

## Theories Empowering for Action

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When I was invited to reflect on the concept of powerful theory, I realized that we usually associate the lexeme *powerful* with persons, institutions, and physical artifacts but very rarely with intellectual products. And I was surprised by the generative potential of the trope "powerful theory" by its ability to direct me to a new understanding of the nature of theory and of the relation between theory and practice. The purpose of this article is to share with the reader the reflections generated in my mind by this metaphorical juxtaposition. My main argument can be briefly summarized through the following chain of statements:

1. First, I suggest that a theory is powerful when it empowers organizational actors, opening new avenues for their action and strengthening their resolve to go along them.
2. Second, I argue that the empowering quality of a theory can only apparently be ascribed to its capacity to intellectually enlighten: Theories affect the feelings as well as the minds of the receivers, resulting in increased knowledge and in changed feelings.
3. Third, when theories are largely adopted—becoming guidelines for future action or justifications of actions already carried out—their success can be due more to their moral connotations or to their aesthetic value than to their power to provide coherent explanations of organizational phenomena.

My conclusion is the following (seeming) paradox: Theories that least approximate the modernist ideal of

science—because they rely on ideologies and aesthetic communication rather than on facts, logic, and demonstration—are more likely to affect organizational habits and practices. Finally, I wonder about the implications of this conclusion for the evaluation of theoretical work and the training of aspiring theorists.

### THEORY AND ACTION

Why do I believe that a powerful theory is a theory that empowers action? Let us start from an acceptance of a relational view of power (Dahl, 1957). Thus, power is not an attribute of an isolated entity but always concerns the relationship between someone or something and someone or something else. I think that the "something else" of theory is practice; thus, the power of a theory should be appraised in terms of its capacity to affect practice.

Many theorists do not seem much concerned with the practical relevance of their work. It always strikes me that the propensity of academicians is to take for granted that the qualities of theories should be appraised within their own domain, in strictly theoretical terms. I think this is a consequence of the cultural opposition (at least in Western countries) between the two domains of thought and action. Most theorists—and social theorists in particular—often believe or take for granted that theorizing is their own game preserve, forgetting that everyone, everywhere, unremit-

tingly creates theories (i.e., hypotheses of the real world or hypotheses of possible worlds). Paraphrasing Burke, we could say that humans build their theories, nervously loquacious, on the edge of an abyss. We need theories because we have to act or justify what we have done. Theory is what makes meaningful (prospectively or retrospectively) social action. Unremittingly, common sense or "expert" theories confront each other, challenge established practices, and are challenged by new practices. Practices embody theories, and theorizing is itself a form of practice. If, then, in real life theory and practice are so strictly intertwined, it seems sensible to define as "powerful" those theories that are relevant for practice, that is, those that empower for action.

### DIFFERENT PRACTICES AND DIFFERENT RECEIVERS

However, the empowering quality of management and organization theories can be appraised in relation to two different audiences and two different kinds of practices: first, other theorists who can be empowered in the practice of their own theory work and, second, the "true" practitioners who have to manage organizations and/or live within them.

Apparently, organization theorists seem much more concerned with the former than with the latter. This kind of concern appears quite clearly even in the recent debate between Jeffrey Pfeffer (1993) and John Van Maanen (1995a, 1995b) on the quality and the relevance of organizational theorizing. Pfeffer complains about the lack of paradigmatic purity and unity in the field, whereas Van Maanen praises the ambiguity and the richness of an open, conversational style of theorizing, holding up the work of Karl Weick as an example. For both contenders, however, what really seems to matter are the possible benefits and costs of different research strategies and styles for the academic community. Pfeffer fears that the economists will invade the field of organizational studies, but Van Maanen testifies to the influence of Weick's work in terms of quotations in academic journals and in terms of how many times his books are in the list of readings for Ph.D. programs.

Clearly, theories empowering theorists are likely to be different from theories empowering organizational actors: The former affect styles of thinking and writing, and the latter affect styles of management and patterns of organizational behavior. I claim that the

more organizational scientists tend to behave as a self-contained, closed system—showing a reduced concern with the social and political relevance of their work—the more the distance between organization science and managerial practice will increase. As I believe that this distance should, instead, be reduced—as a preliminary condition for a renewed interest by students and business school administrators in classes on organization theory—I'll focus on the relevance of theory for organizational actors.

