

Get Real! Historicizing Reality in Organization Studies

Roy Stager Jacques, MBA, PhD

Affiliation: t.b.a.

2732 N. Francisco St.

Chicago, IL 60647

USA

roystagerjacques@yahoo.com

[note: contact info except email may change]

Introduction

It is not controversial to state that the status of Reality in organizational studies is widely seen today to be contestable. After a three-century long Cartesian snipe hunt for the thing-in-itself, Western philosophy has, for a century and more, increasingly accepted that it may be necessary to create knowledge in a world which does not grant access to capital-T Truth, objective, uninterpreted knowledge of the proven fact. Hermeneutics, semiotics, Nietzsche, existentialism, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism; even relatively mainstream philosophy of science (I'm thinking Popper, Kuhn), reflect the ascendancy of recognition that the horizon of objectivity will always recede before us. In the here and now, *I think, therefore I think I am*.

This condition has, of course been prominently reflected in organization studies, perhaps most notably with the appearance in 1979 of Burrell & Morgan's *Sociological Paradigms*, and by the plethora of social science positions and schools represented since then. What is at stake, to summarize brutally, is that unless one can prove that one has an objective fact, whose standing as Truth is not dependent on the knower, knowledge can only become knowledge through time and in a context imbued with values. In the last thirty years, much has been written about the embedded values in organization studies knowledge and how one can know at all (citations would be superfluous, as this applies to virtually all published work representing an interpretive, feminist, poststructuralist, postmodernist or postcolonial perspective).

However, most analysis to date has looked at the values-dependency Reality construction in knowledge. Little has been done to tell the story over time of this construction. Burrell & Morgan (1979), to which we owe an ongoing debt, whatever it's limitations, describes the histories of the different schools of thought which have participated in creating organizational realities, but this is not a history or the concept of organizational reality *per se*. In fact, when *Sociological Paradigms* went to press, such a project would not yet have become interesting. What I have in mind is to tell the story of the convoluted path(s) taken by assumptions about reality in organizations, a story analogous to Shipman's (2002) story of the "reality" of race difference. Ironically, although Foucault has been a popular inspiration in organization studies, most "Foucauldian" writers have not undertaken new historical analyses. Rather, they have reasoned by analogy from structures used by Foucault to present-day organizational artefacts. Whatever the merits of such contributions (cf. Jones, 2002), they do not contribute to the story of organizational realities.

The Story

Why is the time ripe for such a story? When I began graduate study twenty years or so ago, I was optimistic that a time was at hand when issues of paradigms in organizational scholarship would not be reduced to red-herring questions about the "validity" of "qualitative research." I honestly believed that it was possible to soon achieve *détente* with those who test hypotheses and to develop dialogue about the relative epistemological strengths and weaknesses of our preferred methods, that we might tear down the Berlin wall of unexamined Positivist assumptions unnecessarily separating us (Hey, on their side, they were predicting the immanence of a paradigmatic science; we're even!).

In a generation, we have seen constructive change in the proliferation of methods, values and assumptions which may find a seat at the table of organizational scholarship, but we also see the undesirable perpetuation of the myth that mainstream failure to examine assumptions about reality and truth can be reduced to mere questions of method (e.g., Gephart, 2004). We see what Burrell & Morgan (1979) termed "abstracted empiricism" metastasizing as the most conservative version of the American business school is exported, along with our other toxic waste, worldwide. Examples include the present New Zealand PBRF system for evaluating faculty and the "entrepreneurial" orientation of institutions such as Bond University in Australia, which is achieved largely through the mass importation of conservative and unreflective American academics. Sandjaja (1996) warned several years ago of this pernicious imperialism in his home country of Indonesia.

I do not mean to suggest that the output of American business schools is inherently incorrect or evil. I continue, though, to argue that it is incautious to accept such a powerful force in the world without critically evaluating its origins and potential effects. The Narragansett tribe of North American First Peoples once welcomed the Massachusetts Bay Puritans. They would perhaps now concur in the value of critically attempting to suss out the broader trajectory of history's path before acting.

In outline, the history I seek to place upon the table for analysis consists of two inoperably connected objects. One is the history of reality in work organizations themselves. The other is the history of reality in organizational research. Organizations borrow concepts freely from theorists (Quality, Excellence, culture), while theorists constantly expand the canon to include the newest practitioner interest (race/gender, internationalization, ethics, entrepreneurship). These two objects of analysis are not separable, but neither are they one.

Presumably, both objects have a history that could be traced back to the Neolithic. Those with a traditional bent will need to find it emerging in the Athens of Pericles, which putatively produced all that is worthy in Western Civilization. Pragmatically, I think the relevant history is contained in events since World War II -- with a brief prequel.

I have elsewhere stated my reasons for considering "management" to be a mid-to-late industrial object for analysis (Jacques, 1996). Within that argument, the history of management knowledge clearly does not include Moses' "invention" of the management hierarchy or the "simultaneous loose/tight" structure of the Hanseatic league. Imagine an hourglass. The waist of the hourglass is management knowledge in the American business school, c. 1955. Prior to that date, management knowledge, from Sun Tsu to Machiavelli, even to Fayol, and Taylor was what we might term picaresque. It did not seek to outline a comprehensive theory for operating the economy. It sought to provide localised insight relative to specific problems. Chester Barnard (1938), represents a "paradigm shift" in this regard, by attempting to outline a general theory of management. This goes beyond even Weber, whose project was more descriptive than prescriptive. It's hard to imagine that Mad Max could have written a pamphlet with instructions for how to build an iron cage. What is presently relevant is the bottom of the hourglass, extending roughly from Barnard to the present day.

But, as with television, pre-war vital signs only came truly to life after the great *auto-da-fe* of 1939-1945 and its consequences. In the US, the 1950s were the definitive decade for the emergence of the business school and during that decade we can observe the gradual transmogrification of the discipline from a diverse agglomeration of picaresque inquirers (cf., *Administrative Science Quarterly* in its first couple years), to a more rigidly bounded community of those who test hypotheses on the assumption that tested hypotheses will spontaneously accumulate into more significant truths (this is nothing but reductionism seen through the other end of the telescope). By the late 1970s, this rigid reality was ascendant. Then came the "culture people;" Smircich, Van Maanen, Frost, Lewis, Martin and others; who spoke "truths" to power. That is, they argued the case for knowledge as a socially dependent, multifaceted and value-laden artefact (cf., Morgan, 1983).

The Punch Line

What has been the fate of organizational knowledge in the generation since "the culture people" emerged? My perspective is that we're still circling the airport. Old misperceptions, meaningless dualistic oppositions, dismissals of paradigmatic problems as differences of method, and more or less all the problems we had in 1985 are with us today in forms about as, or more, virulent than then. In the US, at least, a buyers market in academic hiring has also, for the last fifteen years, created a climate of terror, within which few feel safe broaching these issues. The result is that we're swimming today in much of the dirty bathwater of a generation ago. If we are to get a sense of where to go, we need a sense of where we've been; thus the need for a history of organizational reality.

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