Essai: Thirty Years On: From Organizational Structures to the Organization of Thought

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‘Every age manages to find modes of classification which seem fundamental starting points for the researches of the special sciences. Each succeeding age discovers that the primary classification of its predecessors will not work’
A. N. Whitehead: Modes of Thought

‘A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions. Low thoughts mean low behaviour, and after a brief orgy of exploitation, low behaviour means a descending standard of life’
A. N. Whitehead: Adventures of Ideas

Abstract

The Aston Studies have proved a seminal reference point for the development of mainstream organization theory. This essay examines and critiques the metaphysical underpinnings of positivism as well as attempts to show up the inadequacies of other recent alternatives such as epistemological realism for the development of organizational analysis. It maintains that common organizational attributes which positivists and realists claim to discover are in fact mirror images of their own deeply-entrenched thought structures. It therefore proposes that commitment to an alternative process-based becoming ontology opens up the possibilities for rethinking ‘organization’ as first and fundamentally a process of ‘world-making’. The modern world that we find so immediately necessary and familiar is one such outcome of organization and it is the analysis of this logic of organization, rather than the current preoccupations of mainstream organization theory, which will provide truly useful insights to management practitioners and to leaders of society. Understood thus, organizational analysis becomes a form of metaphysical inquiry.

Descriptors: being/becoming ontology, simple location, generalized organization theory, happenings, historical foresight

Introduction

In the early 1960s the Industrial Administration Research Unit at Aston led by Derek Pugh, together with several ‘generations’ of researchers with diverse social scientific backgrounds, developed a distinctive approach to the study of organizations. The Aston Group, as it then became known, conducted empirical research on a highly diverse sample of forty-six organizations in both the private and public sectors
in order to establish the relationships between: (1) organizational structure and functioning; (2) group composition and interaction; (3) individual personality and behaviour; (Source: Pugh, Hickson and Hinings 1986: 38)

In the period ranging from 1961 through to 1970, the names closely associated with what was then viewed (and indeed is still viewed by many) as a seminal Aston initiative included John Child, David Hickson, Bob Hinings, Roy Payne, Diana Pheysey and Charles McMillan. As Pugh, Hickson and Hinings (1986) write:

'The Aston Programme contributed to organization theory by blending some of the research methods and assumptions of psychology with conceptions of organizations and their workings from sociology and economics' (p. 37)

Specifically, Pugh et al. are most renowned for what has now come to be understood as the 'comparative study of organizations'. In a chapter entitled 'The Comparative Study of Organizations' in a book edited by Dennis Pym (1968), Pugh and Hickson maintained that since all organizations have to develop means for channelling activities towards the achievement of pre-specified aims, a pattern of regularities emerge over time. Such patterns of regularities constitute what they term the 'organization's structure'. Whilst, all organizations may be different and it may be impossible to equate them to one another, it is nonetheless possible to 'state these differences and to classify them so that something useful can be said about various kinds of organization and the ways in which they function' (Pugh and Hickson 1968: 374). For Pugh and Hickson, it is this systematic study and classification of similarities and differences in organizations, especially that of organizational structure, and the variables influencing structure such as size, technology, ownership, location and so on, which constitutes the principle activity of organizational analysis. Because these patterns of regularities exist independently of the researcher's own perception, they can, through the use of rigorous methodologies, be carefully documented and systematically compared.

For Pugh and his colleagues at the Aston research unit, therefore, the 'universe is replete with regularities' and ultimately, the appeal to empirical 'data' is fundamental to the enterprise of organizational analysis (Pugh 1983: 47). Pugh, in particular, confesses to being an 'unreconstructed positivist' who does not see 'how one can study organizational behaviour (OB) without making the ontological assumption that people and organizations exist as relatively concrete entities' (Pugh 1983: 46). Moreover, for him, questions on whether and in what way organizations exist, 'is largely irrelevant to OB'. For him, the preoccupation with these 'meta-OB' issues is akin to the situation of a nuclear physicist telling a materials engineer that a steel bar is just a series of pulsating energy waves when the latter just wanted to calculate the 'stresses and strains to see how it holds up the roof' (ibid). The understanding of the nuclear physicist, is, for Pugh, 'irrelevant to the task at
hand' (ibid). Likewise, theorists who question the ontological status of organization, do not help advance the functionalist aim of ‘conducting research that increases our understanding of the way organizations are structured and the way individuals and groups behave’ (ibid). This claim of the primacy of functional relevance is what then enables Pugh to justify the Aston approach to organizational analysis.

The Aston Studies, together with other such positivist initiatives by Chandler (1962), Woodward (1965), and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) have had a seminal impact on the direction in which organization theory has developed. The most significant product of these earlier initiatives in organizational analysis has been the development and articulation of a ‘contingency’ approach to organizational design. Despite some conceptual adjustments proposed by writers such as Child (1972) and Pfeffer (1981) to incorporate issues of power and strategic choice, this contingency approach, which necessarily relies on a systems view of ‘organizations’, remains the dominant perspective in organizational analysis. Thus, popular textbooks such as those by Robbins (1987), Scott (1987), Wilson and Rosenfeld (1990), and Donaldson (1985, 1996) to varying degrees sanction this systems contingency view of organizations. It is this positivistic programme which has driven research in organizational analysis since its conceptual expansion in the mid-1960s.

Thirty years on from the initial seminal proclamations of the Aston Research Programme, it is much easier to locate the positivist mindset within the wider context of shifting ontological and epistemological commitments within both the natural and social sciences. This paper seeks to make more transparent the tradition of thought within which the Aston approach to organization theory, amongst others, emerged and to contrast it with an alternative and more fruitful view of organizational theorizing which draws its inspiration from a vastly different set of ontological and epistemological priorities and which, it is claimed here, is more epistemologically robust in helping us develop a more insightful understanding of the modern organized world. It is argued here that this alternative approach to organizational analysis can no longer be ignored if the academic world is to get to grips with the fundamental issues underpinning the emergence, endurance and demise of organizational configurations which effect virtually every aspect of modern life. Moreover, it will be shown that this ‘meta’ analysis of the ‘organization of thought’, as an alternative to the narrower positivist preoccupation, is potentially more functionally useful for furthering the aims and aspirations of civilised societies as Whitehead (1929, 1932, 1933, 1938: 148) so ably demonstrated.

