

“Postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory, thereby limiting its usefulness to the practicing manager. Discuss.”

From the outset it is clear that the following script will take the form of an argument. In primary deconstruction of the title statement it would appear initially that two arguments are apparent. The main argument would be over whether or not ‘postmodernism’ offers anything to current theories of organisation. An offshoot of this argument would be the secondary argument over the ‘usefulness’ of the postmodern context to management practice. Hence the format of this discussion /debate will be roughly divided amongst four sections each enabling a balanced picture to be drawn of requisite title topics. Finally it is hoped that from this analysis of postmodernism and organisation, one should then be able to formulate useful conclusions.

In brief, the script will unfold as follows. Part one will introduce ‘modernity’ and what could be described as ‘modern organisational theory’. This will enable a frame of thought for the ensuing text. Part two will describe and identify ‘postmodernism’ through introduction of some of the major existential debates and key theorists on the subject. Part three will draw on these two sections by discussing the concept of postmodernism as applied to current organisational practice. The themes of ‘storytelling and narrative approaches’¹ will provide a useful perspective here. In part four, I will argue and assess the ‘usefulness’ of the postmodern context to management practice.

“Any discussion of postmodernism assumes a great deal of knowledge about modernism or modernity, or the modern world and how it has been interpreted”²

So, what of ‘postmodernism’? A natural approach to the title discussion may begin by exploring this term. However, it is clear that the word itself is derived from the two terms ‘post’ and ‘modern’. According to the Collins Dictionary, the term ‘post-’ in the sense when it is attached to another word by a hyphen, “is used to form words that describe something as

¹ Brooke, C and Hitchin, L (2002), from the MAN 133 unit, ‘*Critical Perspectives of Management*’, University of Lincoln, November 2002.

² Cahoon, L (1996), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, as quoted in Hancock, P and Tyler, M (2001), *Work, Postmodernism and Organisation*, 1st Edition, Sage Publications, p 10

taking place after a particular date, event, or stage of development.”³ Thus it is my consensus that in the very least one should introduce ‘modernity’ as applied to organisational theory before discussing ‘postmodernism’.

‘Organisation theory’ is a complex concept, especially when expressed through ‘modern’. As will become clear, it is difficult to assign a theory and its usage to a set time period or epoch. However, this section is merely a crude presentation of some of the criteria which may be befitting of ‘modern organisation theory’ and will certainly benefit the description of postmodernism. I do not expect to cover any uncharted academic territory here - just accept the following few paragraphs as an uncritical account of some key features of ‘modern’ theory.

According to Hatch (1997) organisation can be defined in many ways including as a social structure, a technology, a culture, a physical structure or as part of an environment and also from the perspective of such themes as control, conflict, decision making, power and politics and change⁴. Organisational theory is construed by the amalgamation of such definitions and themes. It has only really been within the past hundred and fifty years or so – post industrial revolution – that theory of organisation has been studied and recognised. The term ‘modern’ can be attributed to theory that has arisen from industrialisation and capitalism, and fundamentally, has its roots in science⁵. Under the umbrella of modernity, theories can be sub-divided again. Classical theory, for example, is recognised through work by Frederick Taylor, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber to name a few. They contributed such ideas as the rationalisation of organisation through bureaucracy, control and scientific management and emergence of social science. The Human Relations Movement then questioned classical theory with its focus on ‘the social character of work and the importance of interpersonal dynamics in the maintenance of motivation and theory’⁶, and this was followed by the Neo-human relations approach, which focussed more on the psychology of the individual⁷.

