

Understanding Organizational Culture.

Mats Alvesson. London: Sage, 2002. 214 pp. \$31.00, paper.

This book is the most recent and most authoritative attempt to furnish an overall and systematic picture of the study of organizations as cultures. It warrants attention because the author has been one of the leading proponents in Europe of that particular intellectual movement known as "organizational symbolism," which was born at the end of the 1970s as a marginal and anticonformist movement and has rapidly come to the fore as one of the most important currents of thought and research in organizational studies. Alvesson has written numerous works in this field, with the ambition of both innovating the theory (e.g., Alvesson, 1993) and of systematizing the enormous body of literature accumulated in the area (e.g., Alvesson and Berg, 1992).

The work is essentially a university textbook. The author's educational intent is evident from the emphasis that he places on the usefulness of a "reflexive" approach to the study of organizations, one, that is, that digs below the surface of social phenomena and brings to light the "premises" behind the thought and action of both the researched and the researcher. But the author, who is also an exponent of critical

management theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), addresses the scholarly community as well, his aim being to propose, on the one hand, a theoretical synthesis of the cultural study of organizations and, on the other, to combine the practical/hermeneutic approach usually employed in clinical, problem-driven research with the emancipatory approach characteristic of critical research (Habermas, 1972).

As a synthesis of the organizational culture literature, the book has the indubitable merit of proposing a definition of the field of studies that goes beyond the usual typological classification of cultural phenomena. The author's choice of seven "vital topics"—(1) role and meaning of metaphors, (2) culture and performance, (3) areas of applications for cultural thinking, (4) culture and leadership, (5) the emancipatory potential of cultural studies, (6) the question of level of analysis, and (7) culture and organizational order/disorder—is excellent and original. The best sections of the book are those relative to topics 3 and 4. The first shows the superficiality and the reductionism with which many scholars of management have used the categories of cultural analysis and, vice versa, the power of these categories, if used correctly, to enrich understanding and enlarge the spectrum of action in crucial areas of business administration, like marketing and strategy. The second shows how the cultural study of organizations sheds new and useful light on long-standing questions like leadership, which hitherto have been studied mainly from a psycho-social perspective. This ability to structure the analytical field is not matched by a real capacity for theoretical synthesis. The author does not set out to develop a "grand theory"—something for which, perhaps, we all feel less and less need—but the seven topics are not given uniform treatment. The discussion of some of them is weak and suffers from gaps and contradictions, but especially from oversimplifications, probably due in part to the difficulty of inventorying such a rich and varied body of literature.

As to the gaps, the author ignores not only all the great ethnographies that have marked the development of organizational thought and constitute the most significant intellectual precedents of the cultural movement—from Selznick (1949) to Crozier (1963), from Gouldner (1954) to Dalton (1959)—but also (with the sole exception of Kunda, 1992) the more recent major studies that have simultaneously, and from a longitudinal perspective, analyzed the cross-dimensions apparently so important to Alvesson himself, namely, culture and power (e.g., Pettigrew, 1985). But the contradictions and simplifications are due mainly to the author's second and more ambitious objective: to demonstrate that it is possible for the cultural study of organizations to simultaneously reconcile and cultivate both a practical/hermeneutic interest and an emancipatory one, these being the two central concerns of Alvesson's career as a scholar. His persona as an exponent of critical management theory, however, outweighs his persona as an interpretative researcher. The book, in fact, is permeated by an anti-managerialist and evaluative stance that sometimes induces the author not only to disregard the principle of reflexivity that he urges on his students

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but also to ignore the other two main lessons that numerous organization scholars have learned from anthropology, namely, the need to give importance to "local knowledge" (to avoid overgeneralizations) and the need to respect the cultures studied (so that diagnosis is not mixed with evaluation).

