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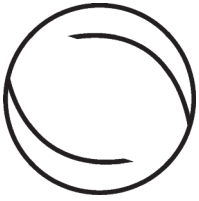
The following review by Stewart Clegg of Michael Thompson's *Organising and Disorganising* was published in the journal 'Organization Studies', Vol. 30, No. 8 (August 2009).

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Book Reviews

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Michael Thompson **Organising and disorganising: A dynamic and non-linear theory of institutional emergence and its implications**

Administer: Triarchy Press 2008, 157pp. ISBN: 978-0-557681-4-9

The late Gerard Fairtlough was a remarkable man: Captain of Industry, research scientist, innovator, entrepreneur and author of excellent organization theory (Fairtlough 1993; 2007). Towards the end of his life (he died in late 2007), he founded a publishing house, Triarchy Press, one of whose fruits is this book. Judging by the biography of its author, Gerard was capable of attracting equally remarkable people. Michael Thompson has worked as a professional soldier, anthropology student, Himalayan mountaineer, cultural theorist, systems thinker, energy analyst, and latter policy thinker. He is also an unorthodox and innovative organization theorist.

His lack of orthodoxy is evident in his antipathy to both methodological individualism and methodological collectivism and his predilection for the transaction as the central focus of analysis but a notion of transaction utterly without the baggage that organization theorists usually expect (Williamson 1975). His main message is that there is no such thing as an organization: only ways of organizing and disorganizing and that there are only five ideal type ways of doing such activity: the hierarchical, the individualistic, the egalitarian, the fatalistic and the autonomous. Each of these is a way of disorganizing the other four and since each form of organizing requires its other to organize against, subversion is inevitable. Managing will always occur within the spaces between the five ways of organizing.

The book begins with some case studies: Arsenal Football Club's search for a new stadium; policy and indigenous actors, and the search for causes of environmental degradation in the Himalayan highlands and the Ganges and Bramaphutra deltas. In each case he seeks to demonstrate that more democratic, less hegemonic and more polyphonic solutions produce better policy outcomes than do the elegant formulae, clear separation of facts and values, and reliance on optimization beloved of typical policy analysts. Where deliberative quality is the outcome sought then the more responsiveness, or plural democracy, and the more accessibility of other voices, then the greater that quality will be. The polyphonically richest outcome he labels a clumsy institution – where each voice is heard and responded to be the others – something similar to Habermas' ideal speech situation.

Methodological individualism and collectivism as false dualism are avoided by focussing instead on Durkheimian solidarities – the variously patterned ways in which we bind ourselves to one another and become socially entangled – that have a fractal quality. The generic name for this approach is cultural theory. Two of the

Organization
Studies
30(08): 909–912
ISSN 0170–8406
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solidarities identified are well known to organization theorists – individualism and hierarchy – but the adherents of autonomy, egalitarianism and fatalism are less exposed. The hierarchist – the adherent to and servant of hierarchy – is characterized by being embedded in ranked and bounded groups with a stress on procedural rationality while the individualist is committed to ego-focused networks and substantive rationality focused on calculations in the here-and-now. The egalitarian model is characterized by bounded and unranked groups and espouses critical rationality while those whose lives are mostly marked by exclusion from the resources of individualism, hierarchy and egalitarianism will tend to be fatalists with a rationality that basically accepts that whatever happens, happens. These four rationalities are each oriented to distinct modes of action: collecting followers, customers or clients for individualists; racking up more sources of exclusion for the fatalist; gaining more rights and obligations for the hierarchist, and more equal outcomes if you are an egalitarian. One who wants none of these things – who renounces the other ways of being in the world – becomes an autonomist with an immediatist rationality best served by withdrawal from all organized forms of solidarity. The autonomist tends towards being a hermit in the schema. Thompson then calls on mathematical proof to support this theorem of five ways of doing things (Schmutzter and Bandler 1980; also see Nowacki 2004, however) and outlines its consequences with an account of the myths of nature that are sustained vis a vis the ecology by each position.

