

# Organizational Anthropology, Organization Theory, and Management Practice

*Pasquale Gagliardi*

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How has the study of organizations as cultures increased our capacity to design and manage organizations? The author examines this question, noting first the growing use of the cultural approach in both the academic and the managerial communities, and discusses the reasons for the split between theory and practice, warning that this split will continue to widen. To bridge this gap the author believes anti-functional prejudice must be renounced. This will move practitioners and academics closer to the goal of the cultural approach which is to employ greater wisdom in organizing rather than to create a new science of organization. To this end, the author makes a plea for more applied research.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationships between a particular, at present very widespread, way of viewing, studying and describing organizations — a way we can conventionally term organizational anthropology — and organization theory, seen from the perspective of its normative implications, and understood therefore as the theory of how to organize. The basic question I shall deal with will hence be the following: to what extent has the study of organizations as cultures increased or may increase our capacity to design and run organizations?

My argument takes as its starting point a recognition of the extraordinary development in the "cultural approach" towards organizations and the way in which "culture" has become the dominant metaphor in the thinking

not only of the academic but also of the managerial community. Then — basing myself largely on a study by Barley et al. (1988) on the forms of the academic- and practitioner-oriented discourse on organization culture — I shall discuss the nature and the possible reasons for the existing split between the expert knowledge produced by organizational culture researchers and organizational and managerial practice. Finally, in a plea for increased scope for applied research, I hope to show that insights generated by the use of a symbolic-cultural perspective can serve in the building of better theories of the organization and of organizing, and thereby in building better organizations.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN ORGANIZATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The developments in organizational anthropology are documented in what is generally known today as "organizational culture literature", i.e. "the intellectual product of those scholars who — dissatisfied with the rationalist and reductive paradigm which dominated organizational science up to the end of the '70s — began looking at organizations as expressive forms and as systems of meaning, to be analyzed not merely in their instrumental, economic and material aspects, but also in their ideal and symbolic features. For these scholars, organizations are cultural entities, characterized by distinct paradigms, and the richness of corporate life can only be grasped through the use of holistic, interpretive and interactive models" (Gagliardi, 1990, p. 8).

The cultural study of organizations has in recent years become unquestionably one of the main domains of organizational research, displaying a startling vitality and gaining a popularity outside the academic sphere that other cur-

rents of organizational study have never enjoyed. The claim by Meril Reis Louis (1981, p. 250) that "much, if not most, of what matters in organizational life takes place at the cultural level" seems to be a conviction shared by a growing number of scholars and practitioners — consultants and managers. The more widely circulated and respected organization and management periodicals have devoted special issues to organizational symbolism and corporate culture — to mention only some, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1983, 28/3), *Revue Francaise de Gestion* (1984, 47/48), *Journal of Management* (1985, 11/2), *Organization Studies* (1986, 7/2) and, more recently, *International Studies of Management and Organization* (1990, 19/4). This explosion of interest in the scholarly literature has been matched by publications on managerial questions which have attained best-seller status among managers and the public at large (Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982), publications which point to culture as the secret of the excellence and success of companies. Such was the fashion for culture, in the early '80s, that *Fortune* devoted a cover to it — as if here were one of the leading-lights of the business world.

But the fashion for culture seems destined to last: countless papers have been presented and discussed at conferences and seminars, one after another, both in Europe and the United States (the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism — set up in 1981 as an independent work group within the European Group for Organizational Studies — has already held its seventh international conference in Saarbrücken in June 1990); many business schools took on organizational culture as a specific teaching area; various consultancy firms offer cultural diagnosis and cultural engineering projects which companies are evidently prepared to buy; "culture" is invoked or evoked — more or less appropriately — in the accompanying rhetoric at the launching of "total quality" programs in an increasing number of companies.