³ Collins English Language Dictionary (1994, 11th Edition, Harper Collins Publishers, England

⁴ Hatch, M (1997), *Organization Theory: Modern Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives*, 1st Edition, Oxford University Press, p 9

⁵ Ibid Brooke, C and Hitchin, L (2002)

⁶ Hancock, P and Tyler, M (2001), *Work, Postmodernism and Organisation*, 1st Edition, Sage Publications, p 41

⁷ Mullins, L J (2000), *Management and organisational behaviour*, 5th Edition, Financial times / Prentice Hall, p 62 - 63

During the latter half of the last century, a plethora of management and organisational theory exist(ed)⁸. Two major phases that can be attributed to this period are those of ‘systemic modernism’ and ‘critical modernism’. Systemic Modernism has its roots in Bertalanffy’s work on General Systems Theory⁹, from which Cybernetic and Decision- Making models have been based. Defined, SM is “the values and methods embedded within the rise to prominence of the natural sciences, combined with the deployment of formal rationality to identify and resolve problems of order and control”¹⁰. It is about the realisation of human rationality and how we can improve by becoming more technocratic; society can only flourish if we accept and develop the progress of technology.

Kant (1991 [1784]), “dare to reason”¹¹

Critical Modernism incorporates Kant’s quote. It is broadly defined as being a process of human / individual reflection and emancipation. There is much debate over its links with SM. As a theory which will not accept that science is neutral and the equation of reason with progress and freedom¹² it appears to contrast SM. However, in agreement with Cooper and Burrell (1988), logical reasoning would have that both are ‘made real’ by the knowledge and understanding of contemporary humans, hence each cannot exist without the presence of the other. It is problematic theories like these which, I hypothesise, brought about the desire / need for a new perspective: postmodernism.

Postmodernism is a multiplicity of things, and to be able to describe or define it completely would contradict my theoretical understanding of it. To even critique it would mean I would have to be outside or past it (in time) which would position me as ‘post – postmodern’. As the question of epoch has arisen, postmodernism exists as a response to modern organisation theory (although it could be seen also as overlapping, or running parallel to it). However, many contemporary theorists suggest (and I would agree), that, although postmodern theory

⁸ Depending on whether you position yourself wholly in the Postmodern or Modern epoch, if, indeed they are mutually exclusive, or even exist

⁹ Ibid Hatch, M (1997), p 34 - 41

¹⁰ Cooper, R and Burrell, G (1988), *Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis: An Introduction*, in ‘Organization Studies’, 9 (1): 91 – 112 as quoted in Hancock and Tyler (2001), p 16

¹¹ Kant, I (1991), *An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (first published 1784) as quoted in Hancock and Tyler (2001), p 16

¹² Ibid Hancock, P and Tyler, M (2001), p 17

exists (i.e. theory that is not bounded so much by the concepts that make modern theory 'modern'), it is difficult to see its usage within everyday organisation at present. Even perceived 'radical' organisations (i.e. 'paperless office'), still operate within the bounds of science, system, technology, society and late capitalism - all key modernistic attributes. Paradoxically, typically postmodern theorists have been publishing work on this subject from the early 1970's, before even the advent of the 'computer - age'.

Hatch (1997) usefully describes postmodernism through the metaphor of artistic collage¹³ in that they are both made up remnants and pieces of old information (theory) / art work which are put together to make something new. To explore postmodernism further, I will pursue the statement that postmodernists view organisation "as a text, a narrative, and a discourse"¹⁴ and briefly introduce the key players in this field who agree exactly that.

Lyotard concentrates on knowledge, difference and language. He refers to the process of "labelled efforts of understanding universal truth" as grand narrative¹⁵. From his postmodern perspective, he attempts to draw us away from the universal laws and systems of knowledge dictated to us through modernity, but instead asks us to view knowledge as fundamentally fragmented¹⁶.

Derrida's focus is on language and deconstruction. Roughly defined, deconstruction is "a methodological strategy which seeks to uncover layers of hidden meaning in a text which have been denied or suppressed", where text can mean anything that is produced in everyday social relations whether it be written, spoken or embedded in material artefacts¹⁷. Derrida, under postmodernism, also asks us to think about words and their opposites (i.e. black and white or good and evil), and how one term cannot exist without an understanding of the other, thus one term will construct the other. In a sense, words are hierarchical and have power relations, and this is what he terms 'différance'¹⁸. On a macro level, Derrida forces us to rethink our actions, knowledge etc. on a sociological plane and also to rethink the 'universal truths', which construe modernity. He focuses on subjectivity and interpretation –

¹³ Ibid Hatch, M (1997), pp 54 - 55

¹⁴ Ibid, p 55

¹⁵ Ibid, p 44

¹⁶ Ibid, p 44

¹⁷ Hancock, P and Tyler, M (2001), p 25

¹⁸ Ibid, p 26

deconstruction to find the absent other – a theory which may have resonance for organisational managers¹⁹.

