'Why is a raven like a writing desk?'

Mark de Rond

review of

O'Doherty, D. P. (2017) *Reconstructing Organization: The Loungification of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan (HB pp v + 324, ISBN 978-1-137-48920-3)

Damian O'Doherty's *Reconstructing Organization* is a wild tale of bob cuts and cats and talking chairs, set within the confines of Manchester airport. Rarely has a steel and concrete waiting room (for that is what airports are to its visitors, if not its employees) seemed more vivacious and colourful. Think *Alice's Wonderland* with its strange and curious creatures, the author its likeable, excitable, Mad Hatter.

The book draws on two-and-a-half years of good old-fashioned fieldwork at Manchester airport, just a few miles down the road from Damian's office, in the parish of Ringway, 'a small and almost forgotten community that lies somewhere in the borderlands of Manchester and Cheshire'. It tells of the becoming of a project within one of the airport's terminals – an Escape Lounge – constructed over nine months between August 2009 and June 2010, at a budgeted cost of £1.7m.

Airports are the sorts of places many of us will go to some lengths to avoid. It is here that people trolley the wrecks that have become their lives to the promise of paradise – Tenerife, Lanzarote, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, La Palma, and the like – only to be met by queues of the fussy and argumentative, processed in turn by people traffickers in primary colours. While universities and the army may

have moved on from the hay-days of David Lodge, airports largely haven't. If ever an honest day's work was done by organizational ethnographers, this surely must be it.

The Escape Lounge was to provide respite for those on the move from others on the move, and provides a good focal point to this account. This ethnography does not lack in originality: the author pulls no punches in extracting his pound of flesh from the concrete jungle that is Manchester's finest. It is well written. The author has clearly thought a great deal about the organization of work around the airport generally, and that of the lounge project in particular. All this makes for an interesting, if not always straightforward, read.

Part of what makes this ethnography unusual is the realisation that we find ourselves caught in the author's ruminations. There is little sense of 'being there, being them', or the rich description that has traditionally been the mainstay of ethnography. Few details are provided of the airport and surroundings, its people and their everyday preoccupations. One cannot help but feel like this is a reflection on fieldwork far more than a cultural description of the world of others – we spend far more time in the Damian's head than in the field – suggesting a predilection for theorizing over story telling.

Along similar lines, Fabian Muniesa, in the book's Postscript, says: 'What we need is not ethnography. What we need is Foucault, Deleuze, Sloterdijk, Adorno, Marx, Leibniz and Spinoza. And Samuel Beckett to that matter' (p. 273). Perhaps. But whatever happened to richly detailed, descriptive accounts – Goffman, Becker, Hughes and Geertz come to mind – as the substance from which to construct provisional explanations of social life? Goffman's gorgeously meticulous descriptions of life inside total institutions and on the Shetland Islands, for example, still rank among the most influential writings in sociology today, yet are relatively theory-light. O'Doherty's two-and-a-half years of fieldwork could, and should, have provided such rich fare and yet where in the book did it go? Why spotlight the work of others (the book contains some 700 individual references) over one's own quite so much?

The resulting book is a smörgåsbord of theories but with no real sense of how they connect to the fieldwork or indeed add up to a meaningful whole. While Damian is clearly a clever guy, and well-read, it isn't always clear how what he saw and recorded over two-and-a-half years of observation (as opposed to what he read during this period, prior to it, and subsequently) shaped his theoretical agenda. Aside from regret at missing out on the action, this observation had me mull over what (too) often felt like an imposition of theory/theories over

observation, even as the author himself argues for the import of 'resisting the temptation to precipitously explain away ...' the observed.

Along similar lines, I felt uneasy at times with what felt like reductive descriptions, for example, of business schools and managerial types. While I have some sympathy with the critiques levied at both by critical management scholars, descriptions or allusions often felt like caricatures – Mad Men, The Office, that sort of thing – and unlike the mostly intelligent, thoughtful, and morally sensitive managers I've come to know over fifteen years or so of engagement. In my experience, managerial types often have little choice but to respond to scenarios that are substantially without precedent, with no real choice but to act before having all the relevant information, and to provide leadership in organizations with potentially little consensus on what matters most and why. James March (2005: 10) once described corporate leaders as toiling away at the great conflicts of life: a predilection toward equality and modesty versus an urge to power and self-assertion; a commitment to rationality, instrumentality, and the pursuit of self-interest versus a conception of duties, obligations, and the pursuit of justice; a desire for clarity, integration, coherence, and unity versus a propensity to ambiguity, inconsistency, and conflict; a claim of human significance versus an awareness of human absurdity and mortality. It is a description that, to me, seems kind of right (even if, no doubt, some will be true to stereotype). I'm afraid the characterization of corporate women and men in *Reconstructing organizations* leaves little scope for subtlety and variety.

I also found myself struggling to understand whatever was meant by 'loungification'. Perhaps this was the author's intention: to invite the reader into unpacking an as yet insufficiently defined empirical observation. Even so, the absence of a working definition left me full of self-doubt: what had I missed? What was I not seeing?

A promised introduction to loungification early in the book left something to be desired. On page 20, it is described as stringing together 'a "lash up" made up of a dispersed series of materials, ideas and subjects. In tracing this "lash up" loungification also helps adumbrate something like a fragile "crack" or "line of flight" that runs like a zigzag through the content and boundaries of formal organization'. We are told it is a bit like Gidden's structuration but not quite like it ... that it exists in 'the next five minutes'.

By page 95, I still had no real idea as to what was meant by loungification, though I'd meanwhile made peace with my inability to grasp what presumably would have been obvious to everyone else. Finally, on page 106 there is some welcome definition: 'to extract and then establish what it is that is specific to the

organization of the lounge takes considerable perseverance and patience, but it is towards this ambition that we have been using the placeholder concept "loungification"'. Or is there?

This is the closest we've come to a definition. By now I understand it to be something ontological ('to make headway in this peculiar ontology' as the author refers to it, and as Gibson Burrell blurbs: 'looking to explain ontologies-in-the-making') yet am thrown off course by a further amendment on page 107: 'loungification is a mode of ethnographic inquiry'. Really? Does this not propel it into the realm of epistemology or methodology?

On page 144, we are told that: 'What allows us to hold all these things together and to trace emergent patterns of organization is the deployment of this concept *loungification*. It is a concept that helps tune our attention to things in process ...' Right. So why not simply call it 'process' or a 'becoming'? What is loungification *uniquely*? Presumably it is something that connects the Wonderland that is Manchester's Escape Lounge with organized life more broadly but, at least to this reader, the concept remained just ever so slightly out of reach.

In Lewis Carroll's 1865 fantasy novel, the Mad Hatter is credited with the following riddle: 'Why is a raven like a writing desk?' When Alice finally gives up trying to figure out why, the Hatter admits, 'I haven't the slightest idea!'.

references

March, J.G. and T. Weil (2005) *On leadership: A short course.* Oxford: Blackwell.

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