



From the Modern to the Postmodern (And Back Again)

Carl Rhodes

review of:

Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler (2001) *Work, Postmodernism and Organization: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage. (PB: pp. 243, £21.99, ISBN: 0-7619-5944-0)

As I was reading Hancock and Tyler's *Work, Postmodernism and Organization* with a view to writing this review, in a daydream I imagined being asked a question by the mythical student to whom the book is addressed:

Carl, I'm interested in postmodernism but I find it all very confusing. Do you know of any book that offers a "lucid and critical introduction to the evolving relationship between postmodern theory and the practice and theorization of work organizations" (p. 3)? One that draws together the key ideas and theories so that they can be understood?

In response, I would definitely advise them to read Hancock and Tyler's book. The reason I would do so is that the book provides a concise reference to much of the history, ideas, theories and theorists that inform and constitute what seems to be considered when the terms 'postmodernism' and 'organization theory' are used together. In the introduction to the book, Hancock and Tyler state their goal as being to "map out for those new to postmodernism, or to the work that has sought to synthesize it with organization theory, what has been written and said about it" (p. 2). In particular, they propose to do so in way that is both engaged with, and critical of, the very notion of postmodernism. Given the diversity and controversy over the various postmodernisms that have been touted in organization theory, it is indeed an impressive task that the authors set themselves. On its own terms, I found that the text dealt with this task quite well.

Hancock and Tyler offer an often descriptively styled rendering of postmodernism and organization theory. This begins with the three chapters in Part One, "Postmodernism and Organization Theory" which discuss what the authors delineate as two traditions of postmodernism. The first is the idea of postmodernism as a new form of organizational production and distribution that has emerged in recent times. The second is

postmodernism as a meta-theoretical position that has brought the ideas of writers such as Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida to bear on organization theory. The three chapters in the second part of the book move away from the more general mapping of postmodernism and take up three themes that the authors associate with a 'postmodern sensibility' – these being organizational culture, emotion and organization, and sexuality in organizations. The final part of the book consists of one chapter. This attempts a "critical reflection on [the book's] central concerns – namely, the relationship between the ideas that have come to be associated with postmodernism and work organizations" (p. 6) with a focus on employee subjectivity.

The breadth of coverage and depth of understanding that Hancock and Tyler demonstrated in the book generally impressed me. Of course my own understanding of what constitutes the main 'topics' of postmodernism is slightly different to theirs – for example I was a little surprised that more attention was not paid to power or power/knowledge as a topic in and of itself. I also thought that the absence of a more detailed examination of language, discourse and organization was missing and I was unable to find any consideration of metaphor or narrative. But this may be quibbling – the book deals with a great deal of complex theory in a cogent way that might be of value to people who want to understand more about postmodernism and organizations and are not sure where to start.

So, as I have stated, I would recommend the book and I do think that it achieves what it sets out for itself. Despite this, I found the book troubling; not because of what it does, but because of the character of its goals and how it goes about achieving them. As I was reading, I found myself casting my mind back to the mid-1990s when I first became interested in postmodernism and organizations. In fact at that time I did fall very much into the category of persons for whom this book claims to be written – "students of organization theory, be they based in university business schools, Sociology departments or perhaps outside mainstream academia" (p. 3). Would I have wanted a book like this then? I probably would. As I was grappling to come to terms with ideas that were new to me, and that were often written in a seemingly obfuscating style, I might have welcomed a book on postmodernism; especially one that was written "in an attempt not to lose too many readers along the way" (p. 3). Instead, however, I encountered a range of postmodernisms manifesting themselves as both an intellectual challenge and a source of inspiration for my own thinking in relation to my practice (at the time) as a manager. Postmodernism was (and is) difficult.

What Hancock and Tyler seem to have tried to do is to offer some relief from such difficulties by providing others with a 'map'. As I cited earlier, the book sets itself the task to "map out for those new to postmodernism, or to the work that has sought to synthesize it with organization theory, what has been written and said about it" (p. 2). Elsewhere they state that, in part, the book "*charts* the literature that has sought to make common cause between the ideas associated with postmodernism and the theoretical analysis of organizations" (p. 3, emphasis added) as well as claiming that others too have sought to "map out the contested terrain on which the various debates on postmodernism are taking place within organization theory" (p. 77) So what, then, can be said of this cartographic impulse to 'map' postmodernism? Indeed, Hancock and Tyler are not naïve here and they comment on this themselves when they write that they

do not “claim that our cartographic endeavours are in any way neutral or objective. For, in writing this book, we have developed our own critical perspective on postmodernism, one that has to a greater or lesser extent informed every chapter” (p. 2). Thus, on the one hand the writers propose a critical engagement with postmodernism yet still appear compelled to provide some form of map of it. On the other hand the book seems opposed to a postmodernism that has brought into question the notion of representation that enable Hancock and Tyler to remain wedded to their relatively unaccounted ‘cartographic endeavour’ – as if a book might provide a subjective map that can guide one through the territory of which it purports to provide a representation. Hancock and Tyler do not seem to have suffered from the ‘crisis of representation’ that has caused some to question whether language can provide a neutral, objective or power-free representation of social reality or whether it is writing itself that produces social reality – even when the social reality is that which gets called theory.

