
Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis: An Introduction

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Abstract

The paper introduces the current debate in the human sciences between the opposing conceptual positions of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' and discusses its implications for organizational analysis. The debate focusses on the nature of 'discourse' (information, knowledge, communication) and its role in social systems. The discourse of modernism rests on transcendent yet anthropocentric criteria such as 'progress' and 'reason' which are varyingly exemplified in the work of Bell, Luhmann and Habermas. In contrast, postmodern discourse (represented here mainly by the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari) analyzes social life in terms of paradox and indeterminacy, thus rejecting the human agent as the centre of rational control and understanding. The paper then considers two contrasting views of the organizing process which follow from these opposing approaches to discourse. In the modernist model, organization is viewed as a social tool and an extension of human rationality. In the postmodern view, organization is less the expression of planned thought and calculative action and a more defensive reaction to forces intrinsic to the social body which constantly threaten the stability of organized life. The implications of the latter view for orthodox organizational analysis are discussed in some detail.

Preamble

This paper is the first in a series for *Organization Studies* in which we attempt to outline some of the key concepts and methodological insights which a number of European social theorists have developed in recent years and which are of direct relevance to organizational analysis. The work of these thinkers is seen here as being inextricably tied up in a major ongoing debate concerning what have been called Modernism and Postmodernism. In this first, long article we have attempted to do justice to many of the issues raised in the course of this debate pointing to the battle positions which have been drawn up on both sides. The language used in this introductory paper may prove to be out of the ordinary for many readers of the journal. This is because we have tried to be true to the positions of those involved and also to respect their phraseology, conceptualizations and forms of expression. In doing this, we are conscious of the space we have taken up and do not make this claim upon the reader's time lightly. We have struggled to provide an introductory piece which is neither

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inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the modernism–postmodernism debate nor so naive and oversimplistic as to disgust those readers who do have a degree of familiarity with the issues at contention. The penalty we have paid for aiming at this intermediate position is length. The present paper provides an overview of the debate and makes passing reference to the work of Modernists such as Bell, Luhmann and Habermas. We also speak here of Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to all of whom the epithet ‘postmodernism’ has been attached. In our second article, we will turn to the work of Michel Foucault and discuss his direct relevance to the world of organizational analysis. Following this, in later issues of *Organization Studies*, the work of Derrida, Habermas and Luhmann will be subjected to precisely the same critical investigation. This present paper then has to be seen as pointing the way into what may be, for some, a new area of intellectual endeavour and confrontation. It is to be followed up by more detailed, substantive considerations of individual social theorists whose work is relevant to organization studies and who are important figures in the modernist–postmodernist confrontation.

Introduction

The human sciences are currently undergoing one of their periodic bouts of self-analysis and self doubt in which certain traditionally prized shibboleths of liberal academic discourse such as ‘reason’ and ‘progress’ have come under the microscope of a renewed critical reflection. The debate is polarized around two apparently conflicting epistemological positions: modernism with its belief in the essential capacity of humanity to perfect itself through the power of rational thought and postmodernism with its critical questioning, and often outright rejection, of the ethnocentric rationalism championed by modernism. Apart from the radical reevaluation of the whole process of modernization which this dialogue evokes, there are significant implications for how we understand the role and nature of organizations in the modern world. Not least of these is the shift away from the prevailing definition of organization as a circumscribed administrative–economic function (*‘the organization’*) to its formative role in the production of systems of rationality. This is clearly a return to the grand concerns that Weber introduced into the study of modern social systems, in which bureaucratic organization had created the ‘iron cage’ of the modern economic order and whose other significant effect had been to purge the world of the auratic and magical. In other words, Weber made us see modern organization as a process which emblemized the rationalization and objectification of social life, and it is to this process that the current debate returns us, but with a fresh twist which directs our attention to the concept of *discourse* and its place in institutional structures.

Weber’s work holds a significance that has been generally submerged in contemporary organizational analysis: the object of his analysis was modern bureaucratic organization as a *process* in the continuing mastery of the social

and physical environment rather than organizations *per se*. Rational organization is a response to forces that we cannot really understand and it is as much a progression of 'errors' as it is of rationality (Smart 1983). In fact, rationality in Weber's analyses shades into 'rationalization', a form of discourse in which logically consistent or ethically acceptable reasons are presented for ideas and actions whose true motives are not perceived. Rationality thus becomes a concealment of its own inner workings. Since it is partly grounded in the 'unknown' or the unconscious, it also appears to have a life of its own, an automaticity that is beyond direct human control. All this was part of Weber's project in analyzing the development of modern bureaucratic organization.

In contrast, the object of contemporary modes of organizational analysis is the organization as a discrete system which subordinates bureaucratic logic to its own hypostatized needs. What is privileged here is the idea of organization as a quasi-stable collection of things or properties, whereas for Weber the very concept of organization was placed in question as an uneasy fabrication. What defines this concept of organization is its prior and implicit self-classification as a formal system of work; its capacity to 'produce the goods' precludes any other possible conception (see, e.g. Hall 1972; Perrow 1972). This mode of organization thus emerges as a product of 'spontaneous sociology' in which we merely see reflected the images that the organization tends to offer of its own functioning and functions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

This historical displacement in the nature of the object of organizational analysis adduces the tasks of the present paper: the identification and analysis of two general forms of organization — the one, automatic and autonomous in operation, defying logical closure; the other, calculative and utilitarian in intent, reassuring in its substance — within the wider context of the discourses of modernism and postmodernism, with special reference to the implications of this contextualization for the social science of organizations.

