

Other Reviews

Translating Organizational Change.

Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón, eds. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996. 284 pp. DM 138.00, cloth; DM 58.00, paper.

The chairman of the board of directors of a large multinational company whom I recently interviewed in the course of

183/ASQ, March 1999

a research study told me with satisfaction, "In five years we've changed our organizational structure three times, just like changing a glove, different each time and each time a perfect fit." While the metaphor vividly evokes the institutionalist idea of formal structure as ceremonial facade relatively decoupled from operational activities (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), the pride with which it was uttered expressed the idealization—and therefore the symbolic value—of change in modern managerial culture. Even if change is usually justified in terms of instrumental rationality, emphasis on the forms of change often obscures its purposes. The equation between change and progress is taken for granted, and a capacity for radical change, even to the extent of altering one's very identity, seems to have become a virtue in itself (Jeambar and Roucaute, 1988). The emphasis on form and the blurring of purposes become even more marked when the forms of change embody contemporary ideologies and values (I am thinking, for example, of the impressive panoply of the techniques and practices of organizational development and of their underlying values of democracy, participation, self-fulfillment, and social integration). The mythic character of many organizational practices—and the symbolic value of change as such—helps to explain the extraordinary proliferation and popularity of the management-oriented literature on organizational change and development. The book reviewed here deconstructs the myth of organizational change and proposes a more complex and problematic interpretation of those offered in the academic literature by the dominant theories of rational choice and environmental adaptation.

The book consists of an introduction by the two editors, each of whom has also contributed an essay, eight essays, and a sort of afterword by John Meyer, who comments on the essays, pointing out directions for further research. It is unusually homogeneous for a work of this kind. Its organization is clearly the result of a collective endeavor: the authors met on several occasions to discuss their contributions; each of them (and not only the editors) knows the others' work well, actually showing that the ideas of the others have enriched and integrated with their own. The majority of the authors, almost all of whom are European, belong to the Scandinavian community of organization scholars that has made such a distinctive contribution to elaborating that strand of thought—characterized by a penchant toward the "erosion" of rationality (see e.g., Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972; Brunsson, 1985)—that has its roots in the cynical tradition of European political science.

The authors, who share a constructivist epistemology and an interest in an institutionalist reading of organizational phenomena, set out to remedy what has also recently been pointed out (Barley and Tolbert, 1997) as a shortcoming in neo-institutionalism, especially American; namely, that it is an approach that has well demonstrated the impact of institutions and cultural values on formal structures but has largely ignored the way in which institutions are created and reproduced. The focus of the book is therefore on institutionalization and deinstitutionalization, in particular on the role played in the diffusion of models and organizational

Book Reviews

practices by, on the one hand, fashions, their creators, and intermediaries and, on the other, by organizations in their constant effort to embody success and to assume identities coherent with rationalized models of progress. In their reading of these processes, the authors employ concepts recently advanced in social theory and methodology and inspired by postmodern and deconstructionist perspectives. As the editors declare, "there is no intention of coming up with a 'new theory' which will explain organizational change once and for all"; rather, the intention is to furnish plausible accounts of the processes explored and theories "which do not so much attempt to 'solve' paradoxes as they try to preserve them in order to understand their role in the life of organizations" (p. 3). This position entails an attempt to collapse a series of modernist dichotomies: micro/macro, innovation/imitation, voluntarism/determinism, idea/matter, technology/society, nature/culture, stability/change, and scientific discourse/narrative. Moreover, almost all the contributors discuss the processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization, making reference to a metaphor (the travel of ideas) and a concept—that of translation—proposed by Callon and Latour (1981), who in turn borrowed it from Michel Serres. The heuristic value of this concept lies in its polysemy: it simultaneously denotes, in fact, transference, transformation, and the rendering of something in another medium or form, embracing both linguistic and material objects, and it is convincingly used as a key concept for understanding organizational change throughout the book.

Czarniawska and Joerges's essay ("Travel of Ideas") discusses the paradox of change and stability, illustrating the processes of fashion and institutionalization—and the relations between them—in terms of the transformation of ideas into objects, actions, and once again ideas, in a constant movement between localized and global time/space. In his essay "Organizational Imitation and Identity Transformation," Sevón discusses the interplay between action and identity and reformulates imitative action as an active process of learning. Sahlin-Andersson ("Imitating by Editing Success: The Construction of Organizational Fields") conducts detailed analysis of the objects and processes of imitation and construction of organizational identity, showing that the translation process—however creative and open it may be—is constrained by "editing rules" dictated by exigencies of social control, conformism, and traditionalism. Forssell and Jansson ("The Logic of Organizational Transformation: On the Conversion of Non-Business Organizations") argue that the construction and change of identity are guided and conditioned less by individual organizational practices or organizing ideas than by abstract and global patterns of forms/activities; these patterns are culturally sedimented, widely known and enduring, and stored in some sort of social stock of organizational knowledge. Abrahamson, in his essay, "Technical and Aesthetic Fashion," thoroughly discusses the role of fashion in the spread of managerial techniques, arguing that these techniques embody collective conceptions of what is rationally advanced and that such conceptions—like taste in aesthetic fashions—"cannot remain stable for too long, otherwise progress will not appear to be progressing" (p. 117).

The theme of fashion is resumed by Røvik ("Deinstitutionalization and the Logic of Fashion"), who analyses the other side of the coin: why and how institutionalized standards fall into disuse, and what happens to them; a matter on which the neo-institutionalists to date have—when they have addressed it—advanced explanations based on natural selection and rational calculation. Røvik convincingly shows that fashion can provide a specifically institutional explanation for the decline of practices. The final two essays, by Spybey ("Global Transformations") and Rottenburg ("When Organization Travels: On Intercultural Translation") explore translation processes in the setting and from the standpoint of globalization. The former discusses the general worldwide trends followed by rationalized ideas now strongly patterned at the world level; the latter analyses the clash between two institutionalized thought structures—the Western rationalist model of organization and the local version of the organizing process—which meet on the organizational ground in an African country.

The majority of these essays are well written. Their many ideas are set out in a stimulating and attractive way, with a wealth of clearly presented examples and empirical cases. In my view—within the bounds of the authors' purposes—the book makes a significant and original contribution to the development of institutionalist theory, describing and pointing out perspectives that integrate with ones hitherto developed mainly by American scholars working in the same area of inquiry. In this regard, Meyer makes some interesting comments in his concluding chapter, in which he analyses the American contribution to contemporary sociological institutional thinking and delineates, by contrast, the key assumptions that explain what he calls the "European flavour" of these essays.¹ The potential of the two approaches—and the reason for the differences between the thematic choices and focuses of the Europeans and the Americans—are discussed by comparing the typically American conception of organizations (and the people in them) as sharply defined and fairly rational actors, with prior purposes, clear boundaries, and unified sovereignty—"the truly hard-wired actor" (p. 242)—with the European conception of the "soft actor," whose purposes, resources, boundaries, and sovereignty are "embedded in cultural material" and "change with changing ideologies and models" (p. 243). From this point of view, the book can be read with another interesting interpretative key: it enables discussion—from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge—of the extent to which underlying cultural and scientific models influence research designs and styles of theorization, thereby developing a debate that has recently begun in our discipline as well (Bacharach, Gagliardi, and Mundell, 1995; *Organization Science*, 1995; Hofstede, 1996).

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Interestingly enough, a previous version of Czarniawska and Joerges's essay, which sets the tone for the whole book, was chosen and discussed as an exemplar of the European tradition of organization studies in a book devoted to this theme (Bacharach, Gagliardi, and Mundell, 1995).

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186/ASQ, March 1999

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Book Reviews

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