That Hancock and Tyler have written a book about postmodernism, an attention to issues of representation might question what it *means* to write about something in the first place. Such dilemmas have, for me, been one of the ‘difficulties’ of postmodernism. Of course, their book cannot be equivalent to or identical to postmodernism and organization theory, just as my review is not equivalent to or identical to their book. The connection between the text and its subject is that one claims to be *about* the other. It can be said that this *about* is a way of writing a new text that in some way relates to, but is not the same as, its subject – writing, thus creates difference. *About* seems to be quite a good word to understand this relationship – given my comments earlier, its possibilities might be more productive than those of ‘mapping’ and ‘representation’ which evoke a denial of the difference that writing produces. In thinking *about* this, I looked up the etymology of *about*. It comes from the old English word *abutan* – *a+butan*, where *butan* relates to being outside, without or except, and the prefix *a-* relates to being on or in. Hence, *abutan* relates to being on the outside of something. As it has developed in modern English, a common use of *about* as a preposition relates to being concerned with, being engaged with or being connected to – but not being the same as, mapping nor representing. Thus, a book *about* postmodernism might be considered as a book that connects with postmodernism in particular ways, rather than being a book that somehow represents or maps postmodernism. Despite the authors’ claims to ‘mapping’, I find that to think of what it is ‘about’, in the sense outlined, is a more interesting way to read the book.

The question that such a reading proposes is not whether this book provides a critical map of postmodernism and organization theory but rather the way in which the book (and its authors) engage with postmodernism. Considered thus, I am twice removed in this review – I am writing a review *about* a book *about* postmodernism. In each case such connections might be considered as being productive as much as representative – this suggests that writing does make a representational claim but in so doing it can also be regarded as the presentation of something other than that which it purports to represent, such that writing has *effects* based on its connection with, and construction of, its ‘others’. Thinking in this way implies that *Work, Postmodernism and Organization* does not map or chart postmodernism and organization theory so much as constructs it in a particular way – a way that can only be apprehended by further connections (such as mine).

In terms of my own connection with this book I am left thinking that while at times it does try to do things with postmodernism (especially in the final chapter) its claims to map postmodernism and to proclaim what “we [sic] might be *witnessing* in the contemporary organizational era” (p. 213, emphasis added), relies on the presupposition that objective description is both possible and desirable. What this also pointed me to was the question of the relationship of the writers of the book to their work. Their connection with postmodernism appears to be such that they wish to simultaneously engage with *it* and distance themselves from *it* while they construct a particular image of *it*. This relationship appears at times ambivalent, even possibly indicating an authorial nervousness about being name-called as ‘postmodernists’ by those who use the term pejoratively. The authors seem to want to pose approvingly as having credibility in regards to postmodernism while also undercutting their position in doing so. Could this be a way, perhaps, to have radical chic while checking one’s credentials in doing so? Management as a discourse is entwined with checks in both senses of the US spelling of this word. Radical chic? Conservative check? ‘Chequemate’?

From the outset, it seems that Hancock and Tyler are somewhat afraid that writing a postmodern text will frighten people, scare them away, or more generally alienate them from the text. In response to this, they adopt a conservative representational stance in the apparent belief that such a disposition will be more communicative and ‘representative’ of this thing called postmodernism. The authors go to some length to point out that although their book is about postmodernism it is not in itself a postmodern book. A few examples from the text:

Clearly, whatever this book is, it is not a postmodern book. Its content and style ... tends to follow traditional academic conventions and ... does not shy away from the authorial voice. (p. 3)

Whist ostensibly a book about postmodernism, this was not intended to be a postmodern book; although exactly what such a book might look like is, of course, open to debate. (p. 92)

It was never our intention to court the label “postmodernist”. (p. 184)

The authors do actually give some hints as to what they believe a postmodern book about organization theory might look like. They even point to Gibson Burrell’s *Pandemonium* (1997) as an example.¹ They suggest that, unlike theirs, a postmodern book might include “a seemingly endless disassembling or deconstruction of the taken-for-granted assumptions of modern science” (p. 2). They also hint towards such a book as being based on “epistemological and ethical relativism”, “rejection of a linear narrative”, “emphasis on a reflexive style of writing”, the avoidance of “traditional academic conventions”, and a shying away from the “authorial voice” (p. 3).