Positivistic Knowledge

The term positivism was first invented in the nineteenth century by the French philosopher August Comte who chose the term because of its
felicitous connotations since, in the major languages in Western Europe at that time, the word 'positive' had overtones of utility, certainty and reality, all of which Comte held in high esteem. Comte saw knowledge as developing from a theological to a metaphysical and, finally, to a positivist stage in which non-observable entities and abstract principles were rejected in favour of the primacy of empirical observations. This positivistic science Comte saw as replacing religion and providing the new basis for the objective prediction and control of natural and social processes.

Nowadays, however, when reference is made to the 'positivists', it usually refers to the group of logical positivists who met regularly in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s and developed a research doctrine which drew heavily from the philosophies of Ernst Mach and Bertrand Russell. This 'Vienna Circle', comprising eminent philosophers and scientists such as Mortiz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath, championed a version of extreme empiricism in which scientific knowledge is essentially defined only by the extent to which it can be verified by an appeal to hard facts acquired through careful observation, and are considered to have meaning and value only in so far as they are so derived. Whilst others such as Karl Popper, Kurt Gödel and Ludwig Wittgenstein also took part in some of these discussions, they increasingly felt the need to distance themselves from the epistemological stance adopted by these logical positivists.

It is possible to identify six enduring positivistic 'instincts' characterizing this form of naive epistemological realism. First, there is an emphasis placed on the idea of empirical verification or some variant such as 'falsification' as a key principle in scientific research. This requires that all theoretical propositions be empirically tested to determine whether or not such propositions are at all true. Second, positivists are strongly pro-observational. What this means is that they believe that what we can see, feel, touch or sense directly provides the best foundations for all forms of knowledge. Third, there is much support for the Humean notion of constant conjunction as a legitimate means for explaining cause and effect. Thus, for positivists, if it is observed, for example, that a match lights up because it is struck, one can conclude that striking a match causes it to light up. Cause, in this instance, is understood to be the likelihood of one event following another. No attempt need be made to seek out any underlying causes or generative mechanisms, such as the chemical properties of the match head, for example, as a way of explaining why the match lit up. When one event follows another in a regular predictable manner, a causal relationship is said to exist. Fourth, positivists see the task of science as enabling the prediction of events. Explanations of the past are attempted only in so far as they help determine the predictability of the future. The idea of understanding past occurrences for their own sake is underemphasized. Fifth, positivists reject the existence of theoretical entities, insisting that such concepts are part of the metaphysical baggage which modern
science can well do without. Since primary importance is placed on observable reality, the postulation of non-observable mechanisms make positivists uneasy. Finally, positivists are united in their rejection of metaphysics. By this they mean that empirically untestable propositions, unobservable entities, deep causes such as Freud’s idea of the ‘unconscious’, belong to the realm of idle speculation and hence have no place in scientific inquiry.

These six ‘instincts’ provide the epistemological justification for a positivist view of scientific inquiry. What positivists are unable to justify, however, is the highly metaphysical character of their own assertions. For example, their claim that empirical verification provides the surest form of knowledge is, itself, based upon a metaphysical assumption which is not empirically verifiable. Positivism, as Bhaskar (1989) rightly points out is a theory of the nature, limits and unity of a particular form of knowledge. It is not ‘a theory of its possibility. Knowledge is, for positivism, quite unproblematic — a given fact, it never inquires for a moment into its conditions or conceives that it might not be’ (Bhaskar 1989: 64).

**Ontological Commitments of Positivism**

Positivistic epistemology is, in turn, predicated upon a set of ontological commitments which are traceable in the pre-Socratic Greek atomists such as Democritus and Epicurus, who were inspired by Parmenidean cosmology. Parmenides was a native of Elea in southern Italy (which was then part of Greece) who insisted upon the permanent and unchangeable nature of reality. To the ancient Ionian question ‘Is reality One or Many?’ Parmenides insisted that what is is One because Reason tells us so. There is only one true world which is unitary, already constituted and permanent. Observed changes in the world are not just apparent, but false, since Reason shows us that what is One cannot also be Many.

‘One way remains to be spoken: the way how it is ... (reality) must exist fully or not at all. Nor will the forces of conviction ever allow anything over and above itself to arise out of what is not; wherefore Justice does not loosen her fetters so as to allow it to come into being or pass away, but hold it fast ... Thus coming into being is extinguished and destruction unknown’ (Parmenides, 6.10, in Mansley Robinson 1968: 113)

This thundering injunction precipitated the kind of Greek atomism advocated by Democritus and described succinctly by Harré (1981):

‘Then the atoms would be Parmenidean, but the changing organization of the Parmenidean atoms into temporary structures would lead to the appearance of change. The ordinary things in the world, which are certainly perishable and come into existence, would, on this view, have to be temporary conglomerations of permanent atoms’ (p. 105, emphasis original)
The axioms of this Parmenidean-inspired being ontology can be clearly articulated. First, reality is made up of discrete, self-identical ‘things’ which are conceptually isolatable and which exist, independently of our perceptual apprehension. Second, these things or entities are primary to process. This means that change and transformation are epiphenomena of entities, not primary processes constitutive of them. Being precedes and is primary to becoming according to this form of ontological realism. Third, the state of rest, stability and equilibrium is a natural state. Movement only occurs when things are ‘disturbed’ or ‘pertubated’. Fourth, an external force is required to initiate change, movement or adaptation. This is best exemplified by Newton’s first law which states that ‘Every body continues in its state of rest . . . except in so far as it may be compelled by force to change that state’. This imputation of the requirement of an external force is what precipitates the widely-assumed notion of ‘causation’ and its attendant effects. Finally, the commitment to a being ontology precipitates a subject-predicate mode of thought in which linguistic terms and categories are deemed to be adequate to the description of reality. Literal, precise, and parsimonious language is encouraged because these are deemed to be more able to accurately ‘capture’ and represent reality as it is in itself. Positivism as a form of knowledge production, is, therefore, first and foremost a representationalist epistemology, though not the only one. These ontological commitments continue to inform much of social scientific theorizing including especially mainstream organization theory.