When Alvesson declares that "... the bearer of charisma enjoys loyalty and authority by virtue of a mission believed to be embodied in him ... this is a bit difficult in business life, as the mission (ultimately to make profit) may be less capable of making the pulse beat quicker for most persons in an organization" (p. 110), he overlooks the fact that the truth or falsehood of his assertion can only be established empirically and on the basis of the meanings attributed to the mission of any company whatever—even one engaged in the humblest and least glamorous of activities—solely by those who work for it. Another example is provided by Alvesson's claim that Western researchers in general are blinded because they share the values of the companies they study—"... progress, efficiency, rationalization, productivity, masculinity, exploitation of nature, control, hierarchy, and affluent consumption ..." (p. 128)—although he fails to show how, why, and in what specific circumstances the sharing of values between researched and researcher impedes the latter from furnishing a good, thick description of the culture of the organization studied. Nor does he ask himself whether it may not be more "blinding" for the researcher to hold values opposed to those shared by the actors in the reality being analyzed.

The obvious consequence of this ideological prejudice is Alvesson's tendency to consider a culture as a constraint that the researcher must help the researched to free themselves from only when the values shared in the system studied are distasteful to the researcher. He disregards the fact that a culture, any culture, is the shield with which we all defend ourselves against our ignorance of the world and that a researcher who believes that he or she has the capacity to establish if and when "... the culture compass indicates arbitrarily a particular route and provides a false security" (p. 143) is not in the best condition to draw an accurate map of the culture being studied. The book offers an excellent example of the blinding effect of this anti-managerialist stance if one compares arguments, for example, about the power of the manager in the chapter on leadership and those in the chapter on the emancipatory approach: in the former, the author argues realistically that the leader can do little to create a culture and that a good leader is, above all, one able to interpret and enhance the existing culture; in the latter, he states, "Managers may be seen therefore as agents of power creating or reproducing shared meanings, ideas and values through acts of communication which freeze social reality" (p. 126). It is as if the author has split in two: in some chapters, he is an attentive observer of reality, in others, a tenacious proponent of his vision of the world.

This ideological passion also induces the author to divide the field sharply between friends and enemies. He consequently assumes that the (purported) sharing of values opposed to his own will inevitably be accompanied by scientific work of poor quality. Thus lumped together under the heading "pro-

management" are all those scholars who have studied the integrative aspects of cultural systems—aspects, moreover, that the author himself recognizes when he refers to his own experience of empirical research. These scholars he accuses of being both the servants of capital and diehard functionalists, unable to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of organizational life and inclined to use only managers as their informants (and therefore to be criticized on methodological grounds). The same tendency to set in opposition and to simplify induces Alvesson to equate those who have taken a distal view on the culture's effects on performance with those who have adopted a proximal perspective (Cooper and Law, 1995) on the processes through which performance produces the culture.

These contradictions come to a head in the final chapter, which examines organizational and cultural change. If the energy devoted to demolishing the "great technocratic project" (to which Alvesson believes the majority of Western managers are dedicated) had instead been used to discuss the principal theories of social and cultural change and to analyze the role of experience and emotions in the construction of meaning systems (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), the book would have greatly benefited. Instead, change is viewed as largely resulting from a cognitive process activated by the exposure of the human mind to "messages." And the author's obsession with demolishing the unitary view of culture finally induces him to propound a concept of the organization as a space of "cultural traffic," or, in other words, a permeable and transitory receptacle of flows and impulses. Alvesson thus appears to neglect the fact that utilitarian organizations, compared with other culture-bearing milieux, are not passive containers but, rather, environments that are signally able to foster—by means of the process Selznick called the "institutionalization" and formation of organizational "character"—the stable definition of idiosyncratic meaning systems that in their turn give rise to and distinguish collective identities.

The intention behind these criticisms is not to devalue Alvesson's book; rather, it is to indicate an interpretative key of particular interest to academics. I refer to the possibility that the reflexivity urged by Alvesson can also be implemented by reading his book as a cultural product, endeavoring to interpret the cultural dynamics in which the author is involved. This would stimulate interesting debate on whether it is possible to cultivate hermeneutic and emancipatory interests simultaneously and, in the final analysis, whether it is possible to combine scientific commitment with political commitment.

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