



## Pretty Ugly: Notes On the Moral Economy of Method\*

Alf Rehn

### abstract

The prevailing belief in the redeeming qualities of method has in the social sciences created a value-system which I like to call the moral economy of method, but which could also be called Methodism. Characterized by an exaggerated interest in debates concerning methodology and critique of the same, such a system seems to thrive on moral condemnations and the view of method as the production function of research, and is fundamentally an ethical dogma. This paper could be read as an inquiry into the ways in which method could be thought of outside such totalizing discourses. Born out of a uneasiness towards the way in which bestsellers in methodology are uncritically adopted and accepted as valid inputs in the academic debate, the paper wonders if method is such a great idea, after all.

The thinking that is to come is no longer philosophy, because it thinks more originally than metaphysics – a name identical to philosophy. However, the thinking that is to come can no longer, as Hegel demanded, set aside the name “love of wisdom” and become wisdom itself in the form of absolute knowledge. Thinking is on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence. Thinking gathers language into simple saying. In this way language is the language of Being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky. With its saying, thinking lays inconspicuous furrows in language. They are still more inconspicuous than the furrows that the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field. (Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’)

The only non-localizable “common name” of pure difference in all eras is that of the poor. The poor is destitute, excluded, repressed, exploited – and yet living! It is the common denominator of life, the foundation of the multitude. It is strange, but also illuminating, that postmodernist authors seldom adopt this figure in their theorizing. It is strange because the poor is in a certain respect an eternal postmodern figure: the figure of a transversal, omnipresent, different, mobile subject; the testament to the irrepressible aleatory character of existence. (Hardt & Negri, *Empire*)

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## I Hate Methodology

Marcel Mauss (1924/1990), whose contribution to the development of organizations studies is rarely acknowledged, famously described the tradition of the *potlatch* as ‘the monster child’ of an indigenous economy perverted by the introduction of the Western concept of the market. The natural meeting the artificial, the intellect meeting the body, the classic Cartesian dichotomy. We’ve learnt to avoid that, right? We’re smarter now, aren’t we? Still, sitting pretty in the field of organization and management (by any other name), things do get weird sometimes. It’s supposed to be an empirical field, but much of what one reads sounds like scholastic philosophy (How many alternate-reality organisations can you fit on the tip of Nike’s rhetorical swoosh?). And the methodology... This is supposed to be a paper on methodology, but I don’t really know. You see, methodology frightens me. The mere idea of methodology frightens me. Conferences are the worst. There people you hardly trust enough to watch your coat seem perfectly at ease with asking personal questions such as ‘What’s your methodological standpoint then?’ without feeling the least bit intrusive. And when I answer ‘Don’t really have one. I don’t like methodology!’ they laugh nervously and say something about the coffee. I really don’t like methodology. The fact that I’ve been forced to teach it for the last few years has heightened this aversion into something pretty close to a pathological state. This paper, then, discusses it all from a somewhat different standpoint. In part it will be an attempt for me to find a way to think about method that does not scare me witless. In a more general sense it will try to address some issues regarding how methodology is viewed. Simply put, by provisionally introducing aesthetics into a discussion on methodology I would like to find other ways of thinking about method and thus, research. Why? Well, because a lot of the time it seems like methodology stands in the way of research, as a roadblock ‘On the Way to Language’ (Heidegger, 1959).

Repeating myself, when reading what is normally written on the question of method, I’m struck by an immense sense of dread. A never-ending list of problems, faults, inaccuracies and mistakes are presented to the reader as a condemnation of her impudence in thinking that she is capable of conducting research (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldbreg, 2000; Bryman, 1992; Silverman, 1985; 1993). A series of mutually exclusive recipes are laid out and argued for and against scolding the reader for her inability to choose. After a careful reading of any standard textbook on methodology one comes away feeling as if one were to try to lose one’s virginity immediately after reading Henry Miller. Let’s face it, methodology is scary. Scary not only because it is presented as an hermetic mystery, as the winding path of the epistemological sage, but because of it being fundamentally anti-inquiry. The ‘physics envy’ that led the social sciences in general into operations analysis, functionalism and an absurd dependence on quantitative methods, has led qualitative studies into a cul-de-sac of condemnation and confusion. Searching for coherence, completeness, and rigor, writers on qualitative methodology have habitually propagated a view on method which resembles (one might even say is) a moral discourse on the conduct of research and researchers. Although most ‘reflective’ scholars share some notion of cultural and social relativism, this has not had much of an impact on meta-methodology, leading to a state where different schools mostly resemble papal states.