A Critique of Positivistic Organization Theory

Contemporary mainstream organizational theorizing, taking its departure from the Aston Studies, amongst other North American initiatives, is dominated by a mindset which tacitly presupposes this necessary pre-existence of enduring spatio-temporal, and physical forms of order governing the presentation of reality. Thus, the Newtonian description of matter unproblematically assumes an entitative conception of reality in which clear-cut, definite things are deemed to occupy clear-cut, definite places in space and time. This assumption of the straightforward locatability of matter in space-time, and the subsequent construal of movement and relationships as epiphenomena of these fundamentally locatable entities, enabled Newtonian science to develop as it did. The wider consequences of this intellectual development is that a whole style of thinking is thus rendered possible because of this assumption of ‘simple location’. It is a style deeply rooted in what I have called an ontology of being, in which the ‘thingness’ of things, social entities, and their properties and attributes are taken to be more fundamentally real than actions, interactions and relationships.

In his penetrating analysis of this Cartesian/Newtonian world-view,
Whitehead (1926/1985) demonstrated incontrovertibly that Newton’s postulation of his first law of motion perpetuated a fundamental assumption which is central to any form of modern theorizing: ‘I mean, the concept of an *ideally isolated system*’ (p. 58). This conceptualization presupposed a fundamental character of things, without which modern positivistic science as we understand it would have been impossible. This assumption of the property of *simple location* in which ‘things’ are believed to exist as discrete and isolatable systems in space-time is what modern science gave as an answer to the ancient Ionian question: ‘What is the world made of?’. For Whitehead, it is precisely this assumption of the possibility of simple location (and hence the possibility of attaining full presence and self-identity) that has led to a ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ in modern theorizing in which objects of apprehension are assumed to be unproblematically presentable to us in their pristine state of existence. Thus, questions about how social objects such as ‘organizations’ come to be pre-existent and to make themselves available as objects of analysis are, therefore, largely set aside as witnessed by Pugh’s (1983) dismissal of ‘meta-OB’ as ‘irrelevant’ to the task of organizational analysis. These concerns are arbitrarily ruled to be not within the domain of organization studies and hence denied legitimate status as a central problematic in the field of study. Through rhetorical manoeuvres, such as those exemplified by Pugh (1983), the problematical character of the *objects of analyses* (in this case the ontological status of ‘organizations’) are set aside.

This is not to deny that a number of more perceptive organizational theorists such as Weick (1969) and Silverman (1970), for instance, have offered constructive critiques of this tendency towards ‘reifying’ organizations in organizational theorizing. However, as persuasively demonstrated by Sandelands and Drazin (1989) Weick, in particular, ‘retreats’ into the familiar language of positivistic science. Elsewhere, (see Chia 1996) I have attempted to show that even Sandelands and Drazin themselves are not prepared to abandon the entitative conception of ‘the individual’ as the basic unit of organizational analysis. This is because, despite their awareness of the problematical nature of language in organizational theorizing, they fail to appreciate the deeply rooted ontological commitments of positivistic science and the atomistic thinking associated with it.

However, this very act of ‘foregrounding’ organizations as clearly circumscribed, legitimate objects of analysis, whilst at the same time denying the status of the network of organizing from which this theoretical object has been abstracted, is itself an ontological act of organization. Organization, in this wider sense, now refers to these inclusive and exclusive divisional acts of ‘reality-constituting’ or ‘world-making’ (Goodman 1984), which necessarily precede any form of mainstream organizational theorizing. The latter can only occur after such organizing acts create, stabilize and hence help legitimate objects of analyses such as ‘organizations’. Thus, even seemingly unproblematic social
objects such as 'society', 'culture', 'structure' and even 'individuals' have to be constructed and legitimized before they can enter social scientific discourse as legitimate objects of knowledge. The organization of these objects of knowledge is, therefore, inextricably interwoven with any knowledge generated about the object (in this case 'organizations') itself. Knowledge about organizations and the organization of knowledge, therefore, implicate and explicate each other and are thereby irretrievably intertwined. Only by a dogmatic and intellectually convenient process of 'forgetting' its 'other' (i.e., the organization of the object itself) can positivistic organization theory proceed in the way it has done. A more thoughtful and reflexive appreciation of the textual practice of organizational theorizing will clearly show how this convenient 'forgetting' is achieved.

Woolgar (1988), offers a useful explanation of how this forgetting, which he calls the splitting and inversion model of discovery in scientific research, takes place in the research process. Woolgar starts by noting that much of scientific research often begins with the production of documents speculating on notions about how the world around us might be. This then is used to project the existence of a particular object which then forms the legitimate focus of investigative work. At this stage, the speculated object begins to take on a life of its own and is increasingly perceived as being separate and independent of our notions of it. Next, an inversion of relationship occurs in which the impression is given that it is in fact the existence of the object which stimulated our attention towards it. Finally, researchers become so accustomed to talking in these inverted terms that the initial three stages of conceiving and reifying the object are 'forgotten' or strongly denied. A fallacy is thus created in which researchers unquestionably take their objects of analysis to be independently existing 'out there'. It is this fallacy which Whitehead termed the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Once this point is reached, the stage is conveniently set for a modernist/representationalist view of knowledge creation. The five stages in this splitting and inversion model of discovery are shown below:

Stage 1: document exists
Stage 2: document------> object
Stage 3: document object
Stage 4: document<------- object
Stage 5: 'deny or forget about stages 1–3'
(Source: Woolgar 1988:68)

Woolgar claims that although the splitting and inversion model of discovery was developed to explain the scientific research process, it is nonetheless generally applicable as an explanatory device for understanding the practice of all forms of representational thinking including, especially, positivism.
Thus, we can see that the positivistic approach adopted by Pugh and his colleagues in the Aston Studies and the subsequent 'findings' they
arrived at is fraught with epistemological problems. In effect, their 'findings' mirror their own unquestioned predisposition to think in static, structured and discrete terms, and this, in turn, reinforces their own beliefs about the validity of their findings. Such an interlocking spiral of self-reinforcing sequence of events is a commonplace occurrence in modern theorizing. It is a feature that has been carefully analyzed in some depths by the art critic Michael Baxandall.

