



Toward A 'Pro-biotic' Study of Organizing

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review of:

Anshuman Prasad (ed.) (2003) *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB: pp.320, £42.50, ISBN: 0-312-29405-0)

[M]ore than two decades after the publication of Edward Said's masterpiece, *Orientalism* (1978), management and organizational scholarship mostly continues to ignore the postcolonial framework. How do we account for such indifference toward postcolonial theory? (Prasad, 2003: 287)

Perhaps, I began thinking as I reflected on this book, we should add a second hyphen to the term 'de-colon-izing' when speaking of organizational knowledge. The colonic metaphor resonates with a theory one of my mentors once espoused as the 'Pampers theory' of organizational knowledge production (Calàs, 1990). I will not go into that theory beyond noting in passing that Pampers is the trade name of a popular disposable nappie. Into a field ready for rigorous de-colon-ization, Prasad et al. have produced a valuable resource for developing more, well, 'probiotic' organizational knowledge, one contributing to better (post)colonic health. I encourage organizational theorists of all perspectives to make *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis* a part of their libraries.

Although I have been aware of postcolonial theory for well over a decade, I am excited by this book because previously I have known of no readily available starting point with an organizational/ managerial focus in this area. As a result, I have failed to incorporate it into my work. This has been less a matter of indifference, as the leitmotif above suggests; more a dilemma: On the one hand, I agree intellectually that to omit this area of critique from organization studies is unacceptable. On the other hand, I have seen far too many organizational phenomena trivialized as 'panoptic' by weekend Foucauldians, too many critiques called 'deconstruction' by analysts ignorant of Derrida, too much unquestioning reification of the questionable, for example, Rosenau's (1991) binarizing 'affirmative and sceptical' post-modernisms – the list can be extended. Even in the area discussed by Prasad et al. it is already possible to find studies claiming to be 'postcolonial' in which both the object of analysis and the theorizing are connected only tenuously to the central theorists or notions of postcoloniality (e.g., Styhre, 2002). It

would be sad were postcolonial theory to join every other radical insight since 'qualitative research' in becoming 'colon-ized', a necrotic testament to the peristaltic neutering power of the dominant discourse (cf., Stager Jacques, 2006). That this is its likely fate in any case does not excuse us from trying to prevent such colonization. What has been needed, then, for the interested novice, is an introduction that walks a fine line; summarizing, but not trivializing, highlighting without dogmatizing, analyzing while resisting cookbook methodolatry.

Prasad et al. are largely successful in achieving this. *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis* does not completely substitute for a rigorous introductory treatise on this subject; I would still welcome one [hint, hint, Dr. Prasad] – but it serves as a very useful introduction. The book is a collection of chapters by different authors and, as such, has certain limitations inherent in that genre. An introduction to the theoretical area is reduced to a single chapter when it deserves far more elaboration. There is a certain amount of introductory repetition ('Edward Said was...') and the chapters vary in quality and depth. However, this collection minimizes these limitations. Unlike the majority of collected editions, this will not be a book you begrudgingly keep for those one or two key chapters surrounded by unread filler. The quality of the contributions varies, but only in the range of adequate to excellent, with a skew toward the latter. Repetition has been minimized through apparently careful editing; only the repetition necessary for each chapter to stand as an autonomous piece remains. The collected-edition form also has some benefits. The variety of authors permits more range of topic and approach than would an introductory treatise and the form of a collected edition means that an instructor can more readily use one chapter out of context without doing violence to its conceptual integrity.

Postcolonial theorizing is deeply embedded in continental critical thought of the last several decades, so the reader unfamiliar with this material will have to do a bit of homework before trying to work with postcolonial thought. The reader new to this area of theory will find the editor's introduction and the concluding chapter by Prasad & Prasad helpful. Without introducing dogmatism, these chapters clearly outline and interpret some key concepts and theorists. Caution: The fact that Prasad et al. do not formulate a canon or dogma does not mean that one cannot be formulated based on their work as has, sadly, happened all too regularly in our field. It would be unfortunate if this volume were to be used to propagate simplistic analytical categories that facilitate calling oneself 'postcolonial' at the expense of doing anything that is in the spirit of postcolonial theorizing (à la Fairclough's (1989) colon-izing of Foucault).