Thus, both in the academic and the managerial communities, corporate culture has become a dominating idea. And yet I have never had such an impression of a profound split between theory and practice, in the sense that despite a common terminology and an — apparent — sharing of concepts there is no mirror-like relationship, nor indeed any mutual fertilization be-

tween the "expert knowledge" of organizations as cultures produced by scholars of organization and the way in which organizations are designed and managed. In other words, if the models on which concrete organizations were shaped in previous moments tended to "mirror" the dominant organizational theories (in particular the so-called classical theory and the system-contingency theory), it seems to me that at present this correspondence is hardly to be found, regardless of the fact that the metaphors of the machine and of the organism have yielded — in the collective imagination of many scholars and practitioners — to the metaphor of culture.

A claim as bald as this (though I hope I have made it clear that it is a question of an *impression*) requires at least some detailing and certain provisos. The "cultural movement" embraces a complex and diffuse phenomenon which can be investigated at various levels: in terms of the dialectical relationship between the new ideas and the theories dominant within the scientific community (Ouchi and Wilkins, 1985), of the correspondence between the new ideas and the needs of the dominant élites or other interest groups in society (Gagliardi, 1986), of chiming or consistency with the spirit of the times (Alvesson, 1984). The various levels interweave in the real situation: in particular, the intellectual conflict between theories may express the opposition between coalitions of scholars, linked in their turn with aggregations of interests within society, just as the "market" in academic knowledge may reflect current ideologies and the spirit of the times. No exhaustive historical analysis of the movement in its facets and variations has yet been undertaken (and forms no part of the purpose of this essay), though Barley and others (1988) have put forward an interesting "cultural reading" of the forms and developments in the academic- and practitioner-oriented discourse on organizational culture. In an analysis of the language of 192 articles published between June 1975 and December 1984 in academic and practitioner outlets. Nevertheless, though I shall refer to this study later on, it tells us little, and that in very oblique fashion, about the actual organizational and management practices inspired by the metaphor of culture. Furthermore, given the authors' involvement in codifying and quantifying measurable indicators of discourse, their account of the subcultures present within the cultural movement does not provide us with a

real picture of the "thickness" of the phenomenon.

My claims should therefore be viewed as hypotheses to be checked and in all likelihood this essay constitutes nothing more than a primary document for a future and much needed ethnography of the "cultural movement". These hypotheses are based on my own experience, which though pretty limited in terms of practice — deriving mainly from the organizational setting in which I live and work, hence experience of Italian organizations and companies — is perhaps less limited as regards theory. The theory, on the one hand, is generally documented in an international literature accessible to everyone — including myself — and on the other, I have had the opportunity of participating (not least as a member of the selection committee for papers submitted) in all the SCOS conferences: hence I have been able to gather opinions and take account of general attitudes, assumptions and epistemological and ideological stances not always evident in the literature but invaluable for a cultural interpretation of these intellectual products and for a grasp of overall trends in the development of thought within the organizational culture domain.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The study by Barley et al., already referred to, picks out two different models of discourse on organizational culture: the pragmatics of practitioners' discourse and the pragmatics of academic discourse. From the former the authors read off an implicit causal model, reproduced in Fig. 1. According to this model, performance and productivity, threatened by exogenous forces (turbulent environment, economic hardship, foreign competition, Japanese management) can be enhanced by both utilitarian and normative forms of control. In particular, "culture's promise hung on the following pseudosyllogism: culture enhances social integration; social integration increases performance and productivity; therefore, if one can enhance social integration by manipulating culture, then substantial increments in performance and productivity should ensue" (Barley et al., 1988, p. 42).

For the pragmatics of academic discourse, instead, "it was impossible to extract... a mod-