In his book *Patterns of Intention*, Baxandall (1985), in his perceptive analysis of the historical understanding of pictures, uses Kenneth Clark's account of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* to demonstrate that the authoritative descriptions offered by Clark represented less of the picture he was observing than the thoughts resulting from his seeing the picture. An excellent passage in Clark's account helps to drive this point across:

'... we are at once conscious of a geometric framework; and a few seconds' analysis shows us that it is divided into thirds horizontally, and into quarters vertically. The horizontal division come, of course, on the line of the Dove's wings and the line of the Angel's hands, Christ's loin-cloth and the Baptist's left hand; the vertical divisions are the pink angel's columnary drapery, the central line of the Christ and the back of St. John. These divisions form a central square, which is again divided into thirds and quarters, and a triangle drawn within this square, having its apex at the Dove and its base at the lower horizontal, gives the central motive of the design'. (in Baxandall 1985: 5)

Baxandall points out that the words used by Clark, such as 'geometric framework', 'divided into thirds horizontally', 'divisions form a square', 'a triangle drawn within this square', 'apex at the Dove', are not descriptions of the picture, but rather are descriptions of his thoughts about the picture as he attempted to make an explanation of it. Hence, 'what one offers in a description is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture' (Baxandall 1985: 5). This finding is reminiscent of Whitehead's (1985) point that all attempts at offering descriptions and explanations are necessarily self-referential.

'The mind in apprehending ... experiences sensations which, properly speaking, are qualities of the mind alone. These sensations are projected by the mind so as to clothe appropriate bodies in nature. Thus the bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely the offspring of the mind ... Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.' (Whitehead 1985: 68)

Whitehead, is by no means a follower of German idealism. Whereas Kantian thought revolves around the assumption of necessarily discrete and pre-existing 'things-in-themselves', Whiteheadian process cosmology insists upon the initial undifferentiated, fluxing as well as transforming nature of the real. Reality, for Whitehead, is perpetually in the process of *becoming* and *perishing* and as such it cannot simply be understood to be composed of discrete, static, and isolatable entities
with distinctive properties that can be straightforwardly represented by linguistic terms and systematically classified and compared in an objective manner. It is this fundamental ontological error of ascribing concrete status to socially constructed objects of knowledge that both positivism and its more recent attractive alternative of 'realism', have made in their desire to build up a 'body' of established knowledge about 'organizations' and their functioning. It is, however, possible to reconceptualize organizational analysis in a manner which resonates more closely with our intuitive appreciation of the dynamic nature of social life in general and with managerial experiences in particular. This will be elaborated upon in a later section.

Against Pugh's 'Unreconstructed Positivism'

It should be, by now, clear that Pugh's insistence on remaining an 'unreconstructed positivist' can only be attributable to a refusal to confront the deeply held ontological underpinnings which informs his positivistic science and which remains widespread in mainstream organizational theorizing. In the face of an overwhelming range of developments in our understanding of the nature of the real and of the socially-constructed nature of reality as well as the bases of our knowledge-producing enterprise, particularly within the 'hard' sciences over the past eighty years, it seems patently obvious that the very modes of classification adopted by the Aston Group, were very much an outcome of their own oversight regarding these ontological and epistemological questions. As a consequence of the challenges posed by quantum theory to our understanding of 'particle' physics, this brand of 'strong' thinking (Vattimo 1988; Cooper and Law 1995; Chia 1995) pursued by the Aston Studies fell out of favour long ago in the natural sciences with the introduction of Einsteinian relativity and more pointedly with Heisenberg's principle of 'indeterminacy' and Bohr's quantum postulate. Bohr, for instance, writes:

'... the quantum postulate implies that any observation of . . . phenomena will involve an interaction with the agency of observation not to be neglected. Accordingly, an independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can neither be ascribed to the phenomena nor to the agencies of observation . . . an unambiguous definition of the state of the system is naturally no longer possible, and there can be no question of causality in the ordinary sense of the word.' (Bohr, in Plotnitsky, 1994: 66–67)

The implications of this claim, now fairly widely accepted particularly within the broader social sciences, including anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies and the social studies of science, is the inevitability of questioning the epistemological status of mainstream claims to knowledge. In effect the very 'meta' issues that Pugh (1983) so cursorily dismissed as 'irrelevant' to the study of organization has resurfaced
with a vengeance. This is rather inevitable, because all our knowledge of organization always presupposes a particular way of organizing knowledge. Until the kind of extreme disciplinary fragmentation we see around us became a common feature in the academic world this century, intellectual life consisted of a series of concerted attempts to relate all aspects of theorizing to all aspects of life. It is in this spirit of acute awareness that Bergson (1913b) took it upon himself to remind us that a theory of life and a theory of knowledge are inseparable. A theory of social life that is not accompanied by a criticism of knowledge necessarily relies on pre-formed conceptual frames which it can only regard as ultimate. As a result, it ‘obtains a symbolism (image) which is convenient’, but it cannot obtain a ‘direct vision of its object’ (p. xiii). On the other hand, ‘a theory of knowledge which does not replace the intellect in the general evolution of life will teach us neither how the frame of knowledge has been constructed nor how we can enlarge or go beyond them’ (Bergson 1913b: xiii). It is therefore crucial that these two inquiries, the theory of knowledge and the theory of life should ‘by a circular process, push each other on unceasingly’ (Bergson 1913b: xiv). Knowledge of organizing and the organizing of knowledge implicate and explicate each other and are thereby irretrievably intertwined. This acute awareness is what drives the intellectual agenda of those theorizing on the margins of mainstream organization theory.