Beyond the introductory chapters, the reader will find a rich sampler of contributions to this book. The chapters vary considerably in their degree of theoretical engagement; the strongest are chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 and 12. Overlapping with these, however, are the chapters which engage with an empirical issue, demonstrating ways that postcolonial theorizing can be applied to organizational thinking. Chapters 2, 8, 9, 10 and 11 demonstrate ways that postcolonial perspectives might be utilized to differently understand applied topics as varied as: imperial banking practices and microcredit as a form of resistance, the 'banal' colonizing power of financial reporting, the colonizing effects of information and communication technologies, and the socio-politics of uranium mining on aboriginal land in Australia. One theme uniting these articles is the

observation that ‘globalization’ is neither a benign nor a natural process, but a specific set of situated intentionalities which can be questioned and resisted.

For instance, the more case-oriented chapters were especially helpful to me in considering a situation I first learned about a few years ago when working as a vendor of Fair Trade coffee. As part of Viet Nam’s economic ‘recovery’ from French and American imperial wars, the World Bank – a putatively banal ‘aid’ institution – encouraged the government of Viet Nam to promote coffee production. In recent years, Viet Nam has moved from being a negligible coffee producer to being the second largest producer in the world. The result has been a potentially endless glut in a formerly stable market. Prices have plummeted. Producers who were previously living economically marginal lives have been further impoverished, while coffee’s Big 5, such as Nestlé and General Foods (each of which is larger, not only than Starbucks, but than the entire North American specialty coffee market) have reaped windfall profits.

How does one frame such a situation? Clearly, Viet Nam’s production of coffee has contributed to both great hardship and great profit. Demonstrably, those bearing the hardship are those who were not especially well off to begin with and those enjoying the profit are the relatively privileged. These facts are not greatly in dispute. The question is whether what happened was justifiable or not. The argument of coffee’s Big 5 has consistently been that prices are simply the result of impersonal market forces and that it is not just acceptable, but ethically incumbent on management to leave these forces undisturbed while seeking the lowest purchase price (invisible hands and all that). If one is not satisfied by this view, how does one frame a rebuttal? Marxian theory offers some relevant insights, but it is unsatisfyingly incomplete. Postcolonial theory, which is receptive to Marxian insights, offers a much richer basis for analysis. In order to actually write such an analysis, I would have to go well beyond the resources in Prasad et al., but this volume would be a valuable starting point.

Another strength of this book is the variety of ways it engages with extant bodies of theory in organization studies. These include organizational control (ch.2), culture (chs.3, 5), workplace resistance / resistance to change (ch.4), ethnography (ch.6), financial reporting (ch.8), the teaching of management (ch.9), enterprise technology in information systems (ch.10) and stakeholder theory (ch.11). This engagement underscores the broad applicability of postcolonial thought. Were one completely disinterested in the postcolonial world, this de-colonoscopy of organization studies is valuable as a means of illuminating assumptions and limitations of the field. Even if one rejects the critique of these authors, one will be likely to leave the engagement with new insights. For instance, after reading P. Prasad’s chapter discussing the embeddness of ethnography in relationships of colonization, I still affirm that there can be emancipatory potential in ethnographic approaches to research (as, I believe, would she), but I no longer assume that such approaches are inherently emancipatory or even inherently progressive.

Another important connection between postcolonial and other bodies of organizational theorizing is its inherently historical orientation. The chapters in this volume vary in the degree to which they discuss historical data explicitly, but a foundational assumption of postcolonial theory is that phenomena which today seem natural, real or inevitable seem

so only because of the sedimentation of past values and practices. This suggests synergy between postcolonial theorizing and the 'historic turn' in organization studies (*Management & Organizational History*, 1(1); Clark & Rowlinson, 2004). In chapter 3, Cooke takes this in an unexpected, yet productive direction, applying a postcolonial lens to the legacy of Kurt Lewin. In this chapter, the colonized are not indigenous people subject to an overt colonial regime, but African Americans colonized by knowledge practices, apartheid and oppression within a country where they are simultaneously indigenous and alien.

