

*For Positivist Organization Theory: Proving the Hard Core*, by Lex Donaldson (Sage, London, 1996).

In 1985, Lex Donaldson published *In Defence of Organization Theory: A Reply to Critics*, in which he began a campaign to restore the functional/positivist orthodoxy in the field of organization studies. His efforts have continued with *American Anti-Management Theories of Organization: A Critique of Paradigm Proliferation* (1995) and, most recently, with the book reviewed here. Donaldson's endeavour has been recently called a "retreat into a nostalgic yearning for past certainties and the communal comfort they once provided" (Reed, 1996). In truth, judging from this book, Donaldson's campaign comes increasingly to resemble more a passionate onslaught than a retreat. Perhaps his growing awareness that organizational studies are multiparadigmatic, fragmented and discontinuous — and that any return to a situation of "normal science" seems, at least for the moment, highly improbable — has induced Donaldson to raise his sights and to sharpen the tone of his polemic. The realization that his arguments, despite their purportedly implacable logic, have won few supporters has induced him — perhaps unconsciously — to resort to rhetoric and metaphor in an attempt to seduce with eloquence those he is unable to convince with reason.

The most striking feature of this book, in fact, is its markedly "aesthetic" quality. One no longer finds the tentative and placid tone used even recently to defend contingency theory in a collective work (Donaldson, 1996). Here the message is: you are either with me or against me, white or black, there is no room for nuances of meaning or compromises. The index itself of the book is a partisan declaration of war, for and against: *for* determinism, functionalism, Cartesianism, generalization; *against* strategic choice, subjectivity, politics, organization types and quantum jumps. Nothing is conceded to the adversary, this is an all-out war. Nowhere in the book I did find any acknowledgement that the theories contested by the author might comprise insights and suggestions which could enrich or supplement contingency theory. From this point of view, Donaldson appears to reject out of hand any hypothesis that the development of knowledge can be based on a dialectical confrontation among ideas.

Donaldson dramatizes his discourse by employing stylistic devices — like the blatant simplicity of his assertions and the obsessive repetition of the same concept, often formulated in

the same terms, in the introduction, development and summary of his chapters, sections and paragraphs — and by using colourful language seemingly drawn exclusively from a dictionary of opposites: positivism is the force of good, progress, reason, the brilliant light of the sun; any other theory is evil, regression, irrationality, collapse, ruin, darkness (see, for example, the beginning of Chapter 4).

Military terms like “assault”, “attack”, “devastation”, “defence”, “battle” abound in the text, and one comes across declarations that smack of dispatches from the front or proclamations of victory (e.g. “Thus positivist theory has again been vindicated”, p. 159). Ironically enough, the use of these stylistic devices is at odds with a fundamental principle of scientific positivism, namely that scientific language should be rigorously analytical and forgo any form of eloquence that appeals to the sentiments and passion rather than to cold reason; a principle that Donaldson himself recalls in the quotation from Hume used as the book’s epigraph: “If we take in our hand any volume . . . let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No . . . Commit it then to the flames”.

Apart from these formal aspects, I do not believe that the substance of Donaldson’s arguments is of any service to the cause of functionalism. I say this with a certain regret, since I believe that organization scholars have grown increasingly indifferent to the practical relevance of the knowledge that they produce. On the basis of this conviction — and agreeing with Donaldson’s view propounded in his book of 1985 that organization theory (seen from the perspective of its normative implications) is inherently a functional explanation — I have argued elsewhere that if we are to narrow the gap between expert organizational knowledge and the way in which organizations are designed and run, we must dispense with anti-functional prejudice and gradually come to terms with a sort of “revised functionalism” whose features I have sought to describe (Gagliardi, 1991). There are two reasons, I believe, why Donaldson’s book is a disservice to the cause of functionalism.

First, in his overwrought attempt to simplify a set of complex epistemological issues, Donaldson gives the reader the impression that his approach must be accepted (or rejected) *en bloc*, in the sense that one cannot be functionalist without at the same time being materialist, positivist and determinist. This strikes me as excessive: the adoption of constructivist, phenomenological and interpretive perspectives may increase our understanding of organizational life — and of the inevitable interweaving among instrumental rationality, interests and value preferences, nature and culture, physical and symbolic realities — and it may help us to construct better organizations (ones, that is, which create fewer problems for people and society than they solve, and whose actors try to reduce the wastage of resources and avoidable human suffering, which is perhaps the most grievous waste of all).