A Becoming Ontology

The dynamic and precariously balance nature of social reality frequently escapes our attention because of deeply ingrained habits of thought which surreptitiously work to elevate notions of permanence, stability and endurance over transience, flux and transformation. The human world that we find so immediately necessary and familiar is thereby invariably constituted in predominantly static terms through an organizing logic based on the principles of division, distinction and difference. Thus, oppositional terms such as is/is not, inside/outside, subject/object, mind/matter, part/whole, self/other, structure/process, organization/environment, and so on, are generated through a dichotomous logic which provides the key conceptual categories that we then unconsciously rely upon to express our most intimate experiences of the modern world. In this way, our understanding of the world is inevitably couched in straightforwardly dualistic terms thereby implicitly privileging a clearly structured and orderable view of reality, which, in turn, then encourages the systematic classification and categorization of the latter. In this way, language and linguistic terms come to be viewed as a relatively neutral ‘medium’ for expressing the nature of reality. However, the alternative belief that ‘all things flow’ and is in a continuous process of becoming, transforming and perishing remains one of
the most enduring, albeit vague, generalizations which the unsystematized and barely analyzed intuition of mankind has produced. It appeared as one of the first propositions of pre-Socratic Greek philosophy in the form of the writings of Heraclitus. Since then it has occasionally resurfaced as in the work of Leibniz and more recently in the philosophical explorations of William James (1910) Henri Bergson (1913a, 1913b) and Alfred North Whitehead (1926/85, 1929, 1938). Whitehead, for one, insists that if we are to go back to that ultimate pristine experience unwarped by the sophistication of theory, the ‘flux of things is one ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophical system’ (Whitehead 1929: 240). Likewise, Bergson maintained that ‘It is movement that we must accustom ourselves to look upon as simplest and clearest, immobility being only the extreme limit of the slowing down of movement, a limit reached only, perhaps in thought and never realised in nature’ (Bergson 1913a: 44). The actual world is fundamentally in a process of becoming so that every phenomena of which we are aware — from galaxies to electrons, from human beings to amoe-bae, from human societies and families of crystals to nursery rhymes and creational myths — each exist only as a stabilized moment in an interminable process of becoming. Thus, there are no fixed entities, no ultimate terms, no essences. In short, transition is the ultimate fact.

Such a process-based becoming ontology generates a radically different set of theoretical priorities. First, activity and movement are privileged over substance and entities. Instead of thinking in terms of discrete individualities, the emphasis is on the primacy of process, interaction and relatedness. However, as Rescher (1996) astutely observed, this ‘processual order is ... (often) conceptually closed’ (p. 29), because the dominant language for description, following Aristotle’s insistence on the primacy of substance (i.e., ‘things’), is based on the ‘noun’ rather than the ‘verb’. Notwithstanding this, he goes on to suggest that ‘verb-entities’ describing more transient events such as storms and heat waves, are closer approximations, which insinuate notions of processes, activities, events and occurrences. Second, instead of thinking in terms of outcomes and end-states, primacy is accorded to the process of becoming. Apparently discrete phenomena such as ‘the organization’ and their supposed ‘attributes’ are a result of the momentary perceptual ‘arresting’ of what is essentially a dynamic and transforming complex of ever-changing interactions. Awareness of this primacy of becoming over being leads us to be constantly mindful of that which is rendered ‘invisible’ (i.e., the dynamic network of interactions supporting the appearance of a phenomenon) by the selective act of attention focusing and the recognition that such perceptual bounding is necessarily arbitrary though oftentimes a result of social conventions. Third, for process theorists, what is essential to nature is change not stability. Stability is only attained by the deliberate conceptual intervention of the intellect onto what is essentially a ‘mobile’ reality. Thought ‘arrests’ the mobile
real by 'slowing it down' in the very act of conceptualizing the latter. In this way the real, like the ever-receding horizon can never be captured by our static conceptualizations. Thinking is the quintessential organizing activity which renders static what is essentially a dynamic and undifferentiated sensual experience. Finally, process theorists are committed to the Whiteheadian principle of immanence. By this is meant that each organizational outcome or 'effect' always already incorporates and hence implicates the 'weight' or 'traces' of its genealogical past. Accordingly, the past is immanent in the present and this fact implies that each outcome, each situation or end-state is never straightforwardly what it appears. Instead, it always embodies the events of its past. Thus, each moment of duration absorbs the preceding one, transforming it and with it the whole, constituting at each stage of the process a novel and never-to-be-repeated event. Understood thus, each 'event' of perceptual organization is immanent in the structures of thought and each structuring of thought is recursively implicate in the emergent logic of language.

It is this resurrecting of the primacy of movement and process over static entities and permanence states, which provides the philosophical basis for redefining organizational analysis as the reflexive analysis of the dominant modes of thought in contemporary social life. For these process theorists, therefore, science is fundamentally the 'thought organization of experience' (Whitehead 1932: 157). The most basic characteristic of the field of actual experience, however, is its fragmentary and disordered character. It is for each person 'a continuum, fragmentary, and with elements not clearly differentiated' (ibid.). Thus:

'I insist on the radically untidy, ill-adjusted character of the fields of actual experience from which science starts. To grasp this fundamental truth is the first step in wisdom . . . This fact is concealed by the influence of language, moulded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverance of experience. The result is, that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events which, as known to us by the direct deliverance of our senses, happen at exact instants of time, in a space formed by exact points, without parts and without magnitude: the neat, trim, tidy exact world which is the goal of scientific thought . . . My contention is that this world is a world of ideas, and that its internal relations are relations between abstract concepts.' (Whitehead, 1932: 158, emphasis added)

The apparent regularities that we commonsensically perceive, such as the 'organizational structures' which the Aston Group claims to have uncovered, do not belong to the immediate relations of the crude data of experience. Rather the mind supplies the smooth uniformity of the world by an unconscious application of the various principles of mental pattern construction.