It should not pass without comment that Cooke is a Caucasian Englishman appropriating theory in which the experience of colonization is a source of authority. 'Can a white man sing the blues?', as the question was once framed in American musicology? There is no simple answer to this question. We have learned from men in feminism, straight people in gay and lesbian studies, white people in race studies, and others in analogous situations, that to speak as the Other is probably impossible, but, to exclude such 'compagnons de route' (Jardine, 1987) from having a voice is equally problematic. What, then, is the appropriate relationship between identity and authorial privilege? To ask this question of Cooke, raises it of the other contributors. To what extent should one be validated to speak authentically of the colonial experiences of 'Indians' simply because one was born in India? How much can a Chinese author speak for 'the' Chinese experience of Western colonization? The authors represented in this volume offer a breadth of experience that goes beyond the boundaries of Anglo-American scholarship; this should be a source of some authority, but how much? All write to an Anglo-American reader from a position of some privilege. I would have been appreciative of more reflection by the authors on their positioning as speakers with multiple, ambivalent identities within and without the colonizing discourses. My fear is that, without active dialogue on this point, we run the dual dangers of making experience and identity irrelevant – which is one kind of problem – or of according the truth of the matter only to those with membership in certain demographic categories – which is equally problematic.

The preceding underscores an important boundary of postcolonial theorizing. Several of the authors in this volume address the fact that postcolonial theory is not external to modernism, capitalism or the colonizing discourses, but is, rather, a part of them. Like early considerations of postmodernity or poststructuralism, the analytical tools and techniques of postcolonial theorizing come from within the epistemic systems being critiqued. They use the system against itself in order to show the limitations of the system, to show the system as a system and not as reality per se, possibly to suggest, faintly, alternatives to the system (even here, one must be mindful of Foucault's warning that "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system" (1971: 230)). Just as postmodernism, even when it had vitality, was more able to show the exhaustion of modernity than to represent whatever might be succeeding it (cf., Huyssen, 1984), postcolonial theorizing works from within the legacy of colonization. It cannot and should not be expected to offer a successor epistemology. This is yet another point at which this volume offers a useful way to reconsider other issues within organization studies. As several of the authors sought to reflectively engage with the limits of postcolonial theorizing, I was reminded how relevant it would

be to revisit these points relative to post-analytic feminisms, Marxisms and poststructuralisms.

Although I agree with Calás & Smircich (1999) that it is time to be 'past postmodernism' in the sense that an 'ism' of the postmodern is probably fruitless, the seismic shifts in social reality which gave rise to speculation about the end of modernity have not disappeared just because 'postmodernism' is now a soiled Pamper. Among these is suspicion of Western analytical knowledge, with its realist ontology, binaristic either/or logic, universalizing typologies, hierarchies of knowledge and scientific faith in 'the data'. Poststructuralism and postmodernism demonstrated at least the possibility that such knowledge was not value neutral, inevitable or inherently superior to that which preceded it within the Western tradition. Postcolonial thought demonstrates analogous points relative to other knowledge traditions. Both approaches are allies in the sense invoked in Foucault's essay 'What is Enlightenment?':

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by 'attitude', I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality...And, consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern,' I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'countermodernity'. (1984: 39)

By engaging with postcolonial thought and its valorization of ambiguity, hybridity, multiply-laden meanings and heterotopic identities, we might both give such thought the attention it deserves and rejuvenate other antiessentialist strands of thought which have become somewhat ossified. If postmodernism and critical realism represent, as I suspect they do, two sides of one coin signifying the exhaustion of a certain intellectual moment, the 'strategic essentialism' advocated by Prasad (with due credit to Spivak's critique of "essentialist/constructionist binarism" and encouragement of post-analytic theorists to take "the 'risk' of essence" (1989:1)) might suggest a way to find new energy and new direction for critiquing and dealing with the crumbling of a certain form of modernity and the we-don't-yet-know-what that is replacing it.

My dissatisfactions with this volume are minor and centre on the largely-absent critique of postcolonial theorizing itself. It may be unfair to ask that an introduction to a perspective also contain critique of that perspective, but such connections are integral to developing this strand of theorizing. As mentioned above, the authors spend little time reflecting on the ambivalence of their own positions. Prasad & Prasad express the desire to, "not reduce non-Western peoples to the status of passive bystanders, but...as active agents" (p.284). This goal is laudable, but we must remember that the Other has no greater agency in these postcolonial representations than in Western poststructuralism, behavioural science, ethnography or popular media. The subject of postcolonial theory may be a construction with different boundaries than these other subjects, but s/he is still a construction. When the aboriginal Australian is represented by the ethnically Indian, American educated, postcolonial theorist whose ability to observe is contingent upon privileged relationships of employment and funding within the institutions of the colonizer (ch.11), he or she may be represented more sympathetically or more knowledgeably, but he or she will still be known to the reader only indirectly, through the interpellation of Banerjee, the privileged representer. I do not mean anything so crude as to suggest merely that this critique is not the final Truth of the matter, a charge

inevitably levelled at deconstructive analyses. That is true; it is also trivial. My concern is that postcolonial theorizing not be reduced to a romanticized nativism which can be sealed into a hermetic bubble exogenous to 'real' organizational theorizing.