And I think this is a question of language. Taking a cue from Elias (1978), it would seem that we as academics have gone through a lengthy civilization process, and are now socialized into a mode of talking about method that equates propriety in method with a more general morality. You're either right or, metaphorically, dead wrong. What I here would wish to put forth is the argument that methodology could be thought outside of this dominating discourse of a moral science and instead be discussed as a path towards aesthetically pleasing, and thus better, research. Talking about methodologies as aesthetic practices is here presented as a way to enliven the discussion about research and make methodology meaningful. And, so as not to be misunderstood before I have had the chance to explain myself, I have to stress the following: I do not believe researchers to be akin to artists. Such a claim would to my mind not only be trite but disdainful to research. In arguing that aesthetics could be incorporated in the methodological discourse I do not wish to present any pseudo-psychological statement *à la* 'we are artists all', but merely to discuss methodology as more of a path and less of a toolbox. Still, research is to some extent a creative process, one which produces artifacts that can be aesthetically appreciated. Curiously, just these end-products of our scholarly endeavors are quite routinely ignored (cf. Becker, 1986; Czarniawska, 1999), as if our texts were mere coincidental effects of the 'real deal' of scientific inquiry. But I'm not talking about art, not at all. Aesthetics here simply denotes a way of talking about human expression that is tied neither to calculative logic or an ethics (although such divisions are dangerous, but you'll just have to bear with me). Being somewhat naive, I happen to believe that appreciation ('Nice, innit?') rather than approval ('That's a well done bit of discourse analysis, that is.') might allow for a more diverse discussion.

To further confuse the issue, the question of method particularly in the field of organization theory raises specific questions. As method is a practice that by its very nature organizes data, organizes research, organizes disciplinary boundaries, organizes schools of practice, increasing attention to its ordering qualities would seem important. And whereas the importance of a research ethics is routinely brought forth, the possibility of a more fundamental set of moralizations already present in the very fabric of research is seldom expressly discussed. The following should thus not be read as a finished argument, but as a slightly bewildered look at the idea of 'method' in research, the notion of a known and communicable way of conducting research, as if the path was already decided. The following will also consequently by its very nature be a blunt instrument taken to a fine weave, an organizational theorist taking on the organizing of that which makes him one.

## The Origin of the Work of Art

When it comes to aesthetics Heidegger is at his most lucid in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (Heidegger, 1936/1993), which in many ways is his easiest work. This said, the work deals with nothing less hard than finding the source where art springs from. Recapitulating his argument, he first approaches the thingness of art, the way in which a work of art is a 'mere' thing. By incorporating his earlier analysis of the ontological position of things, Heidegger shows how different types of things show us their being in different ways. Mere things are here the basest elements, "a stone, a clod of earth, a

piece of wood” (Heidegger, 1993: 147). All that is more than this are *Zeug*, which could be translated into tool or equipment, and is that of which we acquire knowledge (of its being) through using it, like a pair of peasant shoes that “is half thing ... [and] ... at the same time it is half artwork” (Heidegger, 1993: 155). The *Zeug* is that which contains a necessity of purpose, as it is imbued with the world in which it is to exist. The artwork no longer contains the thingness of what it depicts, but instead “is the disclosure of what the equipment [*Zeug*]...is in truth” (Heidegger, 1993: 161). The artwork works through the unconcealment of the Being that served as the inspiration for it. Heidegger’s own example (later criticized by Derrida, 1987), van Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant shoes, for him not only shows the shoes themselves but the world in which they are, the smell of the earth, the sun on the peasants back, blisters. All this should be well known.