Thus, contrary to Pugh's (1983) claim, still widely held by many positivists, that the 'universe is replete with regularities' and that ultimately the appeal to hard 'data' is what extends our understanding,
Whitehead's point here is that the 'pattern of regularities' that Pugh and his colleagues claim to have 'discovered' in their study of 'organizations' is a consequence of the very organizational structures of thought which they necessarily rely upon to express themselves. We unwittingly make up the very world that we claim to discover through our micro-organizational acts of arresting, simple locating and attention focusing. This is precisely the same point which Goodman (1984) makes in his stimulating analysis of 'world-making'.

**Organization as the Social Construction of Reality**

Goodman (1984) unravels the process of 'star-making' by starting off with the more familiar notion of a 'constellation'.

'Has a constellation been there as long as the stars that compose it, or did it come into being only when selected and designated? In the latter case, the constellation was created by a version. And what could be meant by saying that all configurations of stars are always constellations whether or not picked out and designated as such? I suggest that to say that all configurations are constellations is in effect to say that none are: that a constellation only becomes such through being chosen from among all configurations, must as a class becomes a kind only through being distinguished, according to some principle from other classes.

Now, as we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the skies should be marked off into constellations or other objects. *We have to make that which we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system.' *(Goodman 1984: 35, emphasis added)*

It is only by arbitrarily drawing boundaries around our sensory experiences that we are able to begin to ascribe meaning to phenomena. It is this active process of singling out and putting together certain aspects of our experiences whilst ignoring others that brings about the socially constructed reality that we find so immediate and self-evident. This is what Goodman means by 'world-making'. Before our conscious intervention into the fragmentary flow of sensations, reality is merely a meaningless and indistinct moving mass.

The idea that reality is socially constructed, is not, of course, new. Writers such as Mannheim (1952), Schutz (1962) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) together with the influential cultural studies of social anthropologists such as Lévi Strauss (1969), Geertz (1973) and Douglas (1986) have helped immeasurably to heighten our awareness of the plurality of socially constructed worlds. What has, however, not been adequately addressed and made explicit is the ontological character of the real and, therefore, its consequences for our understanding of organization as first and fundamentally a culture-inspired social method for intervening into and hence conceptually arresting and ordering the
otherwise uninterrupted flow of our brute experiences. The regularities
that we subsequently detect mirror, therefore, the very modes of thought
we deploy in making sense of such experiences. In other words, our
socially constructed realities are already conceptual abstractions of the
brute reality of sense experience. They contain the immanent patterned
imprints of the pre-established system of codification (i.e. language)
which structures our consciousness. Thus, any enduring pattern of
observed regularities derives firstly and fundamentally from the struc-
turing of language and thought peculiar to a particular socio-historical
epoch. Understood thus, it becomes more crucial to appreciate how
each age and each cultural grouping manages to find modes of classi-
ification, with its own attendant logic, which seems to serve as the con-
ceptual axes for organizing, prioritizing and discharging human effort
in affairs of the world.

Towards a Generalized Organization Theory

To organize is to ‘supply with organs’; to provide ‘instrument(s) or
means by which anything is done’ (Chambers Etymological Dictionary
1893). It is to form or arrange a set of nascent capabilities in a manner
which facilitates action and response through the concentration of effort
and attention. Organizing operates as a necessary economising principle
in our day-to-day apprehension of our phenomenal experiences. It is
an ongoing reality constituting and reality maintaining activity which
enables us to act purposefully amidst a cacophony of competing, and
attention-seeking inputs. Economy of effort is thus the ultimate aim of
human organizing.

This achievement of least effort is not, however, motivated by an effici-
cy imperative or a consequence of laziness. Rather, it is a necessary
feature of the self’s attempt to differentiate and detach itself from its
surroundings in order to attain a measure of autonomy and independ-
ence. Human organizing, therefore, comprises an interlocking sequence
of ontological acts of differentiations which are central to the self’s
process of achieving its singleness of identity. The object of the act of
organization is, therefore, never to just produce a utilitarian product or
service. Instead, it is the ‘preparation of objects by means of which the
system can (then) distinguish itself from its primary subject and, there-
fore, be certain of itself’ (Cooper 1987: 408). In other words, organiza-
tion works, first and foremost, to construct legitimate objects of know-
ledge for a knowing subject — ‘man’, ‘notes of a musical score’,
‘factory hands’, ‘organizational structure’, ‘pupils at school’, ‘popula-
tion tables’, ‘the environment’ and so on. Organizing as this active and
dynamic process of identity-construction and reality-configuration is,
therefore, an ontological activity. This view provides a more funda-
mental theoretical approach for organizational analysis in an expanded
realm of organization theory.
The term *generalized* organization theory is used within this context to emphasize the identity-locating and hence reality-constituting character of organization as a socio-technical practice of ordering in space-time. It denotes a mode of theorizing that attempts to relate a particular social configuration it is considering to the ineluctable losses incurred through that very act of attention giving. Here, the losses alluded to are the undecidable excesses which are discounted or therefrom ignored as a consequence of wilfully wrestling a patterned order and hence identity out of an initially undifferentiated and indistinguishable whole. The function of organization is, therefore, fundamentally, to create the singleness of the object/objective and to ascribe to it an unproblematical identity by denying the status of its intrinsic opposition. Thus, the object's/objective's singularity can only be realized through the suppression of its Other with which it is compounded. As Cooper (1987) puts it so succinctly:

'... the object is the result of an activity that counters or strikes out its double; in this sense, the object is that which *objects*, otherwise it would be so entangled with *itself* that it would be lost to knowledge. The subject (whether individual, group or system) is necessarily an object constructed out of the uncertainty of division in order to provide a stable identity which is lacking in the primary subject.' (Cooper 1987: 408)

It is the analysis of this construction of legitimate *objects of knowledge*, through interlocking acts of simple-location, isolation and identity construction, and their consequences for our understanding of social life, that a generalized organization theory seeks to enquire into.