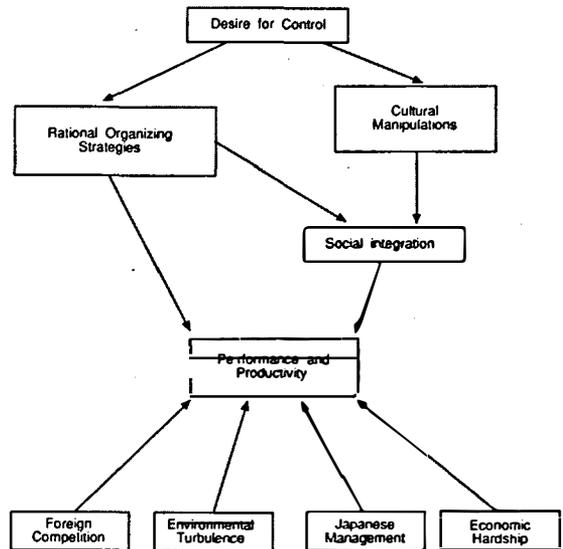


Fig. 1. Model of practitioners' ideal pragmatics  
Source: Barley et al. 1988, p. 39.

el that even remotely resembled a causal framework" (op. cit., p. 44). In academic speech: a) it is continually stressed that the study of organizational culture is an alternate paradigm for understanding organizational phenomena, but views of the nature of this alternative differ widely in line with the anthropological paradigms held by the various scholars; b) many authors seek to eschew functionalism in favour of interpretive approaches to culture; c) culture is portrayed as a force for social control, but while culture might control people, it is "almost unthinkable that people could control culture" (op. cit., p. 44).

The model of practitioner-oriented discourse described by Barley et al. expresses a sharp split between "rationality" and "culture", "logic" and "ideology" which I believe to have significantly influenced organizational and managerial practice. According to this model, there does exist an objective technical rationality on which organizing strategies continue to be based; alongside these strategies go manipulations of the culture aimed at producing shared belief-systems and, above all, shared value-systems. Still implicit in this view is the opposition between formal and informal organization: culture is only a new variant of — or a new label for — the informal organization and not (as would be rightly warranted by the view of the organization as a culture, and as the

academic-oriented discourse postulates at least implicitly) the *unitary key for making sense* of both the so-called informal aspects and of the so-called formal aspects of the actual organization (Alvesson, 1990). This split precludes any possible creative use of two basic insights: 1) the idea that designing organizations capable of fulfilling the purposes for which they are set up implies including within the very design of the organization not just norms of technical rationality but norms of rationality according to values; 2) the idea that technical rationality may itself be culturally determined, meaning that different ideas and conceptions of order (different ordering metaphors) may exist and thus of the particular type of order that a community may consider technically appropriate in given circumstances.

The conceptual weakness of the model explains, in my view, the simplemindedness and sometimes laughable nature of the programs inspired by "cultural awareness". In most cases these are partial and fragmentary activities which make no significant mark on the culture of the organization and effect no change in the existent organizational order, i.e. the distribution and coordination mechanisms for tasks and power. Thus, for example, in leadership training programs, the "cultural leader" — or the "leader creating systems of meaning" — has taken over from the "situational" or "transformational" leader; "culture" becomes the new banner for some old pop campaigns; and elsewhere one witnesses clumsy attempts at direct manipulation of the symbolic field through the creation of slogans and the invention of rituals which leave members of the organization cold or scandalized. Seen in this light "culturally oriented" organizational and managerial practices must in many cases be interpreted more as manifestations of isomorphism with new institutionalized and legitimating myths (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) rather than as authentic innovations in the structure governing the independence of operational activities.

Thus on the one hand — that of practice — we have a questionable causal model, and on the other — that of the academy — no general model yet exists. The divergence is not hard to explain; the practitioners must — by definition — act, and must — with all speed — get themselves a causal model for the purpose; contrariwise the scholars can play with new ideas and unhurriedly wait for any new knowledge to rip-

en and develop before exploring — should it ever come to that — the practical relevance. Truth to tell, in their research Barley et al. do make the observation that, over time, academics have moved towards the practitioners' point of view. They explain this tendency partly as a gradual reacquisition of functionalist language by the academic community, partly through a demographic argument whereby an increasing number of those who have begun to write on organizational culture in academic outlets are more managerially oriented. If one grants greater weight to their latter point, as I am inclined to do, it makes it difficult to claim that academic discourse has in substance changed. And my own acquaintance with the scholarly literature and with many organizational culture researchers strengthens me in that conviction. The split between theory and practice does not, in fact, arise solely from the impatience of practitioners, but largely from the reluctance of scholars to concern themselves with the problems and requirements of practitioners.