Now, contrast this with the way descriptions of e.g. organizational life can be attempted. We can tell of the things that are immediately at hand, the mere matter of the organization, such as official reports or returned questionnaires (the latter being a wonderful example of the reduction of organization, and simultaneously the very organizing of organizations). We can also attempt a *Zeug*-like description, telling of organizational praxis and the like. But if we are to go beyond this (albeit one can wonder if we should), we must create ways in which our description of the organization and its behaviour(s) not only show that which has been at hand, but the world in which this Being exists. This would be, lacking a more elegant name, aesthetic research. Problematically enough, this would also entail a reduction of the praxis of research, the way of the intellect. Now, ever since Marx scribbled down his thoughts on Feuerbach, famously (and, to my mind, correctly and particularly poignant in the fields of organization and economy) dismissing scholarly thinking that is not tied to praxis as ‘a purely scholastic question’, the scholar’s Cartesian split between doing and thinking about doing has been difficult to uphold. Problem is, intellectuals, be they researchers, demagogues or ideo-logicians, are constantly at risk of falling into their own closed practice, the praxis of doing research becoming self-contained and the scripture of methodology working as the researcher’s handmaiden. Heidegger in his ‘Letter on Humanism’ (1947/1993) tries to think this question, particularly turning to the possibility of thought prior to a distinction between theory and practice, thinking that is its use, tool-like, instead of the rational path towards available answers (the way of method). Returning in his writings again and again to the non-thought, the poverty of over-intellectualizing – and we are always there, perilously – pointing out the need for less philosophy, less metaphysics, Heidegger becomes a paradox, or as Derrida (1997: 93) reframes him: “Thinking is what we already know we have not yet begun; measured against the shape of writing, it is broached only in the *epistémè*.”

The path then, the stroll through the thickets of metaphysics towards the *Lichtung* of thinking, goes from the thing-ness of the world towards praxis and further. The later Heidegger was consequently occupied with battling an attitude towards the world he called ‘technological’ (Heidegger, 1954/1993). Technology in the sense used here is not a question of engineering, but of the tendency to rationalize, improve upon, order, instrumentalize and structure the world. This tendency is of course inherently present in the modern view of science (Toulmin, 1992), and has been criticized by a fair amount of scholars. For Heidegger the path to escape this totalizing and reductionism is art (specifically poetry, in his case) and the revealing of the true nature of Being that an

aesthetication of the world can bring. It is this reductionism and strive towards totalization that also continuously endangers the researcher, making the aesthetication of research an important question. But is the path from *technè* to *poiésis* tenable, in anything except a metaphoric way? Are we merely romanticizing research, believing that we could approach the communicative powers of the artwork? And even if we could, what is it we are attempting?

All claims from below have been scurrilously disguised as claims from above: and the surrealists, having become the laughing-stock of those who have seen close up a sorry and shabby failure, obstinately hold on to their magnificent Icarian pose. (Bataille, 1985: 39)

The difficulty, then, here, is that the invocation of the word 'aesthetics' often makes people go into conniptions of a particularly ugly sort, imagining that the mere aura of art is sufficient to carry or stand in for argumentation and/or analysis. The process of aesthetication then becomes just another instrumentalization, another moral goal to be attained. And Heidegger doesn't argue for art, he argues for *thinking*. The analysis of the artwork that Heidegger presents can be read as dealing with how a human artefact is connected to that from which it sprung, as a phenomenological naturalism. In such a reading, the artwork referred to ceases to be a specific cultural form of expression, and stands for expression more generally, namely the expression of thinking. The engagement with the world that is present in the use of equipment, be this a hammer or the sun, shows us the tool, but *thinking reveals it* and the world within which it exists.

