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Is Organizational Discourse's Historiography a Captivated field?

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Burrell and Morgan (1979) have characterized organizational thinking as ahistorical, functional, consensus driven and status quo oriented (for similar characterizations see Shenhav, 1995, 1999; Landau, 2002; Mills and Hatfield, 1998; Cooke, 1999; Mills, Kelly and Cooke, 2002; Cooke, Mills and Kelly, forthcoming). Following this observation, several scholars argued that these discursive characteristics have to be questioned, and that the socio-political and cultural context of the discourse's production should be studied (Mills and Hatfield, 1998; Cooke, 1999; Mills, Kelly and Cooke, 2002; Cooke, Mills and Kelly, forthcoming; Shenhav, 1995, 1999; Landau, 2002). This can be done in two ways: (1) one may establish temporal relationships between changes in the discourse and concurrent socio-political and cultural events; and (2) one may re-interpret the discourse's texts demonstrating the relevance of their contents to those concurrent events. The present study

deconstructs the phases model (Scott, 1987/1992; Barley and Kunda, 1992) which forms the backbone of managerial discourse's mainstream historiography, thus contributing to both efforts.

The phases model represents managerial discourse's development as a sequence of four consecutive and well differentiated approaches (see for instance Scott, 1987/1992): scientific management (starting with Taylor at the beginning of the 20th century), human relations (starting with the Hawthorne studies at the end of the twenties), systems rationalism (starting at the second half of the fifties) and quality & culture (starting at the beginning of the eighties). Most of managerial discourse's historiographic accounts embrace this outline as their main organizing structure (for a screening, see Barley and Kunda, 1992). Historiographic categorizations and periodizations have a determining effect on the way historical objects are defined and situated. This applies also to the efforts to situate managerial discourse within the socio-political or cultural context of its production. The present study challenges the structure of the canonic phases model and the categorizations and periodization comprising it, thus opening new venues for contextualization studies. More than that, it demonstrates breaches of the phases model by political forms of managerial discourse and thus contributes to the deconstruction of the latter's seemingly apolitical, universal and neutral representation.

The study's arguments are based on a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of two of the period's key management periodicals, the Harvard Business Review and Advanced Management, and on additional

analysis of methodological procedures of key bibliometric studies of managerial discourse's development.

The phases model can be characterized as follows: (1) it presents a continuous, linear and progressive historic narrative; (2) it describes the discourse's trajectory as a sequence of discursive forms that are coherent, well-differentiated and mutually exclusive; (3) it presents these discursive forms as determined by apolitical, neutral and universal laws; and (4) it confines the discourse's trajectory within the boundaries of a systems paradigm based on mechanical or biological systems metaphors. The phases model with the various approaches comprising it, form a kind of organizational 'physics' that characterize organizations as holistic entities governed by neutral and universal laws, and position these seemingly holistic organizational systems as the sole representation of the work-world. This is why I argue that differences and alternations between these approaches should be viewed as inner-paradigmatic, that is, confined within the boundaries of a systems paradigm.

The present study deconstructs the phases model, questions its basic structure, test the methodological procedures that reproduce it, indicates its power effects and suggests an alternative account. While the mainstream account makes much of the differences and alternations between inner-paradigmatic approaches, the present study questions this focus, unraveling alternative alternations between political and apolitical forms of managerial discourse.

The study's findings indicate:

(1) a significant correlation between the resurgence of human relations approach and systems rationalism. This finding presents a substantial challenge to the canonic model since it casts doubt on its very basic assumption, that is, that different approaches can never emerge simultaneously (Abrahamson, 1997).

(2) during the forties, the discourse's systems formation was dismantled in several ways, the most significant of which were: first, the appearance of a political labor discourse within the framework of the managerial discourse; and second, the appearance of another kind of political discourse that appropriated the political culture of the Cold War. These occurrences contradict the apolitical representation of the phases model.

(3) a high and significant negative correlation between the labor discourse and the systems discourse during the years 1938-1967. Combined with Shenhav's findings (Shenhav, 1995), this finding suggests an alternative account of managerial discourse's trajectory: the discourse developed not in inner-paradigmatic alternations but in outer-paradigmatic ones between a political labor discourse and an apolitical systems discourse. Most bibliometric studies denied an overall relationship between managerial discourse's development and industrial struggles (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Guillen, 1994; Abrahamson, 1997). The alternative outer-paradigmatic account suggested here opens the way for a quantitative retesting of this relationship.

(4) The way in which the political culture of the Cold War was appropriated, processed and translated by the managerial discourse might suggest a connection to concurrent Cold War socio-political processes, like, for instance, the enlargement and bolstering of the managerial base within the State and

the positioning of management as the spearhead of the global fight against Communism. These findings corroborate with recent studies who suggest to understand managerial discourse's development within the context of the Cold War era (Mills and Hatfield, 1998; Cooke, 1999; Mills, Kelly and Cooke, 2002; Cooke, Mills and Kelly, forthcoming; Landau, 2002).

(5) until the fifties, the discourse's categorizations were not as coherent and well-differentiated as they are presented by the mainstream account. Signifiers, like scientific management, personnel, industrial relations and human relations were found attached to an unsystematic variety of concepts. This finding suggests that the neat distinctions offered by the phases model are backward projections of later historiographic artifacts.

Based on these findings one may suggest a renewed interpretation not only of managerial discourse's development but also of the historiographic field that shapes the mainstream account:

(1) the study analyses methodological procedures and theoretical assumptions of main bibliometric studies of managerial discourse's trajectory. This analysis demonstrates that this field of knowledge which is supposed to study managerial discourse is actually captivated by its object. Suffused by the systems concepts, metaphors, categorizations and indexes on which it is supposed to reflect critically, it is unable to transcend its object of study. One might say that the historiography of managerial discourse is in itself systematized. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 236, elaborated on this phenomenon. They warned against a sociology that unknowingly uses conceptual tools that were produced by its own object of study. Sociology, they argued, might be suffused by its object of study to such a degree that it

could not really know it. For a similar argument concerning the sociology of management and organization, see Shenhav, 1995, 1999; Landau, 2002).

(2) the present study unravels the appearance of a labor discourse within the framework of the managerial discourse. This important occurrence has been erased by the discourse's mainstream historiography, as well as the concurrent upheavals in the industrial arena. It is the historiography's focus on inner-paradigmatic alternations that diverted attention away from these discursive and socio-political events. One might therefore suggest that the phases model acts as a de-politicisation mechanism, contributing to the discourse's apolitical stance, and thus to managerial hegemony.

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