By no means, however, would I claim that theorists should tell the practitioners what they should do: The role of theory is to "inspire" organizational actors (Astley & Zammuto, 1992), leaving to them the task and the responsibility to "translate" (Callon & Latour, 1981) espoused theories into action or into other artifacts eventually relevant for action. And I believe the concept of empowerment is particularly appropriate to mirror this inspiring, rather than prescribing, quality of theory.

### THE PROPERTIES OF AN "EMPOWERING" THEORY

What, then, are the properties of an empowering theory? A theory empowers organizational actors when it spurs their imagination, points out new opportunities and ends, unveils new paths and new means to ends, and increases their freedom of action and their will to act. But a theory (whatever it may be) is never merely and universally understood. Its strength depends mainly on its admissibility in a given, particular context of social and cultural relations. Within this context, a theory is experienced as a cultural artifact and materialized in speech, writing, or another medium. Usually it is experienced in its entirety: Although it is analytically deciphered, it is also morally evaluated because the "hypotheses of order" it contains can be more or less desirable, according to the value system (or, more generally, according to the concerns) of the receiver. Moreover, a theory can be "liked" more or less for its formal properties. It's important to stress that the ontological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions—which we so carefully distinguish at the analytical level—affect each other in human perception and evaluation: We believe true what we desire, and we can find beauty in what we believe to be true.

A compelling (emotionally inspiring) vision can then account for more—in terms of the practical rele-

vance of a theory—than a logically coherent set of propositions. Apocalyptic or utopian thinking is an example of an extremely powerful (empowering) visionary theory, with enormous relevance for practice. One might even propose that the history of organizational knowledge is punctuated by the cyclical alternation of critical, morally, or aesthetically compelling visions and routine rationalizations. This point was made by Barley and Kunda (1992) in an essay they wrote a few years ago on the cyclical alternation of design and devotion in organization studies. Without underrating the relevance of the value premises or the value implications of theories, I want particularly to stress here the seductive power of a theory, due to its aesthetic qualities.

A scientific hypothesis, like a painting, a technological invention, or a musical composition, is a human creation, a skillful making by human minds of designs for ordering or explaining some aspects of what we experience as reality. And few would deny that all such designing involves the creation, imposition, and recognition of form. Like the colors, the light, and the proportions in a painting, the formalisms or the models of a theory can appear equally magical in their capacity to evoke the previously ineffable, to make ideas cogent and manipulable.

What makes a theory “beautiful”? Obviously, no theory is beautiful in itself. Its seductive power depends—as I have just said—on the traditions, styles, and sensibilities developed in a particular social and cultural context. In general, however, I think the aesthetic appeal of a theory can be due to the “rightness” of an underlying concrete image or root metaphor (Morgan, 1986; Pepper, 1942). The potency of this image resides in being striking, surprising, consoling, and gladdening, giving to the receivers the impression that the image captures a reality heretofore unarticulated but intuitively sensed. This image can be quite abstract, lying on the ambiguous border between concepts and images. In the particular field of organization studies, I found that quite often a theory is perceived as powerful—at least by the authors—if it embodies a geometrical figure such as a square, a triangle, or—better—a circle: plane figures, of course, that can be easily put on a flat page. (Some authors seem to think that the best would be a three-dimensional geometrical figure, but their drawings are often disappointing. Perhaps the third dimension gives a sort of corporeality to the image, which loses the perfection and the immaterial purity of a truly abstract image.)

The aesthetic appeal of a theory can also be due to other strictly linguistic properties. In my recent review (Gagliardi, 1998) of one of Donaldson’s latest books (*For Positivist Organization Theory: Proving the Hard Core*), I underlined the markedly aesthetic quality of the book. I noted that the author dramatizes his discourse by employing stylistic devices—like the simplicity of his assertions and the obsessive repetition of the same concepts. By using colorful language drawn from military jargon, some declarations smack more of dispatches from the front than of cold scientific assertions. Among other things, this means that scholars faithful to strictly positivistic tenets seem not to escape the temptation (or the unconscious inclination) to seduce their readers with eloquence. Their expressed positivist purpose comes clothed in rhetorical devices.