For Foucault, the focus is on power, knowledge and subjectivity²⁰. These terms are related through a term he calls ‘discourse’ which is used to describe anything through determining its context. For example, to discuss the term ‘manager’ I could first look at the discourses of ‘manager’ – that is, everything in our opinion that makes a ‘manager’ and everything it is not. Power is one of Foucault’s main emphases. He is interested in the links between power and knowledge and believes that power is something that can be found everywhere and is embedded in everything²¹. Other areas for contention include the addressing of ‘individuals as subjects who are created by and positioned by discourses’ and also how we are regulated by the technologies that we create. Foucault’s position is traditionally anti-humanist in his belief that we are creations of our environment rather than creators of our environment²².

Postmodernism – what can it offer to organisations and organisational theory?

Some of the key qualities of this frame include its focus on subjectivity, deconstruction, discourse, interpretation, language etc. The postmodern world appears to be chaotic, unstructured and above all, uncertain.

Immediately alarm bells are ringing for supporters of modernism. Organisations like predictability, they positively accept hierarchy and legitimated power and leadership, they embrace new technologies to stay competitive and reap in the profits. They can determine their future in the short term and long term with such tools as risk assessment and can do it quickly in the comfort of their offices with their trusty Microsoft Package on their trusty PC. Why would they want to change this?

But do they need to change this, or does ‘postmodernism’ already exist to some level in organisations? Methods, such a strategic planning already commands that the global

¹⁹ I dare to hypothesise that managers could move away from seeing things as black and white and indulge, for a moment, in those indistinct grey areas which Derrida identifies. This may help enrich managerial perceptions of organisational environment usually considered within the boundaries of modernity, and thus possibly be advantageous for that manager.

²⁰ Ibid Hancock, P and Tyler, M (2001), p23

²¹ Ibid, p 24

²² Ibid, based on ideas from p 24

environment is truly a turbulent and unpredictable place (a postmodernistic quality?). Human Resource Management, ‘organisational culture development’ and team building exercises are flattening hierarchies (dispersing power) and empowering individuals (who may have been, traditionally, repressed). Even within the Systems approach, conventionally the domain of modernism, soft (subjective) methodologies are being formulated such as Checkland’s ‘Soft Systems Methodology’ and Jackson’s ‘Critical Systems Theory’ which look at the ‘*what to do*’ and ‘*what ought to be done*’ about making sense of organisational problems²³. Although these are useful, a postmodernist may even criticise their labelling as quasi-postmodern through asking such questions as:

“why do these theories exist?”

“what is the hidden agenda? (e.g. capital gain?)”

“what are the discourses?”

“who are the initiators? who are the beneficiaries?”

Of course, all theory and methodology is questionable. And postmodernism is about questioning everything. For example, in deconstruction of the title ‘Postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory....’ the author of the title has subconsciously become the target of paradox. Although s/he obviously disputes the application of postmodernism to organisation, in doing so, s/he is stating that ‘something *can* offer a lot to organisational theory’. Hence s/he has applied postmodernism through *différance* and discourse.

‘Storytelling’ with its premise on text and narrative has an application as regards postmodernism, critical thinking and organisation. With a postmodern hat on, storytelling can be used as a way of making sense of the world and thus, organisation. According to Boje (1995), storytelling is “..an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience.”²⁴

Stories and storytelling thus involve actors, interpretation, facts and fiction, narrative, text, language, metaphor, culture, morals, ethics etc. It is the very subjective nature of storytelling that has, up until recently, made it an unlikely candidate for organisational analysis except,

²³ Tsouvalis, C (2002), Unit MAN 112: ‘*Systems Methodology*’, University of Lincoln, 2002.

