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Strawberries for Gregor

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review of: **A. Sorge and M. Warner (eds.) (2000) *The IEBM Handbook of Organizational Behaviour*. Thomson Learning.** (PB: pp.768, £38, ISBN 1861526342)

> As he fled the machine, Gregor ran, nauseous and terrified, past severed limbs and lifeless corpses which littered the workshop. Within the temporary safety afforded by a pile of shattered furnishings, he thumbed frantically through The Handbook, seeking a way to disenable the rampaging machine. Desperately, he turned to the chapter headed 'Emergency Procedures;' in despair he read: *The present handbook...does not offer readily usable or 'cookbook' knowledge... It accentuates enlightenment in the expectation that the enlightened practitioner will be sufficiently clever to be practically innovative.* (Franz Kafka, *In the Laboratory*)

One will note the lack of an affiliation following my name above. For about a dozen years I was actively involved in teaching and publication in organization studies, and I may return to these roles at some future point, but for the past four years I have identified primarily as a business-person, first in building the *Ravenheart of Sedona* coffee shop group, which I recently sold, and presently as the principal in a venture to franchise a turnkey coffee shop package. So, I approach this review having contributed to writing theoretical esoterica and also as 'the practitioner.'

Based on preliminary thoughts shared by the editors of this volume, I gather they are sceptical of the growing number of handbook and encyclopaedia projects in our field, in large part because they see behind this trend the danger of unified dogmatism. That would be an unfortunate eventuality, but one only marginally worse than the existing state of fragmented dogmatism. If well edited, I see encyclopaedias as relatively benign objects. It is becoming more and more difficult to stay abreast of knowledge in an increasingly scattered domain. Encyclopaedias could potentially abet this difficulty. As for handbooks, the more the merrier. One might, indeed, ask why a half-century old field which claims legitimation as an applied science does not judge its success or failure *primarily* based upon the amount of problem-solving assistance provided to people attempting to create and operate organizations. As Habermas might have said about Modernity, the fact that it has not been done well yet does not mean that it is without potential. Of course, a major caveat is that the handbook has to be useful.

As I wish to review the present handbook sympathetically, I begin by asking, 'what is a handbook?' It is nearly tautological to presume that a handbook is a book one keeps at hand. Why, then, might one keep a book handy? Unless one is heading towards the loo with *Middlemarch*, probably because the volume at hand is useful in problem solving. This raises two immediate questions: To whom might the handbook apply? What problems might it assist one in addressing?

Thus the leitmotif above. The excerpt is not from Kafka, of course, but it is only partially fabricated. The italicized passage is quoted from pages *vii* and *viii* of the *IEBM Handbook of Organizational Behaviour*. Upon reading it, my immediate question was, 'In what altered reality does one produce a handbook with the stated intention of *avoiding* readily usable knowledge?' I am ambivalent as to how to evaluate a handbook produced with this goal. The goal has been admirably accomplished, but why would one set this as a goal?

Offhand, I can think of three audiences for a handbook of OB. These would be (1) business-people, (2) graduate students and professors, (3) undergraduate business students. As textbooks constitute more or less a handbook for undergraduates, we are left with two potential audiences whose needs diverge greatly. My experience with business-people and as a business-person is that we are almost exclusively concerned with practical problem solving. This is not because we are lower animals who think only with our brainstems. It is a simple result of role and responsibility. When one is running a business, one's business reality is an endless procession of problems needing attention. However great one's hypothetical interest may be in 'accentuating enlightenment,' reflection is what one dreams of indulging in when writing one's memoirs. So, if Sorge and Warner's 'handbook' is not written for daily use in practice, perhaps it is intended for the organizational researcher and/or teacher?

For these constituencies, I can imagine a useful handbook only within an area well defined by a thematic boundary. For instance, a well-executed *Handbook of Institutional Theory* might be somewhat coherent as a reference source to keep at hand. A *Handbook of Actor-Network Theory* would be a stretch because of the newness of the area, yet it is not impossible to imagine. A *Handbook of Postmodernism* would be a self-negating joke, as there is little commonality binding those who have assumed – or who have been the lucky recipients of – this label. What problem would one attempt to address in a Postmodern way? I can, however, imagine an *encyclopaedia* of Postmodernism, a volume whose domain is defined as writing to date that might collect and offer background for the understanding of organizational writers who have invoked that slippery signifier. An encyclopaedia is simply a collation. It does not carry a mandate to aid problem solving.

Introducing the handbook under review, Sorge and Warner implicitly reflect this distinction. The content of the *Handbook* consists of selections already available in the *International Encyclopaedia of Business and Management*. For purposes of review, then, it is irrelevant that the contributors to this volume are a distinguished and multinational lot. Some of the contributions are quite interesting, informative and/or challenging in their own right, but the question this review must answer is whether there is justification in republishing them as a putative 'handbook.'