## The Economy of Method and its Ironies

To complement his pragmatic and anti-foundationalist view on epistemological questions, Richard Rorty (see e.g. Rorty, 1989; 1998) has called for a new approach to research, an approach he calls ironic. To quickly reiterate, this builds upon the researcher being able to balance two opposing forces in her thinking, namely both believing in the validity of her 'final vocabulary' and being able to constantly question and doubt the same. It is important to realize that these two forces here should have equal weight with the ironist (Note that this is an *ironic* reading of Rorty, based in part on Hall 1994, and that it in fact stands partly at odds with Rorty's vocabulary, that tends to downplay the dialectic dynamic of thinking). The postmodernist's continuing scepticism is as much a mistake as the positivist's incorrigible trust in final truths. In some instances one can even find the two forces at work in a symmetric but unattached manner, as Rorty seems to see in critical theory in general and in Jürgen Habermas in particular. Then the lack of irony has become pathological, for neither trust nor doubt longer holds an edifying position towards the other. Ironic thinking is fluid but with a certain rigor, sort of like properly chilled vodka. Stated otherwise, an ironist could be seen as a thinker that does not take herself wholly seriously, but instead revels in the possibility of someone destroying her argumentation. In this sense the ironic attitude could be seen as complementary to the post-empiricist school in the philosophy of science (Bohman, 1991). By allowing a certain amount of holes in her defences, the ironist makes her science a little more interesting, a little more dangerous.

So, maybe methodology lacks irony. Why? Because even the most strident proponent of reflective and critical research proposes reflection and critique as remedies for ailments present in other forms of methodology, thereby taking a moral standpoint. Methodology, as it is presented in learned books on the subject, seemingly cannot exist without positing itself in relation to others, establishing hegemony, claiming victory – however tentatively. Reading texts on methodology one is in awe of the seemingly unending amount of evil that other researchers partake in. Mostly these Others are merely buffoons, clumsy, insufficiently subtle. Bad researchers. In extreme cases these other researchers turn out to be homicidal maniacs, killing and maiming (textually, of course) with their evil ways of bad methodological conduct. Textbooks and articles on methodology almost always show that until now, until the publication of this text, some of us have been doing things plain wrong. Not that they don't accept that there are many ways to skin a cat, they just seem insistent on that some of these ways are more or less right and some others more or less wrong. A method, as it is usually talked about, is a technological concept, an application. It places the world as available and free to be manipulated, it frames the world. Just as Heidegger (yes, him again) showed that the essence of technology would in its totality leave the world as standing reserve that can be roused for the technological apparatus (Heidegger, 1954/1993), methodology usually posits the world as a surface to be penetrated, mined, with nuggets of knowledge to be had as long as the tools are kept sharpened. Use the wrong tool, and nothing is to be had. Use the right tool, and the world is yours. This is the path of technology, where everything becomes-for something else. If method is viewed as a technology, a set of tools, it makes that-which-is-studied a subject, a reserve. Method, as a technique and a tool, frames the world and makes it a commodity for the academic potlatch, a ground suitable for divvying up into easily digestible chunks of 'studies' presented to a voracious band of research junkies eagerly awaiting their next fix. Is your junk pure enough?

And this is where my argument, as it is, naked, despairing, turns to economy and organization theory. For what is method if not the organizing of the world? Even without turning to the machinic theories of Deleuze/Guattari, the way in which the notion of a separated constituent of inquiry which functions as a device for turning the input of the world into the output of science is fundamentally technological. Method is in such a view a productive function, and posits the world as a supply of data, some of which can efficiently be turned into scientific value. This economic unconscious of research enables us to talk intelligibly about 'good' or 'bad' methods, as we by this seem to mean more or less efficient way of producing the aforementioned science-values. Method produces results and contributions, improves data, cleans your desk and enables elderly professors to make a bit of spare change by writing offensively bad cookbooks of research that they can force graduate students to buy. It organizes research into the do-rights and do-wrongs, creating efficient divisions between orthodoxy and the great unwashed. Those who have the method-capital, the correct tools of knowledge, and those who wander, poor, in the world.

The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is in return distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. [...] Everywhere everything is order to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may

be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. [...] It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the revealing that challenges. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over us as object. (Heidegger, 1993: 321-322)

The specific modes of organizing that method conceived of as a tool creates are not neutral or natural ones, and this observation has been made repeatedly. We know that research has a political side, and that this should be acknowledged. But method also has its economic side, an inherent quantification of value that might pervert the interpretative project. Conceived of in the way it is usually done, method *does things*, and is through this fundamentally economic. And this has made the discussion regarding method moral insofar as it discusses how such production can be optimized and made more efficient, with less efficiency in the generation of research immediately perceived as a undesired state. The way in which such teleological argumentation is used renders any statement regarding the way to conduct research ethical to the core. What is more, it makes method an economy (and thereby *ethical to the core*), a discourse where accumulation and the efficient use of resources reigns supreme.

