

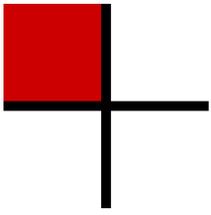
volume 4, number 1 (february 2004)

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Handle with Care

Campbell Jones and Steffen Böhm

Renan's hope for 'the future of science'...is of no consequence because *Woman* [La *femme*] doesn't exist. But the fact that she doesn't ex-sist doesn't stop me from making her the object of one's desire. Quite the opposite, whence the consequences. (Jacques Lacan, *Television*)

Lacan's notorious proposition 'woman does not exist' has sacrificed its meaning to a certain shock value. The proposition's notoriety has blocked serious efforts to understand what is actually shocking about it: its reliance on a definition of being as plural and partial, as small objects of the drive. (Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's no Woman*)

'Organization Studies Does Not Exist'

Given all that talk of paradigm proliferation, pluralism and other apparent open-mindedness, you might have thought that Lacan had the perfect slogan to explain the fundamental gap that organization theorists continually encounter. The fact that, on one side of the divide, certain managerial writers continually confront a world that is fraught with division, conflict, resistance, and so forth, while on the other side so-called critical writers fail to understand why it is that their managerial enemies are unable to theorise conflict.

Following Lacan, this deadlock is not so much an 'error' as it is the recognition of the nature of the Thing. This experience of rubbing up against the Real is, he suggests, a quite normal experience. And the Real is not something which the managerialists fail to see while the critics see it clearly. Perhaps the Real is the very impasse that holds them at odds with one another, forever unable to communicate with one another. Both deluded by the strange suggestion that they might actually be talking about the same thing.

In this respect Burrell and Morgan (1979), and later Morgan (1986), far from being perspectival or relativistic, as has been suggested (e.g. Thompson, 1993), fail to take their perspectivalism to its logical, that is, radical conclusion. They glimpse something which is undeniable, and which is after all a commonplace today. In brief, *we all see organization differently*. But here they stop and recoil from the horror that there might be a gaping hole staring them in the face – a hole they are unable to theorise. This gaping hole is the point at which they stop, and rush to pile up theory upon theory,

perspective on perspective. But this theoretical gesture hides a deeper fear of actually confronting the thing that is perhaps most in need of theoretical reflection, which is, that the very thing they hope to speak of has reached the point of no return. After Burrell and Morgan, and others, had opened it up, organization studies was burst asunder (with a little whimpering here and there as it gasped for its last breath).

Proliferation: Of Cure, Potions, and Poisons

Resuscitation is therefore the only chance, but then we could always engage in denial and invoke a return from the death that we deny has ever taken place. The publishing industry is to blame, obviously. If the publishing industry was content to bury it, it now has no shame in exhumation. Why would the publishing industry concern itself with something so trifling as the demise of the object of scientific inquiry? After all, they know which side their bread is buttered on. So, in recent years they have set about an increasingly ambitious series of publications that would try to collect, once and for all, the state of knowledge about organization. Handbooks, of organization studies. The main advantage of these collections is said to be the efficiency of fitting a wide raft of pieces in the palms of your hands, and hence the title or subtitle of ‘handbook’. As such, these handbooks are designed to be carried, used and situated within arms reach, with little fuss or effort. One of the first of these grand publications was Clegg, Hardy and Nord’s *Handbook of Organization Studies* (1996), but since then a wave of handbooks has hit the library shelves of academia; almost every publisher with an invested interest in organization studies has included one of these handbooks in their catalogues.

The purpose of this issue of *ephemera* is to critically investigate this publishing phenomenon. Approaching these handbooks, we asked contributors of this issue to consider three possible explanations: First, these handbooks might be the result of the natural and quite benign development of organization studies as it progresses towards maturity and a more refined paradigmatic status (whether refinement equals unity or heterogeneity, it is the same story). Second, these handbooks might represent an imperialist urge to render transparent the totality of a field – in this case ‘organization studies’ or ‘organization theory’ – to provide a clear mapping of the lay of the land, one that will be comprehensive, complete and totalising. Third, the emergence of these collections is symptomatic of the political economy of publishing today in which academic books are mainly commissioned in terms of their rate of return from university library sales.