#### "DE-CONSTRUCTING" VERSUS "CONSTRUCTING" ORGANIZATIONS

This reluctance can only be explained in terms of the culture of this current of thought. Though it may be difficult to generalize — given that distinct sub-cultures are probably to be discerned within the scholarly community itself — nevertheless it seems to me possible to claim that the three basic features that Barley et al. light upon in academic discourse (the view of culture as an alternate paradigm, the widely shared interpretive approach which tends to consider "heretical" any leaning to functionalism, the rejection of the very idea of a manipulable culture) constitute an internally highly consistent belief/value system within which epistemology and ideology reinforce one another: to question these features means to put the very *identity* of the current of thought in question.

The conviction that the study of culture constitutes an alternate paradigm to conventional modes of studying organizational phenomena is the mainstay of the triad simply because the cultural identity of the current rests mostly on it. In support of my thesis, let me recall two apothegms, quoted everywhere within organizational literature, both from an article by Smircich (1983): the first is the claim that "culture is something the organization is" (p. 347), the

second is the suggestion that "culture may be an idea whose time has come" (p. 339). The rhetorical power of these two expressions is extraordinary: to *be* (or not to be) is the question — as if to say that it is a question of life or death; and the second expression, echoing Christ's reply to the Virgin's plea that he reveal his real supernatural nature by changing the water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana ("Mother, my hour is not yet come"), bestows a messianic flavour on the advent of the cultural approach. If there does exist an awareness of the reality (or the possibility) of a revolutionary change of paradigm, we ought not to be surprised that — as in all revolutions — there should be an extraordinary concern to safeguard the "purity" of one's ideals and the radicalism of one's position.

If the hesitation to formulate general theories of the organization (phenomenological at least, if not functionalist), which might eventually inform the activity of organizing, on the one hand reflects a concern to preserve a "subversive" identity and not be swallowed up by the existing "order" (Calas and Smircich, 1987), it expresses on the other hand the debt the movement owes to the epistemological and ethical principles of anthropology — in particular those of relativism and non-interference in the social realities that are the object of study.

Unquestionably professional alertness to the dogmatic and value elements in others leads one to reflect on one's own, generating an awareness that even administrative science is a socially constructed reality. But relativism can be taken to the extreme, to the point of assuming programmatically and explicitly that it is not a matter of confronting pre-existent "truths" with new and different "truths", but of *combating* any claim to truth. This intellectual and ethical course, which leads — as on a slippery slope — to an exhausting labour of "deconstruction", has induced many scholars, who made their debut in organizational culture, to swell the ranks of those who propose a "post-modern" approach (Derrida, 1973; Lyotard, 1984) to the study of organizations (Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Berg, 1989; Calas and Smircich, 1989; Linstead and Grafton-Small, 1990).

In the light of these developments, the split between organization theory and practice that I took as my initial hypothesis for these considerations is destined to widen rather than narrow. Paradoxically, growth in reflection on the matter threatens to diminish the will and cour-

age to suggest lines of action, in a process analogous to that described by Brunsonn (1985) in his analysis of the relationship between organizational decision and action. The more we de-construct organizations the less we will find within ourselves the confidence and enthusiasm to suggest new ways of constructing them.

It has recently been asserted (Berg, 1989) that certain "new" organizational forms — network structures, project organizations and matrix-structured organizations — reflect post-modern thought on organization and management in that they embody dimensions of irrationality, flexibility and ambiguity extraneous to the modern and rational organization. Were this the case my hypothesis would already have found its refutation. It seems to me, however, that the organizational forms mentioned — not new, simply more widespread than before — reflect an equally old theory (the contingency theory), in that they rationally combine different degrees of differentiation and integration of tasks in relation to variations and uncertainties in the environment (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). If de-construction is the analysis of the paradoxes, contradictions and tensions which characterize organizations as cultures, to claim that the pragmatic equivalent of this way of viewing organizations are "constructs" constructed a little less rigidly than others means postulating a one-to-one relationship between theory and practice on the basis of resemblance that is in large measure merely phonetic, and on that of a semantic misunderstanding. In any case, if this is the practical result of the alternate paradigm brandished by the theory, it is a minimal enough in all conscience.