Right now I'm thus expected to say that this is not how methodology should be done, and that I have a brilliant idea that will solve this problem forever. I won't and I haven't. I'm not going to butt heads with big boys like Morgan (1983) and Bryman (1992). I'll route around them, tentatively, as in any strategic movement. Heh. Much as the ironist can route around the metaphysician, I could now refer to another one of Rorty's weapons, namely recontextualization. By playing with concepts, Rorty encourages the circumvention of those discussions that one no longer feels to be fruitful. This is similar to the use of metaphor, but instead of trying to enhance our understanding of a phenomenon by looking at it in a different manner, recontextualization (in Rorty's sense) aims at changing the phenomenon itself by altering the language game. Kind of like a form of 'Wittgensteinian reengineering' (a term I'm fond of and wish to copyright, by the way). By presenting a new way to talk about things one introduces a vocabulary that can either be adopted or rejected by a community, but either way one forces people to think about their language. In a sense this makes Rorty a hacker of epistemology, rerouting around what he does not feel like attacking head-on. My small, personal hack in this vein tries to bring in aesthetic concepts to a place where moral ones have reigned supreme. I have no interest in discussing whether e.g. grounded theory is a good way to study motivation, but I think that a lot of the research I see is pretty ugly. Not bad, I do not claim to have the requisite knowledge to say that, but ugly as in overblown, pretentious, piddling, boring, unoriginal, et cetera. Maybe I do mean bad. But not bad in the sense that I can point to any distinct flaw in reasoning or conduct, rather bad in the sense as displeasing, repugnant, grotesque. By recontextualizing in this way we can try to bring in both irony (as aesthetic concepts might not function in the same totalizing manner as moral ones do) into the discussion and enable other forms of the same. A discussion of method that would work in the manner of e.g. art criticism instead of ontological criticism might, to me, be both more interesting and more edifying.

But am I not then inviting that final ogre of research, absolute relativism? Rorty has by his critics (see e.g. Brandom, 2000) been accused of never standing still long enough for anyone to get off a decent shot. Recontextualization seems like the perfect dodge, a way

of dismissing any criticism by calling it uninteresting, making Rorty (and, I guess, me – gosh!) a dandy, waving off any substantive critiques by a witty remark or snide put-down. Such critique is quite understandable, but misses the mark somewhat. Rorty never claims that a recontextualization can take place instantaneously, far less so that it could take place in a total fashion. Rather, different contexts can and do exist simultaneously, in an intellectual version of the evolutionary primal soup. Playing with language in such a way is not a ‘quick fix’ for anything at all, but a move in the game of competing discourses, tentative and incomplete. Take the foolish notion of discussing research through aesthetics. It is not that this isn’t already done to some extent through notions with certain resemblances: creativity, elegance, style, intuition, sophistication, *et cetera*. (The problem with aesthetics within the research field of management and organizations might actually be that it is perilously close to becoming an industry. One should always be wary about a perspective that’s in fashion. And there has been a *lot* of attention on aesthetics recently, with several conferences (Bolton in 1999, Siena in 2000) and journal special issues as visible manifestations. In addition to this we’ve seen several books that in some way approach the question (e.g. Wiesmann, 1989; Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Strati, 1998; Linstead and Höpfl, 1999) and it seems to be increasingly difficult to organize a conference without some smart-alec wanting to incorporate aesthetics in at least a sub-theme. (Waves to friends in the industry.)) Making claims strictly about aesthetics and trying to create a niche for this is fundamentally futile, just another little circle of friends. The point lies in the *juxtaposition* of arguments. The heresy of non-rational (i.e. aesthetic) method has no strength at all until it is posited as a perspective on method as fundamentally a moral economy (a trade in values and the attaining hereof). Words such as shock-value, cute, forcefulness, etc. could all be utilized in the discussion of methodology, and their difference to the logical analysis of data-gathering could infuse the field with a certain dynamic. Much as the existence of the poor can serve as a perspective on bloodless economic theory and the neo-liberals’ Panglossian idea of ours as the best world possible. We might need a poverty of method, more aleatory scholars.