So, the whole issue is a collection of what might be thought of as ‘book reviews’, although there is perhaps more going on than this. This issue considers this ‘handbook’ phenomenon in some detail, as a way of getting a grasp on contemporary developments in organization studies and the publishing apparatuses that mediate the formation and legitimation of knowledge. The tenor of the review essays collected here is not traditional in the sense of clearly and sequentially laying out the contents of the handbook (a reverse totalization). Instead, the contributions are more sporadic and diverse in form, offering critical incisions at unexpected points. Like the mayfly that is

the team mascot of the *ephemera* project, the goal will not be one of building another edifice, but one of dropping little bits of poo at carefully chosen spots.

Although we did not want to limit critical scholarly readings of these books by imposing an interpretive grid, we offered our authors some preliminary ideas as triggers for the project that we had in mind, calling into question the procedures of publication that try to put the house of organization studies back into order. These questions included:

1. The question of the meaning of 'reviewing'. Taking on books of this size and apparent magnitude raises all sorts of procedural questions for a reviewer, and perhaps threatens to disrupt traditional expectations (in terms of length, but also of style) of the 'book review';
2. The politics of the publishing industry. This is a complex issue, bringing together issues relating to academic output, library budgets, publisher profitability and the accumulation process more broadly. Noting that, although there is a lot more to this industrial mechanism than this, the price of these handbooks makes them almost exclusively library collections;
3. There is something poignant about the tool-like nature of these books. The very term 'handbook' points to practicality, accessibility, convenience and authority. The abdication of the reader's responsibility for independent thought? All that a reader needs to do for enlightenment is consult the correct section of the helpfully arranged index (if there is one);
4. The tactile phenomenology of these handbooks. From their physical production to the semiology of design, these handbooks convey weightiness and authority. Oddly enough, very few of these handbooks fit in one's hand;
5. The metaphors of the relation of the 'hand' to the 'book'. Some might note related wordplays: from Heideggerian jokes about tools and hammers, to themes of handiwork and bricolage; from hand-me-downs and the performative instance in which the violated demands to be 'unhanded', to the underhand and strong-handed tactics of contemporary managerial practice;
6. With these handbooks there is often an explicit claim that the said handbook represents the complete 'body' of knowledge of organization. This capturing of a corpus of work reminds us of an organism that has reached its limit, is no longer growing and on the verge of death. The theme of the moribund, rotting flesh and decay persists;
7. Finally, the institution of 'organization studies' as a thing. Thus, there are questions of legitimacy and power to be explored insofar that an implicit narrative of what constitutes 'organization studies' is assumed in any rendering of the field in this way.

Preview

Let us briefly introduce the review essays collected in this issue. First, André Spicer opens the *Blackwell Companion to Organizations*, edited by Baum (2002). After considering a set of problems with the writing genre of the 'review', he identifies 'dividing' as one of the main purposes and outcomes of the publication of handbooks.

Although handbooks give us the impression of laying out the field of organization studies in its totality, they divide and dissect this area of enquiry along specific lines. Spicer does not condemn the act of dividing as such. Instead, he calls for examining and critiquing the specific ways ‘dividing’ takes place. He shows how Baum’s handbook includes and therefore privileges North American managerialists and excludes more critical, European voices. But Spicer also tries to read the *Companion* affirmatively. By using a set of chapters on institutional theory to advise, and intervene in, the anti-capitalist movement – which, in his view, currently faces a set of important organizational dilemmas – as a companion he translates and radicalises his handbook.

In addition to his affirmative translation, Spicer also offers a ‘traditional’ review of Baum’s Handbook, which appears in a footnote. This gesture is perhaps symptomatic about the way the genre of the ‘review’ is treated in this issue of *ephemera*. Instead of marginalizing the ‘review’ – reviews are normally short descriptions and evaluations of the contents and argument of a book that appear in distant corners of academic journals, and that are often not recognised by research assessment bodies as ‘proper’ academic contributions and research output – the ‘review’ takes centre stage here. The reviews collected in this issue decentre normal academic practices of ‘reviewing’ and become important contributions in their own right.

