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Book review

Deborah M. Humphreys

A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Studying Organizations
Chris Grey, SAGE Publications, London. 2017, (4th Edition) 149pp (paperback)

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The prospect of reviewing this book was met with eager anticipation as I had previously read and enjoyed other books within this series and had found them illuminating and often offering alternative views to the hefty core textbooks that we recommend for our students. In addition, I was looking for a resource for my postgraduate students to stimulate them in their action learning sets. I was certainly not disappointed in its delivery and use, I caught myself amused on a number of occasions.

Chris Grey has produced in this latest edition of the book a thought provoking and humorous approach to studying organisations. As a cover blurb states about Grey's previous editions, 'every page has something interesting to say, a great example, a sharp polemic, a superlative popularisation, a thought-provoking eccentricity or a new take on something banal and tired'. What this edition delivers certainly lives up to its title and attempts to deal with the '*banal*' subject of studying organisations in an engaging, alternative, humorous and highly readable manner that will appeal to both undergraduate and postgraduate management students alike. Having already introduced my undergraduate students to snippets from the text, and posed them as questions for their action learning sets, I am beginning to see how this little book may aid the rather staid 'technical' text books on the reading lists. Moreover, provide students with thinking tools to help them appreciate, as Grey states, 'an interpretation of organization theory which tries to unravel the partiality and assumptions of the orthodox approach(es)', (p133). Furthermore, having taught in a Faculty of Education and to prospective leaders who are future management practitioners within our educational system, I think that this book will provide a valuable additional resource of how they may make sense of their organisations, as well as aiding them in their reflections of how organisations themselves contribute to systems of entitlement and disadvantage.

As Grey purports, this is not a textbook nor professes to be one, and is the fourth edition of what has been for his previous editions from a sales point of view, very successful. What makes this edition any different? Well it has retained the conversational tone of his previous editions which makes it accessible to both the student of management studies and the practitioner. My husband (neither a critical management scholar nor a seasoned reader of organisational theory but a seasoned senior executive from the corporate world), found the book an interesting take on organisational life and a rather unconventional perspective. The book is structured around five chapters which show the connections of: Bureaucracy with Scientific Management; Human Relations Theory with People Management; Organisational Culture with Self-Management; Post-Bureaucracy with Change Management; The New Capitalism and the End of Management? Ending the book with a thought-provoking conclusion of why studying organisations should matter to you.

As the author acknowledges, his chapters 1 to 4 are broadly the same as previously, as he is positioning the arguments based on concepts from organisational studies which he recognises have not really dated. It is the examples that he draws upon since the previous edition of four years earlier that make interesting reading. His main objective is to provide readers with an understanding of

mainstream organisational theory with a critical commentary upon that body of knowledge - which he self-deprecatingly says (and is his stance throughout the book), that he is presenting an alternative viewpoint and that 'it means the truths I am so presumptuously offering are only staking a claim to plausibility, not to objective reality' (p6).

The first two chapters explore what Grey refers to as the 'classical' issues in the study of organisations, 'instrumental rationality' in the pursuit of profit. It is here that he introduces a series of themes, issues and ideas which are ever-present in later work on organisational theory - in other words bureaucratic theory, scientific management and human relations theory. With this in mind, and with his belief that most of his readers will have knowledge of these theories, he sets about introducing a different 'take' on them. It is a critical text with the writer acknowledging that he is drawing from his own experiences both as an undergraduate student and an academic of organisation theory. What makes this little book worthy of reading is Grey's simple use of honesty and authenticity when he asks of the organisation to simply recognise the issues that they face. Instead of running into a full-on remedy, (often purported by management consultants or even by business schools) he asks them to deliberate and be conscious of the means to an end, where ethics and values form the bedrock of practice.

He positions himself as a constructivist critic and puts forward an argument that when studying organisations as part of a management degree, students should be presented not just with understanding of the '*classical approach*'. In other words, a positivist viewpoint, where the managerial representation of an organisation is seen as something that exists as an objective reality, something made up of facts waiting to be discovered. Rather he advocates, that students should be presented with the view that 'the orthodox story' of organisational theory is in fact 'a construction' (p60). For Grey, it is about people in organisations. For him the concept of management is only one part of studying organisations and how we study organisations translates into how we conceptualise management. Grey's recurring theme throughout the book is that we must be concerned with politics, history and society not just economics when we study organisational theory. 'Knowledge about them,' he suggests, 'are presented in a way which is denuded of such things, except in the form of a few trite claims and unstated assumptions' (p106).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Grey concentrates on organisational culture and the concept of change. He asserts that the catch-all phrase of post-bureaucracy, seemingly a development from the 'classical' approaches promising, 'agility, fluidity and change' (p16) is nothing more than a re-occurring theme dominated by the 'managerialists'. For Grey this is little more than mechanistic understandings of management and does not aid the development of organisational theory. In fact Grey warns against this re-occurring theme of instrumental rationality which pervades as an underlying philosophy within post-bureaucracy which is a theory he advocates is used 'as a weapon to pursue particular agendas' (p105).

It is within Chapter 5 that the changes are more intentional, drawing on contemporary economics and politics with its encumbering economic and employment insecurities, resulting from the economic and financial crisis. The recurring theme within the chapter is that when studying organisations we must study politics, economics, history and society. Grey, in a scathing attack on business schools says that this is often a failing where scant attention is paid to them. He draws on Richard Sennett's (1998; 2006) concept of 'new capitalism' to illustrate how nothing has changed but with the consequences being the separation of businesses, place and communities. He demonstrates this point by elucidating how names of organisations once reflected such links and therefore were part of the community.

However, due to the rapid growth of international companies such links are now broken and fragmented. He reiterates his arguments that to separate and distinguish organisations from environment is flawed, they are both interconnected. He argues, 'things like deregulation, privatization, managerialization, outsourcing, merging, acquiring, offshoring, uberfication and financial engineering are things that organisations do, as well have done to them' (p127). So he argues that if business schools are to do it properly, then students need to study, economics, politics and culture, and conversely he argues that you cannot study the later without studying organisations. He ends the chapter with a provocative discussion of whether we are seeing the end of management.

Although the reader may question why Grey is still with a business school, the final chapter concludes with him professing that after all he has presented, what he would like the reader to remember is that it matters, '*this stuff matters*'. For him studying organisations is 'inseparable from our individual and collective choices'. He urges us to consider organisations as more than 'sites of instrumental control' (p149) - they are our means of providing for ourselves and others; they affect how individuals are treated and as a result they have an impact on social well-being and the environment.

Conclusion

Having experience at senior manager level, this book resonated with me of my own experiences and how I had to use my action learning sets outside of my institution to help me understand my relationships with my colleagues and my practice as a senior manager. If we had at our fingertips in the management team, this little text and the narrative that Grey provides, then an opportunity might have possibly opened up to talk about and help us make sense of the turbulence of organisational reality that we were experiencing.

With regards to management students I believe it would provide a valuable contribution to aid them in their learning sets to open up the conversation about the purpose of organisations and to consider the possibilities as Cunliffe (2014:xvii) urges that, 'managing is relational, reflexive and (*an*) ethical activity. It is not just something one does, but is more crucially who one is and how we relate to others'. This is a book that has a conversation with you and therefore encourages you to think about those connections and how those choices are made.

References

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