²⁴ Boje, D (1995), *Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as ‘Tamara – Land’*, from the Academy of Management Journal, 1995, Vol. 38, Issue 4, starting page 997, accessed from EBSCO on-line journals, University of Lincoln (19/11/02), p 3 of 27

possibly within the field of social science and anthropology, under the heading of ‘ethnography’.

We, as social actors participating in organisation, engage in storytelling at every moment in our working lives. Boje (1995) recognises the use of organisational analysis through storytelling in his work ‘A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as ‘Tamara-Land’²⁵. In it he uses postmodern analysis to ‘resituate the excluded voices and stories’²⁶. In studying organisation, whether in a grand and analytical way like Boje or simply by passing thought about why someone has said / done what they have done and in what context, we are empowered to ‘look beyond the looking glass’ and enrich our sense-making.

‘ (1) Let me tell you a story. (2) Where I work, it seems that suddenly we have an unusual high rate of staff turnover. (3) Every one is either leaving, thinking of leaving or waiting for a better opportunity. (4) I think we simply need more management support through the changes. (5) Like, they gave us new tills the other day, on a Friday night when it was busy, and a new menu at the same time. (6) It would have gone Ok, had they given us an iota of training! (7) We just looked so stupid and unprofessional to the customers...’

In deconstruction of this short story, the reader is in a position to make assumptions and ‘learn’ about the organisation. As *I* have written it, *I* will attempt to do this.

Q. Why have you written it?

A. Because the constraints and expectations of the assignment, propose that I do.

Q. Deconstruct the sentences (why were they included?):

1 – Frames paragraph

2 – Based on my opinion from what I have seen, I am making comparisons to the objective figures I have learnt from somewhere on average staff turnover

3 – Over exaggeration to make reader sympathetic to my employee position and myself. It is deep-rooted in my fear of what will happen next *if* everyone leaves (e.g. my friends)

²⁵ Ibid Boje, D (1995) (in reference to whole article)

²⁶ Ibid, p 1 of 27.

4 – My opinion on why others are upset too. Also, probably written due to my knowledge of what I feel is good and bad management practice due to my learning in my Management Degree. A cry for help!!

5 – Objective truth. But I felt that they did it on purpose. And I felt helpless at the time when it happened – it was chaos. Also shows how much power technology can exert over us – we are ‘cyborgs’²⁷

6 – Sarcasm due to (probably) my ideology of how someone my age speaks (pronounced in word ‘iota’)

7 – Purposefully I try to include the customer’s perspective in order to back up my argument

Although I am, in no way, suggesting that I have provided here a perfect postmodern deconstruction, it is hoped that it shows *how* it is possible to use postmodernism and apply it to organisation and how organisations could learn from their fragmented unities, particularly, in this case, the management. In a sense, I have ‘repackaged’ or ‘re-framed’ the story. From Goffman’s (1986) perspective, management should appreciate that in most situations, many different things are happening simultaneously – if seen as a narrative, the organisation is not linear but indeed circular and can be understood better by the process of creating boundaries and re-framing continuously.²⁸

The problem of postmodernism as applied wholly to the actor of ‘manager’, and which may make it unappealing, is the blurring of power. Managers traditionally are the leaders, the controllers, the holders of power. Taking a Foucauldian perspective would almost certainly negate the traditional power relations of hierarchy and organisations, and instead claim power to all those actors and objects that personify ‘organisation’. Lyotard may also break down the ‘manager role’ by leading organisation towards a more fragmented but unified network of knowledge rather than a top-down approach to decision-making. In Derridian deconstruction, even the word ‘manager’ can be assumed as ‘man-ager’ with its emphasis on the words ‘man’

²⁷ Defined, “Cyborg, a compound word derived from cybernetics and organism, is a term coined by Manfred Clynes in 1960 to describe the need for mankind to artificially enhance biological functions in order to survive in the hostile environment of Space. Originally, a cyborg referred to a human being with bodily functions aided or controlled by technological devices, such as an oxygen tank, artificial heart valve or insulin pump. Over the years, the term has acquired a more general meaning, describing the dependence of human beings on technology. In this sense, cyborg can be used to characterize anyone who relies on a computer to complete their daily work.” as quoted by unknown author in the *IT Specific Encyclopaedia* (2000) from the website SearchTechTarget.com, URL http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci296606,00.html, accessed on the 06/03/04 as a result of a search for ‘Definition Cyborg’ on the Google internet search engine

