



Canonical Nostalgia

Martin Parker

review of:

C. Casey (2002) *Critical Analysis of Organizations: Theory, Practice, Revitalization*. London: Sage. (HB: pp.224, £70.00, ISBN 076195905X; PB: pp.224, £19.99, ISBN 0761959068)

Catherine Casey is keen to suggest that the world is changing, and that the social sciences are in crisis. The “postindustrial, postmodern capitalist conditions” (p.185) in which we now live need a new form of analysis which is up to the task. So how would one assess these sorts of assertions? After all, it is surely the case that every generation likes to believe that it stands on the hinge of history, yet many of the intellectuals who one might think would have a more measured understanding of their times seem to enjoy making such proclamations too. One could be cynical and suggest that this is mere marketing. To identify the new requires that you dispose of the old, but both operations must be carried out with style if they are to result in sales. ‘Bold’, ‘ambitious’ and ‘sweeping’ are likely to be helpful adjectives. If you are foolish enough to title your latest book, ‘A Few Small Modifications to Our Current Understandings’, don’t expect publishers to be knocking your door down. On the other hand, we might suggest that some academics actually do believe that the world is changing, and that they are its heralds. That they need the continuity of ancient institutions to secure their proclamations is rarely a problem, because they have read books that indicate what insecure lives are lived by others.

Then again, in the spirit of “painstaking reflexivity” (p.3) that Casey commends, we could suggest that the announcement of radical breaks might be a political act intended to achieve radical breaks, and not merely recognise them. But such a judgement would have to depend on what was being broken from. Since ‘post-whatever’ seems to be common sense amongst so many nowadays, perhaps an insistence on continuity would be a more critical gesture – a position many Marxists currently occupy. But Casey really wants to be rupturing and suturing at the same time, the former in terms of her analysis of the present age, the latter in terms of her attempt to rescue elements of classical sociology from a certain neglect. This is (as she is well aware) an essentially Durkheimian agenda. Within the university, she says, grand themes and shared projects have gone out of fashion and been replaced by a babble of small theories. This state of

affairs generates a sort of anomic incommensurability, in which academics stay in their own cells, and avoid too much ambition. Symptomatic of this problem is postmodernism, a set of ideas which runs the risk of being a “degenerative, idiosyncratic and incorporated fantasy offering neither critical practice nor ethical principle” (p.140). This is clearly a bad thing.

Just as well then that Casey offers, in magisterial tones, a “new sociology” (p.4) which will re-vitalize the critical analysis of organisations. This will be a ‘sober and serious’ treatment of both classical sociology, and of the “moral and practical dilemmas to which postmodernism has given rise” (p.2). This is a book with big ambitions, and the author wants us to know it by writing in big sentences. One might even be tempted to suggest that this is a book which (again following Casey’s ‘painstaking reflexivity’) tells us rather a lot about the constitution of the identity of some academics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If, as Casey suggests, “identity pursuits ... are themselves a fragmentation of culture” (p.181), then this book could be read as a clever illustration of the very problems that she claims to identify. She wishes to ‘revitalize’ intellectual enquiry, and neatly illustrate how her academic identity is both the result of, and the precondition for, making such a diagnosis in the first place. People who work alone in ivory towers think they see so much further than everyone else.

Most of the first two thirds of the book summarises the classical and modern traditions of organisational sociology. Whilst her coverage of the Marx, Weber and Durkheim tradition is perfectly adequate, as soon as she begins to deal with material that she is less sympathetic to, her coverage begins to descend into shorthand and parody. Fair enough perhaps if this was an introductory textbook aimed at undergraduates, but it won’t really do when the audience appears to be fellow academics interested in organisation theory. However, her sketchy summaries of often un-named ‘postmodernists’ allows her to stay above the dull matter of dealing with what people actually wrote, and instead tell the reader what all this ‘means’. Lucky reader.

Leaving Casey’s grand pronouncements and poor scholarship to one side for a moment, there was one part of the book that did begin to put forward an empirical argument about social change. When Casey writes about new age movements in organisations, she begins to nicely echo a Durkheimian sense of the progressive possibilities of a new civic religion. Is it possible, she asks, that increasing reference to spirituality and downshifting indicate a form of resistance to the rationalisation of modern organisational life? Could we be witnessing a “laicization of the sacred” (p.175)? Or, following Touraine and others, is it possible to suggest that becoming a subject is the beginnings of a resistance to authoritarian forms of control?

These are interesting questions, and to answer them we might decide to discover something about who was doing what, where and how often, and whether this was new. In other words, like the classical sociologists that Casey praises, to do some ‘sober and serious’ empirical work. Instead, in support of a grand theory of social change, we get twenty-six pages of recounted conversations, observations and summaries of guru books from various parts of the developed world. All rather interesting and suggestive, but to claim that this section can reasonably be titled ‘after postmodernism’ seems to be taking generalisation rather too far. To talk to Geoff in London about numerology and then

claim that “Beyond subjectification and alienation, the subject-actor returns” (p.171) is a bit like claiming that witches exist because your neighbour told you so. Casey might well want to argue that there is a “renewed seeking of traditional cultural communalism” (p.176), but Robert Putnam’s gigantic multi-method study of social capital in the US (2000) seems to indicate the opposite. And if she wants to argue that management references to humanising work are new, then perhaps she would like to look at Beder (2000) and Parker (2000), both of whom provide plenty of evidence to the contrary.

This is a book written by someone who works in a B-School, but that claims to be ‘for’ sociology. Indeed, it offers the revitalization of sociology. So what are we to make of sentences like the following? “As leaders of the business world already know, the coming decades of the twentieth century will be about consciousness” (p.185). This claim is then supported by a reference (in an endnote) to a consultant who the author heard claiming that he had heard a McKinsey executive say this at a conference the previous year. This is no sociology that I recognise. Perhaps it is better described as a religion. One in which its adherents believe that using words like re-enchantment, revitalisation and resacralization has magical powers. One in which sermons are legitimate forms of argument, and that the words of the preacher are more important than the evidence of our eyes and ears. One in which certain texts become sacred, whilst others are so profane that they should not even be given the dignity of a careful reading. One in which words like ‘reflexivity’ are uttered, but not employed, and moral condemnations are uttered, but politics begins and ends with grand speculations. A shame that announcing revitalisation reads so much like the final nail in the coffin.

references

- Beder, S. (2000) *Selling the Work Ethic: From Puritan Pulpit to Corporate PR*. London: Zed Books.
Parker, M. (2000) *Organisational Culture and Identity*. London: Sage.
Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

the author

Martin Parker works at the University of Leicester Management Centre. He has written on a variety of things, and is usually an intemperate reviewer. He hopes that Catherine Casey never reads his review of her book, for which he would like to apologise in advance.
Address: Professor of Organisation and Culture, Management Centre, University of Leicester, Leicester, LE1 7RH.
E-mail: m.parker@le.ac.uk