tsoukas) in a themed section of *Organization* (Oswick *et al.*, 2000a).

Overall, it would seem that isolationism in organization studies has tended to be overplayed. Arguably, the strength of *Debating Organization* is not that it helps to fill a 'debate vacuum', but that it pulls together a series of otherwise fragmented and atomized debates, that are spatially and temporally dispersed, into a coherent collection of 'key debates'. However, this gives rise to a further set of issues pertaining to the liberating and constraining potential of the 'debate approach'.

Barricades

From Debates to Dogmatism?

As previously indicated, Westwood and Clegg contend that a point-counterpoint debate approach promotes "productive engagement between positions in OS" (2003: 17). But does it? This is a decidedly optimistic view of debate. It is entirely possible that the meeting of fundamentally opposing positions may also have destructive consequences and produce decidedly negative outcomes. The editors appear to be acutely aware of the combative connotations of debating. In discussing the etymology of the word 'debate', they acknowledge that it comes from old French and literally means 'to strike down'. Yet, there remains an unwavering commitment to 'positive' and 'productive' power of debate.

Several contributors to the edited collection voiced their reservations about the debate format employed. Gherardi, Marshall and Mills' (2003) contribution to the book focuses on gender issues in organization studies. In doing so, they are uncomfortable with, and critical of, what they see as the masculine undertones of the point-counterpoint structure of the book. A means of undermining the unmistakably adversarial framing of the debates within the book is offered by Albert Mills. During an extract of transcribed dialogue with his co-authors, he concludes:

My personal answer is simply to bring the issue to the fore and share with each other and the reader that we see this more as a journey of discovery, a collaborative effort where we share our differences. (Gherardi *et al.*, 2003: 326)

Equally, reverberations of dissent are evident in chapter 5b where Peter Case offers a lucid and cogent response to a direct question from one of the editors asking why he is uneasy with the debate structure. He responds:

It has to do with the way in which the cultural expectations of debate and the rhetorical strategies associated with it are rigged in such a way that there's rarely a genuine meeting of hearts and minds for the interlocutors concerned. The outcome of debate is much more likely to be the entrenchment of antagonistic and mutually incompatible views than a reassessment and reappraisal of one's ideas brought about by the other's argument. In other words, mutual incomprehension is a more likely outcome of the conventional academic debating process than shared understanding. (Case, 2003: 171)

It would seem that far from leading to 'productive engagement' debate tends to actually stimulate a retreat into isolationism (i.e. stand-offs) as debaters become more resolute in the defense of their respective positions. At a meta-level, what is at stake here is the utility of debate as a vehicle for making meaningful progress in understanding

organization studies as a complex, diverse and plurivocal field. In effect, the conceptual metaphor of ‘argument as war’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which is synonymous with notion of point-counterpoint debates, is inclined to lead to the erection of barricades rather than the building of bridges.¹ It is somewhat ironic that Westwood and Clegg actually champion an antithetical position by framing their deployment of debate as a means of barricade avoidance:

We believe that one positive impact the book is likely to make is in its use as a practical resource for exploration and debate of various positions within the actual disposition of the field – rather than being reinforcements for those already arming the barricades of various theoretical dogmas. (2003: 35)

The fact that the book presents each central topic in terms of a debate between *two contrasting positions* means that it is unlikely to be conducive to the ‘exploration and debate of *various positions*’ in the manner claimed by the editors. Rather, it is far more likely to encourage readers to ‘take sides’ (i.e. aligning themselves to ‘those already arming the barricades’).

Beyond Binary Debates

Debating Organization is structured around thirteen chapters; this includes opening and closing chapters, and a chapter on gender that is not subjected to debate.² The remaining ten chapters are sub-divided into two sub-chapters (i.e. contrasting contributions) and an accompanying commentary by the editors. In effect, it is the pairing off of these twenty contributions into ten chapters that constitutes the focal debates. In this regard, each of the debates can be seen as two-way (i.e. binary). The overt intention for Westwood and Clegg in setting up a series of two-way debates was to stimulate interaction between opposing positions. As they explain:

We wanted to set before the reader as full an array as possible of the areas of critical contestation around core issues. We sought an expressly polyvocal, multipositional text constructed around dyads of point and counterpoint, thesis to antithesis, paradigm against paradigm. (Westwood and Clegg, 2003: 17-18)

The head-to-head, almost gladiatorial, subtext to the positioning of debate in the book is inescapable. This is discernible in the use of terms like ‘critical *contestation*’ and ‘paradigm *against* paradigm’. It is even more pronounced elsewhere in other utterances, contained in the introductory chapter, such as: “clashing tectonics, robust monoliths, volcanic irruptions and ghostly implosions were our desire” (2003: 17).

