

CRITICAL ISSUES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Edited by
Stewart Clegg and David Dunkerley

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Volume 8

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1977

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-65793-8 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-38369-8 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-82293-0 (Volume 8)

eISBN: 978-0-203-54783-0 (Volume 8)

Publisher's Note

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ROUTLEDGE DIRECT EDITIONS

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL
London, Henley and Boston

First published in 1977
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
39 Store Street,
London WC1E 7DD,
Broadway House,
Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames,
Oxon RG9 1EN and
9 Park Street,
Boston, Mass. 02108, USA
Reprinted in 1978

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Unwin Brothers Limited,
The Gresham Press, Old Woking, Surrey
A member of the Staples Printing Group
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ISBN 0 7100 8506 0

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INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL ISSUES IN ORGANIZATIONS

Stewart Clegg and
David Dunkerley

In the social sciences one can find many volumes whose titles proclaim them to be in some sense 'critical'. Indeed, such is the apparent increased frequency with which such terms are used that one might be forgiven for supposing them to be of devalued currency. Yet, here is another volume sufficiently audacious as to claim to address Critical Issues in Organizations. Such a claim cannot be lodged lightly. It behoves anyone who proposes it to argue in what way their volume is 'critical' in such a way as to be distinct from other contributions.

Many other texts on organizations exist. You may well be familiar with some of them. If so, then you will be aware of the bewildering state of disarray that exists in these texts, and which passes as 'organization theory'. Given the antecedents of organization theory such diversity is hardly surprising. The study of organizations has developed in a number of specific ways, serving different ends which have ranged from improving organizational 'effectiveness' to providing theoretical direction for those claiming a purely academic interest. Regardless of the objectives, it is clear that to speak of a body of 'organization theory' is to refer to a body of knowledge that, for pragmatic reasons, has developed both unevenly and atheoretically.

Of course, we are not alone in recognizing the problems confronting the analysis of organizations. Such problems pre-occupy professional conventions and papers. But while similar conclusions may be reached, the prescriptions suggested are quite dissimilar to those which we imply. By way of displaying contrast consider the following example. At the 1974 American Sociological Association Convention, Jerald Hage pleaded strongly for 'a new wave of attempts to create general organizational theory' (Hage, 1974, p.19). His solution was cast in terms of formal middle-range sociological theory emphasizing theoretical and operational definitions and linkages. Such an analysis presumes a certain value to what has 'preceded it, which we, and our contributors, would question. To reason as Hage does is to remain secure within the convention of thesis, whilst neglecting the dialectic of antithesis. To credit as synthetic a conversation which is conducted entirely within one thesis concerning the nature of social reality, and the appropriate

way of 'regarding' it, is seriously to devalue the dialectical metaphor. But the Hage plea is in many respects entirely consistent with some aspects of contemporary American theorizing in sociology. The suggested approach would, we suspect, draw heavily upon the work of methodologists such as Blalock for its 'theory', while its paramount organizational input would be that style of research whose hegemony is maintained by the pages of the 'Administrative Science Quarterly'.

Complementary to, and sometimes in opposition to, the developments and suggestions which emanate from the tradition of 'Administrative Science Quarterly', the study of organizations has progressed in Europe. A distinctively European tradition is emergent. Methodological, theoretical and critical issues which once seemed to be condemned to silence are being re-awakened, renewed and discussed. Much of this discussion has centred on the on-going critique currently being developed by members of the 'groupe théorique' of the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS). The group has a short history to date, having emerged from the first meeting of EGOS in 1975 as a viable focus of interest among researchers. Nearly all the contributors to this volume are currently engaged in this on-going critique. The focus of the critique has been on the development of an 'institutional' approach to the study of organizations, a focus which is represented in all of the papers collected here. This speaks to our common commitment to re-awaken some critical issues for discussion.

Our 'issues' - sexism, power, capitalist development, organizational transactions and interactions, the historical interpenetration of state and capital - are not yet found in the indexes of most texts on organizations. We hope to remedy this state of affairs through posing this absence as problematic. Thus, it would seem to be no accident that the majority of texts on organization theory place greater emphasis upon concepts such as individual motivation, needs and satisfactions, than upon the structural features of power, exploitation and historical change. The eagerness with which management theorists have adopted many of the ideas from organization theory lends further support to the argument. However, considering the way in which organization theory has almost ignored Marx, or interpreted Weber in the narrowest possible way as a progenitor of modern theories of organization structure, then this is not surprising. The interests of management and the interests of organization theory have all too often been in harmony.

A critical theory cannot allow its interest to be so defined. The function of our papers is to enable one to grasp and understand the reality of that 'life' which organizations find themselves imposed in and on. As such we distinguish our analyses from those fictions preserved in the ideology of organization theory, where the freedom of 'exchanges', 'social constructions', and the 'satisfaction' of 'needs' reigns dominant. In contrast, our papers show contemporary sources of 'unfreedom' as occasioned through organizations. We attempt thus to begin conversation with others who have been both mastered and victimized by the formulations that we oppose here.

So it is not that our 'critical issues' are 'in organizations'.

They are not. They are not 'in' organizations in terms of the wide-spread consciousness of their members, any more than they are yet 'in' the widespread consciousness of the members of organization theory. Nor can our issues be constrained 'within' the boundaries of organizations. Such closure to social issues and theory is part of the stance we oppose. Our issues are 'in organizations' only in so far as *organization* is the metaphor under which we collect our thoughts and reflections. Organization serves merely as the rubric and the locus of our analysis. Only in as much as we constitute them as such are our issues *in* organizations.

In an organization theory where life has been analysed, paralysed and reduced to a series of quantifiable variables, our issues would remain unspoken. This volume is an attempt to speak this silence. For all of us, in our various voices, this articulates itself through redressing the scant consideration given to issues which are historically located, politically potent, economically relevant, and socially significant.

We neither propose to 'synthesize' existing theory, nor to 'broaden' it by importing yet another fledgling sociological stance. Rather, we propose to overcome existing organization theory. In that organizations have been left too much to the ideologists of administration, their continued existence as an ontological realm of self-sufficient enquiry has survived critical scrutiny for too long. We wish to call into question the continued existence of such a state of affairs.

Each of our papers displays this desire in the nature of a critique which intervenes in the idea of an 'organization theory'. Our topics and our styles may differ, but our underlying theme, which stresses what we would call a 'critical' and an 'institutional' approach, remains present in each contribution.

Janet Wolff's paper takes as its critical issue the topic of women in organizations. The paper analyses the social and political movement towards equality of employment for women in the United Kingdom. The review leads the writer to the conclusion that organization theory has been too myopic and apparently unaware of the wider socio-cultural environment in which organizations exist. It cannot account for the 'powerless' role of women in organizations. Three important points emerge from the analysis. First, in spite of extensive recent legislation women are relatively disadvantaged compared with men in employment. Second, this relative disadvantage cannot be accounted for by traditional organization theory. Third, while a more adequate organization theory may be constructed, it would be insufficient unless it incorporated a sociological understanding of extra-organizational factors. In spite of these shortcomings detected in organization theory, Janet Wolff does acknowledge that the theory is able to make some contribution to the understanding of this particular issue. She recognizes the movement away from a crude functionalism towards the attempt to consider meaning in particular situations and to account for informal as well as formal pressures upon the individual and the group. Essentially, the paper is a plea for widening the scope of organization theory in order to account for social, political, economic and historical influences within society in