²⁸ Goffman, E (1986), *Frame Analysis*, 2nd Reprint, The Maple Press, USA, p 1- 20

and ‘age’, thus evoking images of traditional manager as male. Postmodernism empowers the repressed in society, so gender based arguments are applicable to this deconstruction.

So is the concept of postmodernism as applied to organisation and management, coherent? Introducing the concepts of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ has enabled important and tangible issues to be raised regarding the appropriateness of both theories to contemporary organisation and its management. Regarding postmodernism ‘as a text, a narrative, and a discourse’²⁹ befits the notion of storytelling within organisation but the use of storytelling is questionable. In agreement with Gabriel (2000), storytelling ‘enriches, enhances, and infuses facts with meaning’³⁰ Note the intrinsic dualism here. The benefits of storytelling are clear in that they enable subjectivity and individuality to be raised within organisation however ‘the danger is to lose sight of the importance of actual events in organisations’³¹, the insinuation being that organisations must be objective to remain viable.

What should be clear is that organisations are incorporating theory which reflects postmodern strands anyway. Operating environments are now acceptably ‘unstable and uncertain and dynamic’; the belief that science, technology and capitalism have the answer for certainty, profitability and exponential growth in organisations is dwindling. Critical theories have given way to postmodern thought³².

From a management perspective, postmodernism offers alternative ways of thinking about everyday organisation. Building on the corporate culture movement and ‘management – guru’ hype of the 1980s, postmodernism seems, to me, to be an old theory repackaged. Even though postmodern thinking attempts to break down the fundamental principles that allow ‘organisation’ and ‘manager’ to even exist this is not its *raison d’être*; the primer for this frame is its ability to give social actors a way of making sense of an increasingly hostile and complex world. As Gabriel (2000) remarks, ‘postmodern approaches have made considerable

²⁹ Ibid Hatch, M (1997), p 55

³⁰ Gabriel, Y (2000), *Storytelling in Organizations*, Chapter 6: Using Stories in Organizational Research, from the Learning Package MAN133CB06 at the University of Lincoln (2002), p 135

³¹ Ibid, p 151

³² If you refer back to p 3 of this script and consider the content from the first mention of Critical Modernism forthwith, then you *may also* agree that there has been a transformation in thinking to a more postmodern take. A key transformation from ‘theory’ to ‘thinking’ is another assertion from this sentence. This provocative argument outreaches the boundaries of this study, but a question for consideration if I may; “Is it possible that managers can exact themselves within ‘theoretical’ paradigms, but also ‘think’ for themselves at the same time? Are ‘theory’ and ‘thinking’ mutually exclusive or mutually dependent terms within the context of management?”.

contributions to elucidating the role of language in organizing, structuring, and occluding our understandings, without for one moment convincing us that everything *is* language³³. From this quote Gabriel is suggesting that postmodernism is not influencing practical management, thus for those absolute postmodernist thinkers amongst us it would appear that there is still a long way to go. However, I believe that if society and its actors were to grasp the idea that everything *is* language, and just for a moment were able to see between the lines of the text, maybe even those most convinced by practical theory may find themselves revelling in their own thought processes and innovative ideas. And then, just maybe, postmodern thinking would have overcome one of its biggest enemies of all... acceptance. This is, perhaps the case when talking of the management profession. Those in this position who find themselves happy within their comfortable, traditional roles and structures, afraid of losing power and afraid of change will spurn the challenges of postmodern thinking the most. Those who are fairly liberal and/or critical in their thinking may question the pragmatics of postmodern thinking and practice, and therefore find it difficult to accept.

And as for those very few remaining...welcome to the *real* world!

³³ Ibid, p 151 - 152

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