Following this conceptual revision, attention is redirected towards an examination of how complex interlocking micropractices of organizing, ordering and representing work as event-structuring 'happenings' that cumulatively contribute to create and sustain a relatively stabilized but precarious balanced version of social reality. Such interlocking chains of relational assemblages, which are themselves continuously being extended and reinforced through further successive integrations, make up the social orders that we find so immediately necessary and familiar. Organization theory conceived thus takes on a different complexion, one in which organization now refers to the fundamental socially structured process of punctuating, abstracting and ordering and hence arresting the flow of human experiences in order to create a coherent, stabilized, and liveable world. Instead of an organization theory concerned with organized *states*, this generalized economy of organization takes it upon itself to elaborate the *emergence, endurance* and *sustenance* of such organized states.

Organizing is fundamentally an economic advantage-gaining activity involving the 'transformation, use and exchange of matter and energy' (Cooper 1987: 406) whereby the remote, the obdurate and the intractable are rendered more accessible and hence more amenable to control and manipulation. The study of social organizing as reality-configuring
event-structurings that help organize modernity, offers a promising alternative to the dominant preoccupations of organization studies. As an alternative focus, it would help students of organization to begin to understand the broader socio-historical trends, the implicit logics of ordering deployed, and the shifting modes of thought accompanying each conceptual epoch. As Whitehead (1933/48) reminds us: ‘Such instinctive grasp of the relevant features of social currents is of supreme importance’ (p. 119) in the cultivation of what he calls ‘Historical Foresight’. Thus, rather than indulging in an excessive preoccupation with the empirical investigation of ‘organized structures’, or any other related attributes, this generalized approach calls for a return to Weber’s original concern with the analysis of social organization in all its myriad forms — rationalization, professionalization, administration, bureaucracy, economics of performance and ‘disciplines’, etc. It is these broader concerns with the systematic organization of modernity which exercised Weber and Whitehead and which continues to exercise more contemporary thinkers such as Foucault (1970, 1979) and Douglas (1986), amongst others. It is also within this expanded realm of a general economic analysis of organization that the limitations of the Aston Studies can best be understood.

The Organization of Thought: Some Consequences for Management Theorizing

It seems almost a truism these days to assert that different peoples from different epochs, different cultures and even different formative contexts construct and hence perceive and experience different realities. This is because the objects of knowledge they become accustomed to and the attitudes they adopt vary from one individual situation to another. How these differences of perceptions have been brought about is of immense importance for our understanding of the diverse logics and priorities underpinning managerial strategies and actions, which often defy common understanding. This is not merely a question of discerning what is popularly known as the ‘cognitive maps’ which people are supposed to carry around in their heads. Rather, it is about unpicking the underlying reality-constituting logics of individuals (themselves understood as socially constructed and temporarily stabilized configurations of relations) and organizational ‘assemblages’ which precipitate fundamental attitudes and orientations towards the social and physical environments. It is this cultivating of an acute sensitivity to the fundamental acts of managerial world-making, and its consequences for managerial action, which provides an alternative raison d’être for this ‘meta’ approach to organizational analysis. The analysis of those underlying organizing logics which precipitate enduringly successful individual and organizational ‘assemblages’ become, therefore, an alternative theoretical focus for organizational analysis.
Thus, it becomes possible to appreciate, for example, that a central organizing principle driving the late Konosake Matsushita, founder and chairman of the Matsushita conglomerate, was to consider ‘profits’ to be a by-product of the provision of an appropriate service to the community. Profit for him was not a significant object of desire, something to be directly aimed for. Rather it is something which comes on the rebound as a token of appreciation for one’s constructive and responsible actions towards the wider social collectivity. This is a thought-style entirely alien to our more traditionally goal-oriented understanding of managerial actions. More importantly, it is an attitude which is congruent with the dominant thought collective (Fleck 1979) within which Matshushita’s formative understanding of the meaning of social responsibility took place.

It was this passionate belief and sense of social obligation which led Matsushita, shortly before he died, to hand-pick one hundred young Japanese for an educational development programme in which they were made to spend inordinate amounts of time watching carps swimming in the pond and perfecting the tea pouring ceremony in order to inculcate an acute awareness and sensitivity to the importance of the ‘other’ in affairs of the world. Other examples abound of these difficult-to-understand and even more difficult-to-classify managerial logic and thought-styles circumscribing the formative contexts of other equally successful business minds/enterprises.

In a recent fascinating analysis of the organizational ‘culture’ of the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB), Edgar Schein coined the term Strategic Pragmatism, to reflect in some good measure the unusual blend of idealism and pragmatism characterizing the mindset of the EDB (and indeed, the Singaporean) way of life. Strategic pragmatism alludes to the very successful combination of a well-articulated strategy coupled with a ‘bending over backwards’ type of opportunism and pragmatism displayed by the EDB in dealing with affairs of the world. Thus, in their highly selective approach towards foreign investment:

‘... once Singapore committed to a company, it pulled out all the stops to make the relationship work. One can think of this as a kind of “strategic pragmatism” in the sense that the EDB was very clear about its long-range goals but, at the same time, remained tactically very flexible in working towards these goals and nimble in solving the day-to-day problems of their clients.’ (Schein 1996: 23)

