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Business Beyond Modernity: Some Emerging Themes

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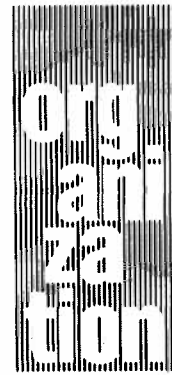
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speaking out

For this first issue we invited a number of contributors to 'speak out' about their potential agendas for a field of study called organization studies and thus a journal such as Organization. We asked for short pieces, each focusing on a particular issue of importance to its author. We also wanted pieces untrammelled by normal academic conventions. The authors were to feel free to speak as speculatively, provocatively, passionately, as they chose.

Business Beyond Modernity: Some Emerging Themes

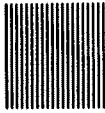
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In this short essay, I pursue three themes that I consider central to the future of the field of management and organizational studies.

During the last five years or so, a new awareness has crept into the field of management, much of it to do with internal debates about developments in fields that are usually considered unrelated to management, such as philosophy, history, literary theory and criticism, social theory, critical theory, feminist studies, semiotics and linguistic analysis, cultural studies, aesthetics, and so forth. These developments represent fundamental changes in the way we view the world, our cultural and literary heritages, and our assumptions of individual subjectivity and social reality—all of which seem to question the established paradigms while pushing us toward new frontiers, regardless of whether we are social scientists, management specialists or scholars in the different fields within the humanities. There is also much skepticism of heretofore taken-



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for-granted Euro-American conceptions of the world as cultural boundaries shift and lose their historic meanings only to make room for new ones. Since most of these revolutionary sounding ideas are emanating from the writings of scholars within the fields of humanities, it seems important to bring together scholars whose paths have not crossed in the past but are likely to in the future. To the extent that the ideas of a Derrida or Foucault or Haraway have begun to enter the social science vocabulary, some of us have realized that we cannot sit back and be amused by what may be passing fads, while, in reality, they are here to stay. And to the extent that the ideas of Asian, African and Latin American scholars have not even made a scratch on our thinking, we hope that before long we will see both knowledge and wisdom in their ideas.

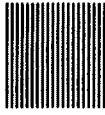
Theme 1: Whither 'Management?'

In this fast expanding cultural globalization where economic boundaries are constantly shifting and new modes of information are creating new needs for managing global resources, both physical and human, the established techniques of management may not be valid. The realization that social systems around the world are not merely economic units but woven around cultural significations is prompting many scholars to look for ideas that are not available through conventional themes. In these times, one cannot rely on purely behavioral and social scientific paradigms for solutions. Let me quote from a recent issue of *Man* (December, 1992: 693–6), a very prestigious journal in anthropology, published in Great Britain. The editor of the journal, Tim Ingold, was asked to comment on the directions for the future of the field of anthropology:

I was recently asked, in connexion with an inquiry commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) into future opportunities for the Social Sciences, to comment on the prospects for anthropology . . . In responding, I found it virtually impossible to distance my assessment of how anthropology is likely to move into the next century from my own vision of how I would like it to move. Of one thing, however, I am convinced: that the discipline presently stands on the verge of one of the most exciting and fruitful periods of its history. For one reason, I am taking this opportunity to place on record the burden of my response . . . in the form of four theses.

Thesis 1: The task of anthropology is to help dismantle the intellectual barriers that currently separate the humanities from natural science. The experiment that was launched earlier this century under the banner of 'social science' has conspicuously failed, crippled by its lingering commitment to a positivist programme long since abandoned by the 'harder' sciences, and by irreconcilable epistemological disputes concerning the very possibility of scientific inquiry into the forms of human life. It is not with social science that the future of anthropology lies . . .

Indeed a stunning statement, but how true. I recommend that interested readers examine the entire article.



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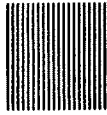
How prepared are we to make a similar statement regarding our own subfields within management? At the very least, we should have the courage to introduce new forms of discourse into management thinking. Some of us do, some are afraid. I see this as the most formidable challenge facing the academics who teach in the business schools, more specifically, in the American business schools. I suggest that we examine the role of the 'B-school' in this new quest.

Theme 2: Why the 'B-School'?

Business schools rarely figure in academic discussions except in social gatherings or in other lighthearted settings. As academic researchers we do not self-consciously address the goings-on in business schools. From a knowledge production point of view, the subject-matter does not seem to be worthy of any serious discussion. In management conferences, the subject of business education is usually relegated to a low status session and is considered a filler to the main course in the conference, unless the conference is entirely focused on business teaching, in which case, the attendees are well-meaning teachers from lesser known institutions. The so-called main players rarely attend these conferences or sessions. Periodically, special commissions are created to evaluate the curricula of business schools, and reports are usually issued by accrediting bodies whose main function is to oversee and evaluate business programs based on certain educational criteria. In other words, most of these activities are carried out non-problematically, in a reformist mode, the aim being to tighten educational standards and directions. This is not the type of activities that I wish to address here, important as it is.

I am proposing that we view business schools as the mainstay of the capitalist order, as ideological institutions, with deep and far-reaching cultural agenda. It is in this context that business schools must be studied.