By analogy, in my country, Aotearoa/New Zealand, there is an emergent stream of research called kaupapa Maori (Smith, 1999) which is an attempt to develop a methodological approach to social research which is congruent with the traditional values and beliefs of the country's First Peoples. While the attempt to honour and respect the traditional values of this social group is important, it is also problematic in ways kaupapa Maori has yet to systematically engage. A majority of people of Maori ethnicity live within the dominant, postcolonial culture where they may find many values of their ancestors as alien as do their fellow citizens of European origin. The link between traditional values and traditional ways of living, has been increasingly eviscerated for a century and a half. What do traditional fishing rights mean when the fish in the river are trout imported from Europe, when the oceans are exploited by Maori companies using diesel-powered trawlers – where objects from the colonizing culture are inextricably bound up with today's lived experience of the formerly colonized? Simply because one is ethnically Maori, it does not follow that one does (or can) speak for 'the' Maori. Postcolonial theorizing has much to offer kaupapa Maori theory and vice versa, but the relationships of power which permit the postcolonial theorist to represent the Other must become part of this dialogue. I expect that the contributors to this volume would agree with this observation and I am confident they have not overlooked the problems I note. There is, after all, only a certain amount one can include, even in a dense, three hundred pages. I am simply suggesting ongoing, critical dialogue in a spirit well represented by one of the contributions in this book.

I conclude this review with consideration of chapter 7, contributed by Esther Priyadharshini, because this chapter illustrates themes which run strongly through the entire volume. Priyadharshini performs a discursive reading of popular business press representations of 'tiger economies'. Rather than discrediting the perspective she critiques, Priyadharshini engages with it both critically and appreciatively. One might contrast this with Gibson Burrell's widely quoted dismissal of this literature as 'Heathrow organization theory' (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004: 333). While Burrell's dismissal has its own uses, Priyadharshini's critical engagement seeks to use this literature as a source of knowledge, albeit knowledge its producers may not have intended. After all, as she notes, whatever the quality of this information,

One of the most convenient ways of obtaining the 'latest' knowledge...is through published secondary sources like that of business journalism – the genre contained in business and economics magazines and newspapers...This genre is ubiquitous...The increasing importance of this source can also be attested by their prominent appearance on approved and reading lists for students...In some cases they fashion academic debate...lending credence to the idea that "such texts create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe." (p.173)

Despite this degree of influence, she observes, "Thus far, academic communities seem to have paid little attention to the content or construction of texts in this genre" (p.173). Rather than dismissing this genre – a more common CMS strategy – Priyadharshini engages in a critical exploration of its structure, linking rather than separating, mainstream and critical knowledge practices. She offers this engagement to inform

teaching, a linking of theory to practice. She is reflective about the role of the postcolonial subject in the postcolonial subjugation, linking rather than opposing the dominant and the marginal. In her argument for postdisciplinary knowledge practices which lessen “academic compartmentalization” (p.188), she attempts to link often fragmented critical theoretical fiefdoms. While postcolonial theorizing might seem at first to be one more intellectual ghetto in a highly fragmented field, such theorizing might constitute one source of linking without homogenizing the now bewildering array of epistemological, ideological and methodological outposts within the terrain of organization studies.

Prasad & Prasad state that postcolonial theory is addressed to critique of, “three monumental and overlapping phenomena of great relevance to us today, namely, Western colonialism and neo-colonialism, European modernity and modern capitalism” (p.284). In that the industrial organization and management as it is taught in the business school is, in its entirety, a product of capitalist modernity and colonial administration, it would be wrong to view postcolonial theorizing as a specialist area. It is, rather, an integral facet of the central phenomenon we wish to understand. To consider postcolonial arguments in an informed and reflective manner, then, should be incumbent upon everyone claiming even mere competency as an organization theorist. If one needs to do a bit of homework in that regard, I know of only one well-developed, introductory source, *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis*.

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