Ultimately, at the heart of the debate structure is the issue of power. The adversarial positioning of protagonists is not simply about academic content. Rather, it is a power

1 This is not to say that debate is *de facto* always a bad thing. There are occasions when combative-style engagement and the strident defense of a position can be productive. That said, the central tenet here is that positive outcomes from debate are generally less commonplace than negative ones.

2 The chapter on gender is presented as a collaborative conversation between three scholars. This format is used to deliberately escape what the contributors perceive to be the masculinist point-counterpoint structure employed elsewhere in the volume.

struggle between identities. It is because the primary point of contestation is about ‘who I am’ rather than just ‘what I say’ the combative stakes of debate are raised.

Beyond the adversarial tone of two-way debating, there is another more troublesome dimension to the approach inasmuch as it, albeit unintentionally, reinforces ‘dichotomous thinking’ (Beech and Cairns, 2001), promotes the formation of ‘false binary oppositions’ (Tsoukas, 2000), and encourages an ‘either/or logic’ (Gergen, 1999). This emerges through a form of ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1945) wherein the two views of the world represent the world and, therefore, the repertoire of possible readings is reduced down to a choice between two competing alternatives (i.e. which one wins out as the more plausible or legitimate account). In effect, this process shuts off, or at the very least restricts, the scope for acknowledging and exploring the existence of other perspectives beyond the constructed dualism.

For instance, the point-counterpoint debate on epistemology contained in the book has contributions from Lex Donaldson (2003) on positivism and Barbara Czarniawska (2003) on social constructionism. Are we to assume that these perspectives constitute the only, the main, or the most important epistemological perspectives? Critical realism and poststructuralism are, for example, entirely absent from the debate.

By foregrounding a two-pronged representation of the field rather than multiple takes on it, the debate approach has severely limited potential for generating polyphonic insights. Moreover, it would seem that Westwood and Clegg’s espoused aim to produce ‘an expressly polyvocal, multipositional text’ is, ultimately, hampered by the very framework (i.e. a debate format) that they claim is best suited to delivering it.

Towards Polyphonic Dialogue

Having raised some significant reservations about the value of point-counterpoint debates as a means of enhancing the study of organizations and organizing, it may be helpful to briefly sketch out an alternative direction. One that is less adversarial and more inclusive. Given the negative connotations of debate, the incorporation of more dialogically-oriented modes of textual exchange in organization studies might prove beneficial. Unlike debate, which is typically more positional, antagonistic and intransigent in nature, dialogue is predicated on a certain level of flexibility, receptiveness and openness during the interactive process. Moreover, debate is often competitively structured to produce winners and losers while dialogue is collaboratively structured in ways that facilitate mutual gains and mutual understandings (Oswick *et al.*, 2000b). The crux of the difference between debate and dialogue rests upon what Stan Deetz describes as the ‘information’ and the ‘dialogue’ perspectives on communication:

Most organizational members and researchers attend psychologically and sociologically to human interaction as an information process. Meaning is already possessed, and the reason I talk is to get it to others, hoping to change their choices. Dialogic communication suggests that meaning is always incomplete and partial, and the reason I talk with others is to better understand what I and they mean, hoping to find new and more satisfying ways of being together. (1995: 97-98)

As Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996) point out, dialogue can be conceived of as a transformative endeavour. This is achieved via a process referred to as ‘generative dialogue’ which attempts to “enable participants to escape the realities they enter and

enable them, working collaboratively, to formulate models of understanding or action that incorporate multiple inputs” (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996: 368).