The book does a reasonable, albeit conservative, job of introducing postmodernism as it might be written about by authors who do not wish to be tarred with the brush of postmodern writing. To situate the book in these terms makes any review that I might have written problematic. Should I have chosen to write a postmodern review of a non-postmodern book about postmodernism? Maybe it should be a non-postmodern review

1 Ironically, however, while Hancock and Tyler are very careful to tell us that their book is not postmodern, in Burrell’s text he seems to feel little need to tell us that his is.

about the postmodernism in a non-postmodern book? Perhaps I am fortunate in that as well as positioning their own identities in relation to postmodernism, they also construct identity positions for their readers. In what seems like a pre-emptive defence against reviewers, the authors are concerned about possible reactions to the book. They place their potential critics neatly into two camps: “those who are hostile to the meta-theoretical claims of postmodernism” and “those who have defended the radical claims of postmodernism” (p. 184).² From the former they fear that the book will appear as a

hapless attempt to promote a perspective on organizations that represents little more than a misappropriation of what is, at best, a fanciful creation of disenchanted European intellectuals, or, at worst, a deliberate attempt to obscure the introduction of a reactionary agenda within the social sciences. (*ibid*)

From the latter they fear being

decried as little more than unreconstructed modernists, dabbling in ideas beyond our grasp and, in turn, perpetuating the follies of modernist social science that would have best been discarded. (*ibid*)

What is interesting in their defensive reactions is that the authors do seem to expect the book to be read by people (such as myself) who are outside of the audience for whom, in their introduction, they state that the book is intended (students). The sort of students who they refer to do not seem to me to be the type of people who spend their time decrying people as ‘disenchanted European intellectuals’ or ‘unreconstructed modernists’. Such banter is more commonly that of the seasoned academic. Further, the trouble with creating identity slots for readers to step into is that, contrary to the authors predictive expectations, readers responses to the book may fall into neither of the camps that they posit: some readers may want to make up their own minds. Where possible, the present reviewer likes to think of himself as one such iconoclast!

As I stated at the outset I commend the authors on achieving their aim “to draw together and introduce students of work and its organization to the literature and ideas that have been generated by the increasing interest in postmodernism” (p. 211). It is precisely in this strength, however, that I found the book problematic. Its attempts at *drawing together* seem to try too hard and claim too much – at times bordering on a claim to do my (the reader’s) thinking for me. As if by nature, I resist. Introducing postmodernism need not be a matter of pre-digesting it for others. As the authors suggest themselves, a contribution of postmodernism has been the emergence of new critical questions, new sensibilities and an “opening up of the range of ways of thinking about that which has previously been subsumed under the hierarchical modes of cognition that the Enlightenment left in its wake” (p. 96). Yet, in praising this ‘opening up’, the authors seem quite willing to draw together and close down – to make a definitive statement that purports to pin down something whose contribution, as I see it, has been its dynamism and its preparedness to unpin that which has been fastened on the specimen boards of those who delight in the dissection of wholes into their disjointed parts.

2 Interestingly, elsewhere (p. 212) they chastise Robert Chia for what they see as his dichotomous approach to modernism and postmodernism.

I agree with the authors that this book is not postmodern. Such agreement, however, is not because the book doesn't reject traditions of linearity and conventional academic genre, nor because it avoids rhetorical techniques of irony and relativism. Instead, it is not a postmodern book because, rather than engaging with postmodernism, it tries to totalise it. Turning back to the mythical student who I introduced at the beginning of the review – yes, I would suggest that they read this book. I would also suggest that it should not be the only book *about* postmodernism and organization theory that they read.

reference

Burrell, G. (1997) *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*. London: Sage.

the author

Carl Rhodes is Senior Research Fellow in the Research Centre for Organizational, Vocational and Adult Learning (OVAL Research) at the University of Technology Sydney. He is the author of *Writing Organization* (Benjamins, 2001), co-author of *Reconstructing the Lifelong Learner* (Routledge Falmer, 2003) and co-editor of *Research and Knowledge at Work* (Routledge, 2000). Current research interests include ethics and managerial subjectivity, critical representation of organizations in popular culture and the politics of writing about organizations.

Address: OVAL Research, Faculty of Education, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia.

Web: http://www.education.uts.edu.au/ostaff/staff/carl_rhodes.html

E-Mail: carl.rhodes@uts.edu.au