## THE ROLE OF APPLIED RESEARCH

Organizations are the dominant and outstanding social artifacts in the contemporary cultural landscape. To an increasing and irreversible degree utilitarian forms of human association are taking the place of communal forms, in the extent to which problems requiring for their solution the construction of cooperative systems continue to multiply. We may lament the fact that organizations often fail to resolve the problems for which they were meant or that they create more problems than they resolve, and congratulate ourselves on our ability to recognize and analyze the contradic-

tions and paradoxes which practitioners fail to see or deal with, or alternately we can concern ourselves with the practical relevance of our thinking: the implicit assumption of my argument so far is that the latter attitude is preferable.

Were one to decide to hold by the former attitude one might well justify the preference by an appeal to the exigencies of specialization in science and to the necessity of preserving the separation between basic and applied research. The appeal in this case would be to a traditional principle in the rational organization of labour, and one hard to rebut, though it could well be challenged by yet another organizational notion: one unwished-for consequence of the separation of tasks (the price of specialization) is the development of professional sub-cultures more concerned with defending their demarcation lines than in breaking them down and — chiefly — concerned to defend their own relative status in a wider system of relationships.

From this point of view, the "purists" of organizational culture may well be concurring — even quite unconsciously — with the purists of any other field of study in the belief in the intrinsic superiority of basic research over applied research. I was struck, in this regard, by the introduction of the series editors to a small volume by Schein (1987) on the clinical perspective in field-work. The introduction states that "problem solving research . . . is . . . field-work of a strategic and restricted sort" (p. 5) and that the willingness to work towards the solution of concrete problems is a *price* to be paid for the insights that research may bring. In his own preface Schein himself declares his intention of *legitimizing* a kind of knowledge that "has not gained the respectability it deserves" (p. 7), an aim not dissimilar to the one I proposed for myself here.

Detailed scrutiny of the relative merits and demerits of basic and applied research does not come within the analytical scope of this article, and it is perhaps not a question that can be resolved analytically in that the opposition between people involved in pure research and those involved in applied research is sustained by cultural dynamisms linked to the definition and preservation of distinct professional identities. I would merely like to recall a point that Simon made in an early article (Simon, 1967): while in pure science researchers who discover they are unable to give a satisfactory answer to the problem they initially set themselves can

modify and simplify it until they scale it down to their ability to answer, a researcher dealing with real problems of organizational life raised by those involved does not have this option. It is my view that the mismatch between the problem and the researcher's present ability to answer has its own advantages: the wish to help or the need to make oneself useful lead on to formulate more ambitious research agenda which, though they may be handled in an over-hasty and superficial way, may well stimulate the development of creative modes of cognition of organizational phenomena. In a certain sense, moral pressure can create fruitful intellectual pressure.

### BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE: TOWARDS A REVISED FUNCTIONALISM?

Bridging the gap between new knowledge and what is done in practice requires the working-out of a new theory of the organization which can be exploited in design. This means a renunciation of anti-functionalism prejudice since organization theory is inherently a functional explanation (Donaldson, 1985; Hartman, 1988): it seeks to identify the conditions under which an organization deals efficiently with determinate problems. The structural and functionalist approach to organization theory has been subjected to many criticisms, but I believe we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater, where the baby in this case is our ability to help in the construction of better organizations. Our passage through organizational cultures and the conceptual gains acquired from other currents of organizational thought have awakened us to a series of intellectual hazards and snares, awareness of which may allow us to gradually come to terms with a sort of revised "functionalism".