The combative predisposition of academic debate simultaneously produces a concomitant defensiveness and attack-mindedness. This, in turn, places a pressure on the participants in a debate to focus the vulnerable points in the other person’s arguments. Contrastingly, an approach called ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Cooperrider and Srivasta, 1987; Hammond, 1996; Watkins and Mohr, 2001) provides a very different entry point to engagement; one that involves looking for the good in a given situation. As such, it focuses attention on the positives and the strengths of an interlocutor’s position, rather than on attacking weak areas, and through appreciation it seeks to build upon, extend and develop the arguments. Appreciative inquiry has proved to be popular in a number of areas (e.g. social work, community relations, and public policy administration) and, although it would require a significant shift in thinking, there is a case for enlisting the appreciative approach in organization studies. It would certainly be interesting to see an edited collection in the field where contributors from different perspectives are encouraged to be appreciative and ‘build bridges’ by identifying and engaging with the strengths of the other contributions.

Finally, dialogue, as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), is unquestionably a polyphonic phenomenon. For ‘real dialogue’ (Oswick *et al.*, 2000b)³ to occur it is a necessary precondition that there are more than two parties involved. This circumvents the prospect of a two-way debate. It also maximizes the probability of transformative insights and new meanings being generated (Bohm, 1996). This is rendered achievable because:

Each participant in dialogue always brings pre-existing expectations and ‘frames of meaning’ to bear on the comprehension of concrete discourse. Therefore, the crux of an ‘active and engaged understanding’ is the act of incorporating the word of the other into one’s own conceptual system, thereby imbuing the word with an entirely new range of inflections and evaluative nuances. It is this feature of linguistic interaction that makes genuine dialogue possible, and it facilitates the introduction of new meanings into language. (Gardiner, 1992: 38-39)

Accommodating multi-voiced dialogue within handbook-style, organization studies texts is somewhat impractical. If we reconsider Westwood and Clegg’s volume, covering ten topics via two-way debates, resulting in twenty contributions, is clearly manageable, but to absorb four-part dialogues, for instance, on each topic would generate problems concerning space and acceptable word limits. This problem is amplified with the case of more extensive handbooks (e.g. Clegg, Hardy and Nord, 1996).

3 ‘Real dialogue’ is seen as occurring when there is an openness and receptiveness to, and an unconditional positive engagement with, the other’s position.

Sandcastles

The metaphor of a sandpit has been used by Perrow (1974) to depict the study of organizations and organizing. As explained in Oswick and Grant:

He [Charles Perrow] describes organization theorists as being like children playing in a sandpit; each child oblivious to, and uninterested in, what the others are doing concerned with building their own sandcastles and pausing only occasionally to destroy an alternative sandcastle that threatens to become more impressive. (1996: 214)

The evocative imagery of sandcastle building seems to resonate as a characterization of organization studies in general and some of the arguments forwarded in this review in particular. The image of children being concerned with building their own sandcastles and being oblivious to what others are doing nicely parallels Westwood and Clegg's concerns about isolationism in organization studies. That said, the form of adversarial debate that they champion to counter isolationism in organization studies appears to most closely resemble the child-like behaviour of 'destroying an alternative sandcastle that threatens to become more impressive'. It is possible to further extend Perrow's sandpit metaphor. We could perhaps envisage a situation where the children learn to play together and deal with their differences constructively. In this scenario the children would collaborate and cooperate in the construction of their respective sandcastles and, on occasions, they might come together to collectively build sandcastles.

It is important to stress that the notion of dialogue espoused here is aspirational. It should not be thought of as a pathway to an utopian society. Dialogue can never be perfectly symmetrical and inclusive. Moreover, we cannot escape the *Realpolitik* of power and domination in communicative spaces. This does not, however, mean that we should not promote collaboration and attempt to engage in 'real dialogue'. The active, albeit ongoing, pursuit of collaborative ways of being as an alternative to the more prevalent combative alternatives in academe remains worthy of endeavour even if utopian outcomes cannot be fully realized.

So, where does this leave us? The breath of coverage demanded for handbooks requires compromises in terms of the depth of coverage required in order to produce meaningful multivocal, dialogic insights. Arguably, the answer is that we need fewer handbooks in organization studies and more tightly-framed, theme-specific collections that contain contributions from a range of perspectives, but that also engage in a constructive process of dialogue with each other. In short, we need to rethink the way we produce organization studies texts to ensure that in the future we collaboratively build impressive and innovative sandcastles.

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