Secondly, the credibility of Donaldson’s assertions is, I believe, vitiated by the frequent logical contradiction between his partial admissions of the complexity of phenomena — which he is compelled to acknowledge when discussing the theories he opposes — and the axiomatic rigidity of his conclusions. For example, he admits the existence, however limited, of managerial discretion in re-engineering the environment (p. 39) and in the choice of structure (p. 51) but he concludes categorically that “organizations are forced to adapt their structure to contingencies” (p. 40) and that structures are “the inevitable outcome” (p. 56) of contingencies. Likewise, on page 65, when comparing the “rational” and Parkinsonian (“political”) interpretations of the structural evolution of the English military administration, he admits that “the truth may be some admixture between these two antithetic theories”, but concludes that “the Parkinsonian theory . . . is not supported. If we are to make progress we must eschew Parkinson” (p. 84). On other occasions, by contrast, I have found a close match between the simplism of

Donaldson's assertions and the simplism of the theories of human behaviour that he cites in support of those assertions. For example, he challenges the idea that organizational slack can be used to avoid structural adaptation with the following argument: "... if management use slack to indulge themselves and to avoid efficiency reforms that they find personally distasteful, why would this always be primarily in their organizational structure? Why not take it out in expense-account living, stock houses, pensions or on-the-job leisure? Surely, if management are out to maximize their personal welfare, these are more direct pay-offs than sticking with inefficient structures" (p. 21). Evidently, Donaldson finds it inconceivable that a structure may be kept or jettisoned because of the "meaning" that it possesses, in a given context, for organizational actors; he finds it inconceivable that production practises may also be symbolic practices of appropriation of the world.

Underlying the contradictions to be found in this book, I believe, is an epistemological issue that Donaldson does not explicitly address, but towards which he maintains an ambiguous stance. One fails to understand whether he views organization theory as a positive science — defined on the basis of a phenomenon to analyze — or as a normative science — defined on the basis of a project to construct. In other words, and with reference to the classification of the sciences proposed by Piaget and adapted by Le Moigne (1990), it is not clear whether Donaldson believes organization theory to be a life science or an engineering science. The question has been addressed and elegantly answered by Thompson, who on the one hand states unequivocally that "administrative science . . . [should stand] approximately in relation to the basic social sciences as engineering stands with respect to physical sciences or medicine to the biological" (Thompson, 1956, p. 103), but on the other formulates his views on organizational action (Thompson, 1967) as "conditioned" positive propositions. Stating, for example, that "under norms of rationality" organizations seek to seal off their core technologies from environmental influences, he shows — at the same time — how organizations which tend to use criteria of instrumental rationality really behave (assuming, evidently, that actual organizations can act differently), and how an organization that intends to act rationally should behave. Thompson's (positive) assertion that organizations are natural systems which *strive* to act rationally effectively sums up his position. Donaldson, by contrast, *seems* to argue that the tendency to act rationally is some sort of "natural law" which organizations cannot evade. The adaptation of the structure to changed contingencies may be belated but it is inevitable. Herein lies the ambiguity: is it inevitable *if* an organization seeks to perform well and thus survive, or is it unavoidable *in any case*? In the former case, the hypothesis is plausible, but it ignores the lessons of neo-institutionalism and forgets that organizations may adopt and preserve structures which do not guarantee performance but legitimation, and which enable survival without performance (Meyer and Zucker, 1989; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In the latter case, the hypothesis is that organizations cannot decide to die, or that they cannot die *in any case*. And yet, it is towards the latter — disconcerting — conclusion that Donaldson seemingly leans when he depicts managers as the docile instruments of a norm of rationality inscribed in the genetic heritage of organizations; managers able to accelerate — but not to delay! — inevitable structural adaptation (p. 56).

My general impression is that ideologies rather than scientific theories confront each other in this book — although this is to some extent inevitable given that there is perhaps no theory that is not value-driven. It is curious, however, that Donaldson is swift to recognize the ideological basis of the theories that he challenges (p. 164) but fails to acknowledge that of his own position, as if determinism and the denial of free will, materialism and scientific empiricism itself were not fundamental visions of the world, of humanity and of knowledge, subject to choices which refer only to themselves.

In the conclusions to the book, for the benefit of his reader, Donaldson summarizes the chief regularities observed by scholars inspired by contingency theory. It is as if the knight in shining armour who has defended the honour of his lady in so many bitter battles finally unveils her beauties to justify his endeavours. Donaldson tells us things that we have known for some time, but his recapitulation induces us to enquire whether, today, there is any point in solemnly reiterating that, for example, organizational size is related to structural differentiation and decentralization, strategy is the major determinant of divisionalization, and task uncertainty and required innovation rate alter the way jobs are structured. And I ask myself whether it was worth spending so much energy and vehemence on arguments of such generality and intuitiveness that they are by now almost self-evident. Although Donaldson believes that the elegance of a theory depends mainly on the elementariness and generality of its assertions, universal and exhaustive propositions of this kind do not prompt research programmes to corroborate them. Nor does one see how they can concretely improve our design skills. Perhaps even in organization studies, God is in the details.

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