



Renewing and Revitalising the Critical Tradition in Organization Theory

Mike Reed

review of: S. Linstead (ed.) (2004) *Organization Theory and Postmodern Thought*. London: Sage. (HB: pp.208, £70, ISBN 0761953108; PB: pp.208, £21.99, ISBN 0761953116)

This book opens with a promise – to open-up ‘paths to a passionate postmodernism’ and, simultaneously, to convey a sense of the intellectual excitement and emotional disruption that it can, indeed should, generate. The discursive form and means chosen to achieve this ‘opening-up’ is a series of sympathetic, but critical, readings or engagements with a selected author or group of authors that have played pivotal roles in facilitating the ‘postmodernist/poststructuralist turn’ in contemporary social and organizational theory. This includes all the ‘usual suspects’ (Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida etc.), but also other contributors that have not figured so prominently in the ‘postmodernist pantheon’ (Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, Vattimo, etc.). The editor’s introduction makes it quite clear that this ‘passionate postmodernism’ is intended to encourage potential readers to engage with the original texts rather than to absorb the ‘airport-lounge postmodernism’ that passes for scholarship in fields such as organizational behaviour/theory, human resource management and strategic management. This is serious stuff!

His introduction also insists that postmodernism subsumes poststructuralism to the extent that both are grounded in a social ontology that regards reality “as an ambivalent, ambiguous, paradoxical and problematic for purposeful human existence and we therefore develop ways and means of managing meaning and responding to the perplexities of nature and, perhaps, god” (p.4). Thus, postmodernism encompasses poststructuralism because they simultaneously reveal “the flux inherent in the raw material from which modern knowledge is constructed, and whose movement and play still adhere within the systems of modernity” (p.5). Refracted through this discursive prism, postmodernism becomes ‘paratheory’ – rather than historical period, social form, epistemological framework or cultural movement. As ‘paratheory’, postmodernism questions and challenges the assumptions, rules and status of all theory – including

critical theory. Indeed, it questions everything, or just about everything, that 'we', as social scientists or whatever, hold dear or at least try to keep quiet about in order to get some sleep at night! As 'paratheoretical approach', postmodernism "looks for the fissures in this cosy state of affairs, the failures, the immanences, the bursts of energy, the collapses, the silences and the refusal of the unsaid and the non-known to become the said or the known...The postmodern understood in this way is a powerful but elusive, a formless form of desire, an energy rather than a structure" (p.5).

Once the underlying purpose and general philosophy of the book have been set out by the editor in this uncompromising and challenging way, eight chapters, dealing with the major contributors to postmodernist thinking and analysis, follow. Although each of the chapters is framed and shaped by the distinctive intellectual inclinations and sensibilities of their creators, collectively the book endeavours to convey a deeper understanding of 'their author(s)' work(s) and their wider significance for the study of organization as "a territory continuously in construction by the *becoming* of the heterogeneity of components in action" (p.12). Dave Knights sets the tone and momentum for the rest of the volume when he insists that Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* "has been over-represented in organization studies. This, I feel, is largely the product of a selective appropriation, of Foucault for organization theory. It is partly why I am seeking to reverse the whole exercise so as to write organization theory into Foucault" (p.19). In particular, this encourages Knights to focus on resistance in postmodern organizations in relation to 'identity struggles' in a wider socio-historical context in which social identity is, *necessarily rather than contingently*, multiple, flexible, fragmented and transformational. In turn, Knights' writing of organization theory into Foucault engages with a number of critical problems that confront them both. More specifically, humanism, epistemology and gender emerge as three pivotal intellectual and practical terrains on which Knights wishes to read and write organization theory into Foucault. These are seen to be strategic issues for Knights because they force us to reconsider the universalism, essentialism and dualism that has underpinned and unwritten 'mainstream organization theory' for a century or more.

The chapters that succeed Knights' 're-reading and rewriting of organization theory into Foucault' largely sustain the intellectual momentum and engagement that he achieves. This is particularly the case in relation to Campbell Jones's scholarly and sympathetic exposition and evaluation of Derrida. To this reviewer's mind, his chapter provides an exemplar of the kind of interpretative writing that needs to be done if paths to a 'passionate but coherent postmodernism' are to be opened-up for the curious and sympathetically-inclined reader. By focusing on 'deconstruction' more as an 'affirmative critique' rather than a necessarily 'oppositional, negative and critical methodology', Campbell Jones opens up distinctive and exciting possibilities for a 'certain spirit of friendship' that can revive and re-invigorate the tradition of critical scholarship that has informed social and organizational theory for much of their histories but which seems to be in need of intellectual renewal at the present time. As he suggests, this might include the emerging Foucauldian and critical realist interpretations of organization and organization theory. But, again from this reviewer's viewpoint, this demands much greater attention to the ontological presuppositions that inform the critical tradition or dialogue in organization studies and their implications for theory development and practical organizational analysis.

On the whole, this book succeeds in its major objective of opening up new paths into postmodernist writing and thinking that will stimulate new conversations around the major philosophical, theoretical and political problems that confront us in these 'post-postmodern times'. However, passion needs to be focused, channelled and, sometimes, restrained. It also needs to become engaged with a much more 'realistic', in all its potential meanings and senses, appreciation of the complex interplay between structure and agency as it shapes and reshapes the conditions under which we live our lives.

The 'opening-out' of the critical tradition in contemporary organization theory will need to engage with social ontology and its explanatory implications in a much more sustained, and often uncomfortable, manner than has often been the case in most postmodernist writing in organization studies. Within the latter, an underlying commitment to a 'process-driven' ontology necessarily legitimates a social constructionist methodology that collapses structure into agency or reduces the former to temporary stabilisations lacking sustainability and durability. If postmodernism is to be regarded as nothing more and nothing less than "a formless form of desire, an energy rather than a structure" (p.9), then it is denying itself the intellectual tools and emotional resources needed to understand, much less explain, the dynamics of change and continuity in a (post)modern world. Not only this, but in denying itself any kind of 'structural or institutional vision' postmodernism radically disables itself in relation to a more developed understanding of the 'history of the present'. There is much in this book that can help us to understand complex socio-historical processes and the organizational changes that it generates. But its contribution will have to be *opened-out* to other voices within the critical tradition of research and scholarship in organization studies, if the latter is to renew and revitalise itself through that very same conversation.

the author

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