In the second review Mark Tadjewski reviews *The Oxford Handbook of Organization Theory*, in which the editors – Tsoukas and Knudsen (2003) – explicitly aim to collect ‘meta-theoretical’ views of organization theory. Raising questions about the way that debates from the philosophy of science and the paradigm debate are presented, Tadjewski points to the shortcomings of the way Tsoukas and Knudsen theorise and execute their ‘meta-theoretical’ approach to looking at organization studies. He discusses a range of authors, such as Ritzer, Feyerabend and Kuhn, whose work – who are neglected (but alluded to, as if they were important) by the editors and many authors in this handbook – is regarded by Tadjewski as being essential when outlining the concept of ‘meta-theory’.

The next two reviews offer commentaries on two monumental handbook-type collections that span over altogether twelve volumes. First, Peter Fleming engages with Routledge’s *Organizational Studies: Critical Perspectives on Business and Management*, edited by the Warwick Organizational Behaviour Staff (2001), and then Campbell Jones takes on Sage’s 8-volume-monster *Central Currents in Organization Studies*, edited by Clegg (2002). As Routledge’s collection explicitly aims to offer *critical* perspectives on organization studies, Fleming’s review is mainly interested in assessing the understanding of critique and the deep pessimism he detects in their way of seeing, or rather not seeing, possibilities of progress. While he acknowledges the importance of being critical about an unquestioned historical progress, he laments the absence of a translation of this historical pessimism into a meaningful political critique that is able to engage effectively into today’s conjuncture and see possibilities of how things may genuinely improve and get better. Jones’ review is also concerned to evaluate the editorial and political framing of handbooks. Specifically, he is interested in aspects of the production of Clegg’s colossal Archive, *Central Currents*. By identifying a series of shortcomings in Clegg’s archival activity, Jones raises questions about the economic and political ends of the production of handbooks.

Roy Jacques considers Sorge and Warner's *The IEBM Handbook of Organizational Behaviour* (2000), asking questions from the viewpoint of a practitioner. Suggesting that much of today's academic output is self-indulgent, esoteric and not intended to be usable by people outside academia, he extends some of Spicer's lines regarding the 'using' of handbooks – although their arguments are of course very different in their theory and practice. He revisits the theory/practice debate, drawing attention to the dangers of what he calls the 'great divorce'.

Cliff Oswick reviews a book that does not aim to provide a totalising view of organization studies – or so it seems at first glance. Westwood and Clegg's (2003) *Debating Organization: Point-Counterpoint in Organization Studies* is not explicitly a 'handbook' that shows off its authority by way of an impressive price-tag. Instead, it tries to provide an overview of key themes in organization studies by engaging in *debate*. Although Oswick appreciates some of the goals of Westwood and Clegg, he points to some serious problems of the way that they have framed the question of 'debate'. Instead of genuinely generating polyphonic insights, Oswick argues that the binaristic set-up of the book's debates builds artificial barricades limiting the possibility of dialogue and complimentary understandings.

In the final review in this issue Damian O'Doherty takes us on a fieldtrip through the *Financial Times Handbook of Management: On the State of the Art*, edited by Crainer and Dearlove (2001). Like most other contributions to this review issue, O'Doherty's text is not a 'review' in the traditional sense of this term. Rather, he literally re-views this Handbook; he repeats its textual and visual fragments in order to produce a delirium of a composition – a bricolage of psychedelic dreams of management. O'Doherty reads across the Handbook; he uses it – in a radical way – to produce a new and different text that hopes to reveal the phantasmagoric nature of this managerialist bible. He uses the 'state of the art' and turns it into a new art form, delivering an uncompromising indictment to the *Financial Times'* view of the state of the art, and in doing so, a way of thinking the state of the art quite differently.

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