We need to study the business school as the prototypical organization of a particular kind, in the same way we might study the multinational organization (e.g. IBM or Unilever) and closely examine various organizational and institutional issues, pertaining to who runs them, how they are managed, what curricula are set, what subjects are taught, which ones are ignored, who determines the curricula, what power relationships exist within the schools and with outside agencies, etc., a sort of Foucauldian analysis of the discursive practices of this august institution. Perhaps these concerns may be more localized, that is, some people might feel these are not central to non-American experience. After all, the B-school as an educational institution, as a degree granting program, started in the US in the early part of the century and has steadily evolved until the 1980s when it exploded to its present capacity. This explosion consummated during the great era of emperor-Reagan when feeling good and being greedy had become inseparable. The historical and cultural nexus of the business school as found in the American scene may not be present in many other countries. Obviously, business schools in America hold a



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much more powerful position and are symbols of great local tradition and economic power. Up until recently, business education in the rest of the world has been a curiosity, a benign appendage to the mainstream academic scene, sometimes an irritant, but not more than that. Great universities like Oxford have for long considered business education as vocational training and not fit to be dignified by a university degree. Of course, we all know that this is no longer true.

Times are changing. All over the world, business schools are springing up every day. Business education is now identified with success. The dollar sign (or whatever the currency is in a particular country) dangles before the eyes of every educated youth. This new culture that guarantees success based on a business degree owes its existence to the American organizational invention, the B-school. From Costa Rica to India to the Philippines to Switzerland, universities as famous as MIT and Harvard, and many lesser known ones are collaborating and setting up business programs. MBA is now hailed as the passport to celebrity life. The image of the conquering hero is cast in terms of the fast-paced aggressive executive who jets across the world with an attache case in one hand and MBA degree in the other.

Business education is spreading all over the world with the zeal of religious evangelism. Its diffusion resembles very much the spread of religion, Islam or Christianity in the first and second millennia. Business professors act like preachers imparting business wisdom. Business consultants are now in great demand and they are called 'gurus', a semi-religious expression borrowed from Hinduism. (The 25 December 1993 issue of *The Economist* lists 10 famous business gurus. They include university professors and consultants, and even a philosopher, Jacques Derrida! Derrida? I ask myself. What the devil is he doing in this list?)

In practice, whom do the B-schools attract? Everybody and anybody. As in the case of religion, the B-school has become the last resort for many kinds of people, from physicists, to biologists, to musicians to English teachers who are all looking at the MBA, in much the same way as a sinner looks for salvation.

If business education is such an important part of world development, and is becoming so ubiquitous, why is it not a subject of intellectual scrutiny? Why are organization theorists not studying business schools? Why are sociologists not studying business schools as institutions of social change? If business education is diffusing all over the world, why are marketers not studying the diffusion process? The answers to these questions may not be available at this moment, but the questions must be raised. I believe an opportunity exists to examine these issues closely.

Theme 3: The Global Consumer

The world is witnessing today a new form of human being called the global consumer. The consumer is to the current global context as a citizen is to a nation. The ability to be a consumer even outside one's



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traditional boundaries, and the ease with which one is able to realize this status is what I call the postmodern consumer development. Put in another way, consumer is to postmodernity as citizen was to modernity. The rights and privileges of citizens are confined to their political boundaries. Beyond the political system, citizenship evaporates, one is a guest at best or illegal immigrant at worst and in neither case does he/she enjoy any special privileges. On the other hand, one can be a consumer whether inside one's country or outside and exercise consumer 'sovereignty'. Just as the 18th century political thought gave rise to a political entity called the 'citizen', who was given rights to vote, elect his/her representatives and participate in the political process, the modern form of human participation is not so much in the political process but in the consumption process. To study this newly constituted global citizen, we cannot be bound by such concepts as nation, national economy, for this global citizen transcends these categories.

The consumer participates in what Baudrillard calls the economy of the sign. This economy is replete with symbolic images transculturally diffused via electronic media. Consumers' fulfillment and spiritual upliftment seem to come from participation in the symbolic consumption culture, where they control their destiny by accessing the world of consumerism and becoming a product of the global consumer culture. Obviously, not all consumers have this power invested in them, that is, the power to acquire products that are produced globally. Just as the political citizen of the 19th century creation is an illusion because he or she has never really participated in the everyday political processes and only does it in theory (but the image, however, survives), the postmodern consumer does not have to acquire the products, nor need to have the means to acquire them. All that is needed is the image, that is, the image of accessibility to the products, created through the global institution of advertising. Consumer culture is indeed a culture of consumer images, the representation of symbolic processes for consumers to participate.

How does one study the new culture of consumption? We have to look to emerging themes in cultural studies. As one theorist declared not too long ago, we are now living in the age of the 'symbol'. If this is true, we have to understand the discourse of the symbolic. The world view that was conceived in rational and functional terms (the paradigm that has served us for nearly 200–300 years) is now being called into question by scholars and thinkers who are forcefully arguing for a shift (and a return) to the world of the symbolic. It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of these symbolic systems. This means shifting our focus to the disciplines where the discourse centers around the 'symbolic' more profoundly than in the conventional social sciences. In sum, in this short essay I have raised some issues of personal intellectual concern and hope that they are interesting enough for others to take them to the next step.