In chapter four the mountaineer emerges with tales of the author's experiences with the Chris Bonington led South West Face Everest expedition of 1975. The logic is distinctly anthropological and recalls Goffman's love of the extreme: above 25,000 feet everything is stressed to the limit and phenomena not normally visible become so. Behind the interesting story lies the theory: at its core there is a further development of notions of bounded rationality. Our rationalities are bounded by the information we reject and we do not reject information randomly but in accord with our solidarities. The discourses of rejection are for the fatalist, based on risk absorption focused on a strategy of individualized survival (the world of the author at the mercy of journal reviewers and editors); for the hierarchist, paradigm protection focused on a collectivized manipulative strategy which has to respect the preferences of authorities (the journal editor's world); for the individualist, networking through an individualized manipulative strategy (the inner circle of political science studies of power elites – in journal terms the networks of affiliation around a few favoured schools – such as population ecology; discourse analysis or institutional theory); for the egalitarian, expulsion through a collectivized survival strategy (the sect – in journal terms the special issue). Hermits are those observers whose ethnomethodological protocols call for a radical bracketing concerning the rationalities of each and every position ... where the reviewed and reviewing author seem to fit comfortably.

The author's affinities with existing arrays of organization theory emerge in the fifth chapter: Robert Cooper is the *éminence grise* behind the subtitle – an organization is a contradiction in terms because all there is are ways of organizing and disorganizing. The three main ways of organizing are ego-focused groups (individualist patterns), bounded and ranked groups (hierarchical patterns), and bounded but unranked groups (egalitarian patterns). Hermits organize themselves

in contradistinction to all three patters, and fatalists are on the outside of all patterns: for them, “shit” just happens! No pattern is ever total; there will always be adherents of more than one pattern in any situation of organizing and disorganizing, and indeed, each needs the others in its environment to organize against if it is to be viable (requisite variety condition). It is this dynamic that sustains organizing/disorganizing as autopoietic systems in which disequilibrium moves between the different ways of getting things done in a swarm of complexity producing ordering without predictability, as well as surprise, which are explained through anthropological examples drawn from the interaction of ecologies and communities in the Himalayas and the Alps. Surprise is the crucial link-pin between social understandings and the worlds in which we live. If the worlds we experience do not confirm to the convictions of our solidarities we are going to be surprised!

The eighth chapter of the book is a mapping of social theory possibilities from the various possible relations that might occur amongst the four-fold possibilities (leaving out the hermit option). As Thompson suggests, oddly the more unitarian theories have tended to be – such as rational choice theory – the more impoverished they will be! Finally, the book comes clean on its relation to Mary Douglas’ cultural theory. Essentially, her four-fold grid/group analysis is opened up by inserting the hermit at the intersection of the fourfold elements of the table. Thompson brings power in to cultural theory in an explicit way; implicitly, it was already there. If each mode of organizing can only be made sense of in terms of those others that it struggles against, then struggle – and thus power – is central to the schema as an emergent property of all social relations in self-organizing systems. Moreover, each way of organizing has a specific modality of power associated with it; the hierarchical and individualist seek to exercise *power to* shape the other ways of organizing; the fatalist and egalitarian strive to articulate their *power to* resist other ways of organizing, while the hermit seeks to operate in a power void.

How then are preferences formed in the different ways of doing things? They precede those people who end up working with any of the ways of organizing; they are discursively given as what the reviewer would term modes of rationality within the frame of the different rationalities. For instance, within the individualist solidarity the vocabulary of motive revolves around the competitive axis; forms of preference can only sensibly be performed in these terms. Being altruistic, for instance, would be to move from the individualistic to the egalitarian solidarity.

Much of the language of the book – some of which I have translated into terms that are more familiar (at least for the reviewer) – will be unusual for organization theorists. The formalism of the book, and the anecdotal quality of its evidence, may be off-putting to some. Nonetheless, this is a book which is significant and should be widely read by organization theorists. It is in many ways a throw-back to an older style of theorizing – Talcott Parsons is mentioned in passing – but in an age when big-picture theorizing seems to be in retreat – in part because of the decline of the book as a resource for scholarship, which, in turn, is partly due to the triumph of science-based models governing research assessment exercises privileging the journal article – this book is a timely reminder of what a broad, reflective and theoretically coherent social science of organizations can offer. It

makes a refreshing change from empiricist, mid-range theoretics, propositional science fiction, and the multiple-regression of variables without rigorously coherent multivariate theoretical forethought that one sometimes finds in the journals; the marriage of cultural and organization theory could provide a very fruitful springboard for future research.

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