As with Gregor, my hope began to fade upon learning that this book is intended to *not* be readily usable. It disappeared entirely when I encountered, in the introductory essay, the homogenizing fantasy that, "Organization [*sic*] behaviour has now emerged as a well-grounded interdisciplinary field" (p. 27). This is the legitimating fairytale we use in undergraduate texts about the march of progress in the field. It invariably ends with the assertion that the field is 'about to become' a paradigmatic science. My oldest source of this fairytale is dated 1847 (Jacques, 1996). Waiting for the Messiah is legitimate as religious activity, but it is quite out of place in what is presented as an empirical discipline. Invoking such a platitude in a volume directed toward informed insiders runs the dual risk of misguiding the reader and discrediting the authors. There has been widespread lamentation for decades – and by defenders of the *status quo* – documenting that the evidence ceases to fit the plot of this smooth trajectory starting at least as early as 1970. The goal of knowledge development is not served by masking the paradigmatic disagreements and internal lamentations of disciplinary stagnation or fragmentation.

A final barrier to the use of this volume as a handbook for the theorist or teacher is the lack of a unifying theme, which I stated above would be necessary if this book is to be something other than redundant with the organizational encyclopaedia whence the selections came. The volume, instead, is edited with the apparent goal of comprehensively covering the terrain of organizational behaviour – as well as much of organization theory, a bit of business strategy and a smattering of operational research. Speaking as a theorist, it is quite unclear to me what the logical domain or the pedagogical purpose of these selections might be. So, I return to wondering if this volume is intended for the practitioner.

But this still seems unlikely. For instance, the first section of the book consists of one hundred thirty pages of 'theoretical approaches and paradigms.' Imagine, by analogy, a *Handbook of Plumbing* which begins with a dozen chapters examining contemporary theoretical debates in the science of hydraulics and theoretical physics. The practitioner's interest in the physics and metaphysics of hydraulics can quite likely be summed up in four words I once heard from a trades school instructor: 's**t doesn't flow uphill.' Paradigmatic debates are unlikely to be salient when sewage is washing across the living room carpet.

There are two more features of this volume which are likely to be experienced negatively by 'the practitioner.' A minor point, perhaps, but one indicative of the editorial perspective, is the fact that it ends with twenty thumbnail biographies which, with the sole exception of Henry Ford, illustrate how theorists have solved the problem of creating theory. Business people are avid readers of biographies, but a perusal of the local bookseller's business section would illustrate conclusively that this interest is directed at stories which tell how people *in* business solved their problems.

The second, more fatal, problem is that neither the contents nor the index are ordered with reference to problems of practice. They are ordered with reference to concepts, debates and individuals of importance to theorists. Both the biographies and the referencing are indicative of the output-driven nature of organizational studies at this point in time. This, perhaps, more than any individual failings of Sorge & Warner, is the problem on which we should focus.

The Great Divorce: Theory and Practice

In 1988, when I went to my first Academy of Management meeting, the conference theme was *The Marriage of Theory and Practice*. This must have been an especially unhappy marriage because I have seldom seen the two partners together. Fifteen years later, I was unable to find a single presentation in the 2003 Academy of Management program that I could profitably share with my managers.

As both mainstream and critical approaches to the study of organization increasingly address problems of interest to theorists, practitioners have less and less reason to follow what is occurring in the business school. In my academic career, I regularly heard the question, 'where are the practitioners?' Sometimes, this was asked with the implicit subtext that the practitioner fails to know what is good for him or her. Other times, it is asked to query how research can be more effectively communicated to the practitioner. Seldom does anyone recognize that perhaps there is simply little of use to the practitioner occurring in the business school. That, however, is largely the case at present. It has not always been so.

If one looks at the periods when organization studies was making rapid strides – the late 1800s, immediately following the Great War, again in the 1950s – we find that the studies which were foundational to these periods of vitality generally emerged from collaborations between employers and researchers. More to the point, the objects of study central during these periods were questions whose answers mattered greatly to the employers whose resources made the research possible. This is not to suggest that organizational research should be dictated only by the needs of top management; I am already critical of the field for being too biased in that direction. But research in public health is dictated by public illness. Research cannot be directed at the researcher until the researcher community is independently capable of funding itself.

In my view, the last period of great vitality in organization studies was the 1950s, stretching into the late 1960s. What has followed has increasingly been, to borrow an image from Yeats, the rattle of pebbles under a receding wave. In the average Organizational Behaviour textbook, the core of knowledge presented is pre-1970. What is more recent could be described with little distortion as an attempt to hang patches for current events onto an increasingly outdated core – power in organizations, organizational culture, 'managing' diversity, 'paradigms,' international management, entrepreneurship, business ethics. These are all worthy topics, but their motley addition to the knowledge base is one indication of a field without a sense of mission to serve any identifiable clients.