It is important to note that theories perceived as beautiful—or, more generally, theories that give rise to intense, perhaps unconscious, aesthetic experience—can be particularly moving because of the peculiar cognitive potential of aesthetic experience and communication (Gagliardi, 1996). The weakness of the language of words, in its literal and merely denotative function, lies in its discursiveness, in the linear order of the words, strung one after the other like beads on a rosary. It is an excellent tool for exact reasoning, but it permits us to say one thing at a time. By contrast, aesthetic communication—based on the holistic sensory contact with the forms—is the vehicle of what Langer (1967, 1969) calls a “knowledge by acquaintance.” Such knowledge permits us to say more—even contradictory—things simultaneously without the filter of intellectual abstraction. In this intimacy without mediation lies the richness of aesthetic communication, its capacity to break the schemata and penetrate ineffable reality. In this sense, aesthetic knowledge is an intuitive knowledge of the possible, rather and more than of the true, not so much the account of that which has happened as the prompting of that which might happen or might be (Bottiroli, 1993). This helps, perhaps, to understand why a “beautiful” theory can be more empowering for action than a logically coherent explanation.

## IMPLICATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Before the scientific revolution, the art of rhetoric was one of the most important—quite often the only—branch of learning for students in European

countries. To learn this art meant for them to be able to recognize and use both aesthetico-intuitive (subjective) and logico-scientific (objective) knowledge to understand reality and effectively communicate with others (Gagliardi, 1996).

Quintilian, the famous Roman rhetorician, maintained that every effective speech is paradigmatically structured in four parts: exordium, narration, confirmation, and epilogue. Appealing to feelings is particularly important at the beginning (exordium) and at the end (epilogue), so that the demonstrative core of the speech—narration and confirmation—is framed by two “passionate” sections. There is passion in the exordium: Every new speech is a violent deed, insofar as it breaks the silence or the thread of other speeches or thoughts, and we—consciously or unconsciously—try to tame our listeners, to persuade them that we are trustworthy and lovable. But also the decision to conclude a “conversation”—provided we have been able to psychologically engage our audience—is an arbitrary act, which has to be justified and forgiven. That is why in the epilogue, we sum up the “things” that we said (*peroratio in rebus*), but again, we call on our listeners’ feelings (*peroratio in affectibus*). More generally, Quintilian maintained that every human speech able to attract the hearer’s attention oscillates on a cutting edge, between moving (*animus impellere*) and informing/convincing (*rem docere*).

At the end of the 17th century, with the coming of the scientific revolution, rhetoric irremediably declined: Modernity stressed the role of evidence, hardened the distinction between logico-scientific (objective) knowledge and aesthetico-intuitive (subjective) knowledge, and enhanced the idea that we can observe what is “out there,” avoiding the interplay of perceptions, feelings, and desires. These modernist distinctions have been widely and authoritatively contested by philosophers of science and social scientists (e.g., Brown, 1977; Ricoeur, 1976). In the field of management and organization studies, many scholars today recognize that our values affect our visions, that the border between rational demonstration and rhetorical persuasion cannot be easily traced, and that every text is essentially an attempt to seduce at least as well as an attempt to argue logically (e.g., Geertz, 1988; Gergen, 1992; McCloskey, 1985; Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987; Van Maanen, 1995a; Wechsler, 1978).

Although these insights are rather widely accepted, their implications in terms of evaluation of theoretical

work—and training of aspiring theorists—are not fully appraised. There is in our field, I believe, a sort of splitting between what we would grant in a low voice and what we are willing to openly profess. It almost seems that the principles of scientific work settled 3 centuries ago—the idea that the reports of the scientist have to be based exclusively on logico-demonstrative processes, divested of the charm of imagination and free of value judgments—have for many of us the same sacredness that the Hippocratic oath has for doctors.

This resistance does not concern solely positivist scholars but all those who—though embracing other epistemologies—still view knowledge as the exclusive product of intellect and are reluctant to acknowledge what Bob Witkin (1974) called the “intelligence of feeling.” If the value premises of any theoretical discourse are unavoidable, why don’t we usually help students and colleagues to recognize and to make them explicit rather than underplaying and concealing them? If any text is unavoidably an aesthetic product and a rhetorical act, why—rather than invite our students to “clean” their papers of stylistic devices and imagery—don’t we invite them to consciously choose the rhetorical strategy appropriate to their purposes and to the receivers of their speech or writing? From this point of view, I believe, a 16th-century treatise on the art of rhetoric wouldn’t look out of place in the list of readings for a Ph.D. program and could shortcut many interesting surprises for many of us.

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