Now the truth can be told. This article shouldn’t be read as forming an argument. It is born out of the poverty of my thinking, pained, battling. I just don’t understand what people are talking about when they discuss method. They have stuff, obviously, cherished methods with which they get into journals (My Precious!). I have none, or at least I don’t think I do. So what do I have? I know when I like what I’ve written (though I’m unsure of this text). I know when I like what others have written. I just don’t always know why. Kant’s third critique names it *Urteilkraft*, clumsily translated as ‘judgement’ in English. It could be called *Erziehung*. Stephen Toulmin refers to a lecture given by Isaiah Berlin:

We mean nothing occult or metaphysical; we do not mean a magic eye able to penetrate into something that ordinary minds cannot apprehend; we mean something perfectly ordinary, empirical, and quasi-aesthetical in the way it works. (2001: 181-182)

We need less discussions on method, and more discussions on thinking. Less highfalutin theory (and we are all sinners), and more ‘perfectly ordinary’ writing. We do not need method, we need reason.



## Postscript

...as both a devoted student and aggressive critic of Immanuel Kant, Schiller holds a special place in the history of aesthetics. By distilling some of Kant's theories of aesthetics and spicing them up with some of his own he wrote 27 letters on the need for aesthetics, later publishing these as *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (Schiller, 1995). This work stands as one of the most important popularizations of aesthetics ever. Here Schiller tries to show the importance of aesthetics in the life of a balanced individual, and the ways in which an aesthetic sensibility is a necessity for freedom and the possibility to create (see e.g. Savile, 1987).

Schiller is prone to discuss things by invoking opposites, positioning spirit against matter, chaos against form et cetera. His argument is then that in between these pairs of opposites there exists a field that functions as a crossroads, a meeting point, an exchange. Of particular interest to Schiller are the two opposites of form and matter and the two forces that steer man, namely the propensity towards either form ('*Formtrieb*') or matter ('*Stofftrieb*'). *Stofftrieb* draws us towards the material in the world, towards our basest instincts and the immersion in the world of things. This is the world of the barbarian, the one who is disassociated from all that would make his surroundings meaningful. *Formtrieb* draws us towards the pure abstractions of the mind, towards 'dogmas and empty formalism' (Guillet de Monthoux, 1993). This is the world of the bureaucrat, the one who has no connection to the world he lives in but only to the meaningless logic of his thinking. These two forces are the frame of human being, the sterile endpoints of letting either one of the forces take over. They are not necessarily moral categories, but extremes that have to be lived with in some way. And the way Schiller says that we can live with these two extremes is through Art (capital A). For in between the two there exists a space where something fecund can happen, a place created by the '*Spieltrieb*', the drive to play. By utilizing this drive, the artist can overcome the hindrances present in staying fixed at either of the poles, form or matter. In the space of *Spieltrieb* the two are in harmony with neither taking a dominant position. Here we can find the pure aesthetics and it is here that beauty can come into being. What is further, here one cannot talk of progress in the systemic sense, but only of development (*Erziehung*), or even the state of becoming learned (*Bildung*). The Hegelian space that is formed in battling both barbaric matter and soulless form is not a given method, it is a lived process, the task of thinking...

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#### the author

Alf Rehn is the research manager of the Pink Machine-project at the Royal Institute of Technology, a project that studies aesthetics and frivolity in technology, management and economy. He has recently defended his dissertation on hypermodern gift economies, and is presently thinking about moralizations, frivolity and the mundane in the development of modern economic thinking.  
Address: Alf Rehn, Department of Industrial Management and Organization, Royal Institute of Technology, 10044 Stockholm, SWEDEN.  
E-mail: [alf@pinkmachine.com](mailto:alf@pinkmachine.com)