Rectifying this drift has been made almost impossible by a dominant dogma, gradually emergent through the twentieth century, which makes it axiomatic to believe that the knowledge base of the field can be expressed in the form of statistically testable hypotheses. Had the question been formulated as, 'How can hypothesis testing assist the development of organizational knowledge?' statistical analysis could have been a toolkit of great usefulness. Instead, the question has been formulated as, 'How can organizational knowledge be expressed in the form of testable hypotheses?' Well, it can't. The knowledge amenable to hypothetico-deductive analysis is, and will remain, a

subset of the knowledge necessary for effective operation in organizations. The great optimism held for this project in the 1950s (read the first issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* for a revealing snapshot) has, of necessity, given way to pessimism, as, in one area of investigation after another, hundreds or thousands of studies have resulted in explanation of less than 10% of the relevant variance. Today, it is difficult to find a relationship between highly researched organizational variables which cannot be summarized as, 'researchers differ regarding the significance of this relationship and further research is indicated.'

The mere failure thus far to validate key organizational relationships could be spun as a mere practical problem – too few monkeys and too few typewriters. It is still possible that *some*day the facts will actually speak for themselves. Before that day comes, however, the object of analysis, the organization, will have changed beyond recognition. We are already at least a quarter-century past the first glimmer of realization that changing boundaries of technological possibility related mostly to the microchip and intertwined changes in the worldwide relationships of production and exchange are resulting in organizations significantly different (no pun intended) from those of the mid-twentieth century. These changing relationships are making the old core problems peripheral, while bringing to the fore new core problems. This is a fatal problem for a knowledge base founded on what Kuhn called 'puzzle solving' science because the puzzles being (putatively) solved are no longer puzzles of interest, yet new puzzle-solving research must be an elaboration of prior studies.

In a field governed by a mission to produce knowledge useful to an identified client base, the changing needs of this clientele would dictate the pace and direction of change in establishment of the core problems to which puzzle-solving elaboration could then be applied. However, severed from the concrete need of a constituency, Truth (and Tenure) can only derive from elaboration of past knowledge. Thus, while organizations change fundamentally in form, organizational knowledge cannot follow without structural changes to the machinery of knowledge.

Those who identify as critical theorists are largely free of the knowledge-development problems caused by normal science puzzle solving, but critical knowledge production is, if anything, more removed from practice than are mainstream approaches. Studies in the labour process are generally sympathetic to 'the employee,' but they are accessible to few employees. Much critical theorizing is internally focused on critiques of the field. Much is utopian in advocating values that can only become meaningful if there is fundamental change to the present order of things. Some is merely critical in that no constructive alternative to the phenomena criticized is offered.

I affirm the *potential* value of all these varieties of critical scholarship, an area which includes my own publication. What is lacking is a structural link of esoteric theory to practice. There is a paucity of institutional relationships that can apply critical perspectives to applied problems and that can direct critical efforts based on practitioner need.

So, while theorists are largely directing efforts toward the solution of problems defined by theorists, practitioners are developing theories-in-practice to meet a set of problems

posed by their experience. There is a theory and practice of theory and a separate theory and practice of practice. In a field legitimated as an applied science, this constitutes a fundamental crisis that is likely to threaten the vitality, possibly even the survival, of the field.

Fishing With Strawberries

In a book that is extremely popular, although not with theorists, Dale Carnegie wrote:

> Personally I am very fond of strawberries and cream, but I have found that for some strange reason, fish prefer worms. So, when I went fishing, I didn't think about what I wanted. I thought about what they wanted. I didn't bait the hook with strawberries and cream. Rather, I dangled a worm or grasshopper in front of the fish and said: "Wouldn't you like to have that?" Why not use the same common sense when fishing for people? (1936/1982: 32)

As expressed in Jacques (1996), I have serious concerns about the input-driven institutional practices of the management disciplines. I believe that if these practices continue they will result in increasing marginalization of the field from positions which permit influencing behaviour in organizations. The management disciplines have traditionally been legitimated as applied disciplines. This means we claim expertise in the use, not the production, of social theory. Our business 'suppliers' are departments of philosophy, psychology, sociology, engineering and others. Success in applying knowledge to organizational problems has not been steady, but there have been fecund times. This is not one of them. I believe two barriers stand in the way of – pardon my language – 'increasing productivity and effectiveness.'

Neither our increasing need to manage proliferating information nor the need to successfully apply knowledge in practice are served by output-driven publication practices. Today, academic output in the management disciplines is primarily of interest to academics because it is produced primarily to meet the needs of academics. The editors state that they desire to flit about, pooing at will. I respect their interest. However, I would welcome significantly less freedom of esotericism in the field if it were due to the fact that groups of researchers were clustering around significant practical problems of organizing rather than methodological dogma or theoretical ideology. *The IEBM Handbook of Organizational Behaviour* is yet another theoretical strawberry. How about a few more worms?

references

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