With no pretence to covering the matter fully, I shall set out what I take to be some of the crucial bearings in the new awareness.

a) Organizations are the living historical product of the process of problem-solving engaged in collectively by a group. They are characterized by distinct paradigms which incorporate both specific values and particular conceptions of instrumental rationality. Instrumental and expressive, material and symbolic aspects are inextricably interwoven into the observable forms/structures of an organization. Form does

not always follow function; but if it can hardly be claimed that the form of the nose depends on the fact that it must serve as support for spectacles, it is also beyond discussion that a person with a nose can wear pince-nez spectacles while a noseless person cannot.

b) We must beware of reifying organizations by considering them as systems with their own ontological status, structured by way of components each of which performs a function essential to the maintenance of the system and to the achieving of goals hypothetically attributable to the system as such, hence "governed" by impersonal forces over and beyond the will of the individual. But organizational agents do reify the organization: the way in which they envisage the organization and its goals is of enormous interest to us for a grasp of how a group intersubjectively negotiates particular representations of the organizational order and how these representations condition organizational activity.

c) What many scholars and practitioners — in contemporary managerial culture — take to be "the structure of the organization" (i.e. the observable patterns of division and coordination of tasks and personnel) constitutes only one type or aspect of the regularities inherent in a cooperative system. The organizational order emerges spontaneously as the result of the dynamic interaction of these patterns — interpretable as expressions of deliberately instrumental strategies — and other types of strategy or regularity.

d) For an understanding of organizational order it thus becomes necessary to shift the emphasis of analysis from the effects of observable structures to their causes or origins, adopting longitudinal, genetic or process perspectives consistent with a view of organizations as states of becoming rather than states of being (Zeleny, 1985). In one sense, for a better understanding of how actual organizations function (and new ones might function) research must seek "backwards" and "in depth" for deep-seated structures and processes not directly observable or morphologically describable. This implicit assumption is shared by various of the new conceptual proposals: the idea of formative contexts which influence the behavior of the actors and account "for their skills, the inertia of their learning, and the unawareness of their actual practices" (Ciborra and Lanzara, 1990, p. 150); the distinction between social organization (rules of conduct) and so-

cial structure (a particular contingent of living components integrating and constituting the organization at a given time and place) (Zeleny, 1985); the emphasis on structuring processes rather than on instantly observable arrangements (Ranson et al., 1980); the picking out of different levels and dimensions of the structure (Fombrun, 1986); the observation that the organizational order tends to mirror the cultural order (Gagliardi, 1990).

e) The designing of an organization can no longer be conceived as an *intellectual* activity, centering on the *deliberately instrumental* action, and *previous* to the concrete creation of the organization as a cooperative reality. The designing of an organization — like any other planning activity — is the social process whereby the *representation of the problem* which the collective must face conditions research, debate, and the choice of the most appropriate methods for dealing with it. The process takes the shape of an intersubjective and dialogic exploration in which interests, cognitive maps and alternative virtual worlds are exchanged and negotiated together (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Lanzara, 1985).

Where could one conceivably look for something to bridge the gap between the new view of organization as culture and a theory of the organization which can be put to purposes of design? I have no ready-made receipt to hand.\* If it is true that the growth of knowledge is today the fruit of the cumulative and cooperative effort of scholars, the problem I point to is a purely organizational one. Not to go against what I have barely said, I must at the moment limit myself to offering *my own representation* of the problem, setting in motion a process which can only be carried on through challenge and debate with all those who might decide to cooperate in dealing with it. I believe that the possible result of the collective effort hoped-for will bear not the slightest resemblance to an up-dated version of the traditional "principles of organization"; the goal we may perhaps

\* One of the few organizational culture researchers who has tried to bridge the gap between "new" organizational knowledge and the theory of organization and management is Omar Aktouf (1989). His passion and the conscious adoption of a precise ideological stance make his attempt fascinating, but constitute his limit at the same time: in any case his work exemplifies one sort of possible route to follow, though one might claim that the quest must be undertaken with other goals in mind and with other baggage.

reasonably set ourselves is not a new science of organization, but a greater wisdom in organizing.

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