In his two-year study of the EDB, Schein identified a number of organizing logics and priorities which flies in the face of conventional organization and management theories. Thus, ‘As we are being told how organizations are reducing or even abandoning hierarchies and creating flat networks, we find in the EDB — and to some extent in other parts of the Singapore establishment — both a fairly steep hierarchy and a very flat and very effective network that is able to co-ordinate rapidly’
Schein struggles to conceptualize the anomalies presented by his study of the EDB. Thus, he finds it necessary to coin anomalous terms such as ‘strategic pragmatism’, ‘participative autocracy’, ‘nonhierarchic hierarchy’, ‘individualistic groupism’, ‘distributed centralism’ to more accurately describe what he observes. These paradoxical terms testify to the logical limits of our current forms of organizational theorizing. For Schein, the traditional objects of knowledge such as ‘hierarchy’, ‘individualism’, ‘centralism’ and ‘autocracy’ no longer appear tenable within a world-view that recognizes the dynamic and emergent quality of human situations. They reveal the abstract and impoverished nature of the static conceptual categories we rely upon, in management and organization theory, for dealing with the real dynamics of shifting constellations of relations which are always being extended, discarded or reinforced to allow newer and more novel successive integrations to take place.

Schein’s intuitive appreciation of the limitations of the dominant concepts in organization theory and his vain attempts to reconcile his observations with the pre-established categories of organizational knowledge, yet again reminds us of the vast chasm still existing between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. It points us to the urgent need to make a paradigmatic break away from the current preoccupation with organized ‘end-states’ to an analysis of the unfolding logic of organization informing our current modes of thought. The prevailing academic thought-style, locked in its own neatly structured world of static dichotomous terms, remains unable to deal with the ‘pure’ emergent movement characteristic of real-world events. As Bergson (1913a) reminds us:

‘The real, the experienced and the concrete are recognised by the fact that they are variability itself . . . Out of variability we can make as many variations, qualities and modifications as we please, since these are so many static views, taken by analysis (i.e., structured thinking), of the mobility given to intuition (i.e., process thinking). But these modifications, put end to end, will produce nothing which resembles variability, since they are not part of it, but elements, which is quite a different thing. They are not parts of the movement, they are so many snapshots of it . . . The moving thing is never really in any of these points . . . Faced with our impotence to reconstruct the movement with these points, we insert other points believing that we can in this way get nearer to the essential mobility in the movement. Then as this mobility still escapes us, we substitute for a fixed and finite number of points, an “indefinitely increasing” number — thus vainly trying to counterfeit, by the movement of a thought that goes on indefinitely adding points to points, the real and undivided movement of the moving body.’ (Bergson 1913a: 42–43)

It is this awareness of the primacy of movement which has precipitated the resurgence of interest in a process epistemology and its consequences for revising the logic of organizational theorizing away from structured entities/end-states to the underlying thought-structuring processes which produce these outcomes. It only seems appropriate,
therefore, to recur to those steeped in process thinking for a reformulation of the problematic of organization and management.

Organizational Analysis as Metaphysical Inquiry

One influential process thinker who has put much thought into examining the prerequisites for a successful business mind of the future is none other than the mathematician-turned-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. In a little-known paper, first delivered as a lecture at Harvard Business School and subsequently published as a preface to the book entitled *Business Adrift* authored by the then Dean W. B. Donham, Whitehead expounded on the general type of mentality (i.e., organizing logic) which he considered to be the vital prerequisites for promoting the general success (understood in its broadest possible Whiteheadian sense) of any commercial endeavour. Whitehead (1933) used the term *Historical Foresight* to differentiate this form of pragmatic wisdom from that of Scientific Induction. Unlike the knowledge gleaned from scientific generalizations, Historical Foresight entails the sensitive collecting and selecting of particular relevant facts from the inevitable welter of detailed incidents and events which collectively make up the historical tracts of a specific situation. It entails the painstaking examination of the ‘accidents, the minute deviations — or conversely, the complete reversals — the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us’ (Foucault, in Rainbow 1984: 81). Through this cultivation of an unspecialized aptitude for eliciting generalizations from particulars and for seeing the divergent illustration of generalities in diverse circumstances, it becomes possible to intuitively grasp the ‘complex flux of the varieties of human societies’ (Whitehead 1933: 119) and to effect appropriate action. For Whitehead, ‘such a reflective power is essentially a philosophical habit: it is the survey of a society from the standpoint of generality. This habit of general thought, undaunted by novelty, is the gift of philosophy in the widest sense of the term’ (Whitehead 1933: 120). Metaphysical inquiry for Whitehead, in contrast to Pugh’s (1983) dismissive attitude, is not a tiresome academic subject unrelated to affairs of the world. Rather, metaphysical inquiry is:

‘... at once general and concrete, critical and appreciative of direct intuition. It is not — or at least should not be — a ferocious debate between irritable professors. It is a survey of the possibilities and their comparison with actualities. In philosophy, the fact, the theory, the alternatives, and the ideal are weighed together. Its gift are insight and foresight, and a sense of importance which nerves all civilized effort.’ (Whitehead 1933: 121)

Writing at the time of a world depression, Whitehead further observed that the endless cycles of wild trade fluctuations being experienced then indicated that business relationships were infected by an incurable dis-
ease of short-sighted motives coupled with the inability to think of the business world as one integral part of community itself. For him, this is a serious oversight since, whether we appreciate it or not, the attitude of the community is reciprocally affected by the business mindset. This ultimately meant that:

'... a great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions. Low thoughts mean low behaviour, and after a brief orgy of exploitation, low behaviour means a descending standard of life.' (Whitehead 1933: 120)

This might serve to caution those like Pugh who would hastily dismiss the crucial role that a 'meta' inquiry has to play in the study of managing and organizing, and more importantly, in equipping students of management with the necessary critical skills for discerning and implementing the appropriate pattern of priorities in dealing with affairs of the world. For Whitehead, there can be no successful, free, open, and democratic society if general education did not encourage such a philosophical outlook. This Whiteheadian generalization may yet prove to be true then, as now.

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