A similar distinction is drawn by Varela (1979) in his analysis of the two major forms of knowledge used in the study of natural and social systems. Varela's work is significant in the present context because it directly relates forms of discourse to the cybernetic concept of organization (Morgan 1986). Varela distinguishes two basic themes of organization: *autonomy* and *control*. The two themes entail two different discourses of information/knowledge. In the autonomous approach, information is 'always relative to the process of interactions of the domain in which they occur, and to the observer-community that describes them' (Varela 1979: 267). Consequently, autonomous information is a process of interaction between terms which specify *each other* and, since therefore it cannot be located in any one particular term, it denies the tendency to see the world in terms of simple substances or things. In contrast, information in the control sense is referential (mapping one set of terms onto a corresponding set), it restricts the point of view to fixed interactions and observational positions, it is 'instructive' (i.e., it tells us how to act in regard to a particular goal), and does not explicitly include the observer, an elision which

runs the risk of denying the active role the observer plays in the construction and maintenance of information/knowledge systems.

The discourse of modernism can be said to be referential in the sense that it sees language as a means of expressing something other than itself. More specifically, it is a *metadiscourse* which legitimates itself by reference to 'some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). It posits the idea of a criterion which *already* exists, an already-made-up mind — often of extra-historical and universalistic content — which necessarily implies an already existing answer to questions. It puts the answer before the question and in this sense may be said to be 'instructive'. In the sense that it 'already knows', modernism is totalizing and controlling.

Postmodern discourse begins with the idea that systems have lives of their own which make them fundamentally independent of human control. Systems express only themselves and we may understand them only through analysis of their own self-referential workings. For the postmodern thinker systems do not have meanings or purposes; these are human projections in which we uncritically assume that the world exists only for us and by which we locate ourselves at the controlling centre of things. Since the world is basically self-referential, it is neither pro-human nor anti-human; it just *is*. Postmodernism therefore decentres the human agent from its self-elevated position of narcissistic 'rationality' and shows it to be essentially an observer-community which constructs *interpretations* of the world, these interpretations having no absolute or universal status.

Modernism

Modernism is that moment when man invented himself; when he no longer saw himself as a reflection of God or Nature. Its historical source lies in the eighteenth-century philosophy of the Enlightenment which chose Reason as the highest of human attributes. Reason, according to Kant, is when we think for ourselves and cease depending on an external authority to make up our minds for us; it thus implies a *critical* sense in which we have both to develop our powers of rational discrimination and have the courage to express them when appropriate; *Aude sapere*, said Kant: 'dare to know'.

Also at this time the expediencies of Reason were appropriated by social thinkers such as Saint-Simon and Comte whose concern was their application to the increasingly weighty problems of government, administration and planning brought about by the industrialization of society. We thus find the rudiments of organizational thinking in the Enlightenment philosophy. But at this historical point there occurs a schism within Reason itself, showing that it too is subject to the displacements intrinsic to self-reference: Reason is appropriated by an early form of systems thinking which subverts its critical

edge to the functional demands of large systems. The followers of Saint-Simon drew up a blueprint for the *systeme de la Mediterranée*, a projected 'universal association' of the peoples of Europe and the Orient through a comprehensive network of railways, rivers and canals. The Suez Canal, begun in 1854 and completed in 1869, represented part-realization of this dream. Comte, perhaps the first philosopher of organization, saw industrial organization (the scientific organization of labour and knowledge for the production of wealth) as the source of human unity and progress. His was a theory of organization applied to the administration of society as a whole, but which laid down detailed specifications at the level of the micro-function: the precise roles of politicians, industrialists, bankers; the optimum number of men in each city, etc. The spirit of this functional reason was well captured at the time by Goethe in the character of Faust who translated passive reason, mere thought, into active reason, the accomplished deed, through the technological transformation of the entire world (Berman 1983). Modernization thus appeared early on as the organization of knowledge expressed in terms of the needs of large-scale technological systems. The Victorians celebrated this achievement in the Great Exhibition of 1851.

Modernism thus has two versions: *critical modernism*, a reanimation of Kant's programme of enlightenment, and *systemic modernism*, the instrumentalization of reason envisioned by Saint-Simon and Comte.

Systemic modernism is currently seen to be the dominant form of reason, now more usually expressed as 'instrumental rationality'. This is well brought out in Bell's (1974) thesis that modern (or post-industrial) society differs from previous societies in relying on knowledge that is essentially theoretical. Bell cites the chemical industry as the first of the truly modern industries because its origin lies in the intimate linkage between science and technology: it is necessary to have a theoretical knowledge of the macro molecules being manipulated in order to create chemical synthesis (the recombination and transformation of compounds). Bell's vision of how theoretical knowledge is used in the post-industrial era reveals its technocratic and systemic character. 'Post-industrial society is organized around knowledge for the purpose of social control and the directing of innovation and change . . .' (Bell 1974: 20). The point is further elaborated in the argument that theoretical knowledge offers a 'methodological promise' for the management of the complex, large-scale systems which distinguish the modern world. The major social, economic and political questions of the post-industrial era centre around the problem of 'organized complexity': large-scale systems with many interacting variables, 'which have to be co-ordinated to achieve specific goals'. The new intellectual technologies now available for this endeavour are: information theory, cybernetics, decision theory, game theory, utility theory, etc. The distinctive function of this technical armoury is the definition of rational action and the identification of the means for achieving it. Problems are formally defined in terms of certainty/uncertainty, of constraints and contrasting alternatives. 'Certainty exists when the constraints are fixed and known. Risk means that a

set of possible outcomes is known and the probabilities for each outcome can be stated. Uncertainty is the case when the set of possible outcomes can be stipulated, but the probabilities are completely unknown' (Bell 1974: 30). In this context, rationality is that action which can yield the preferred outcome, given several competing alternatives.

Bell indicates the urge to determinacy and firm foundation in systemic modernism in the suggestion that social 'progress' is motivated by the human quest for a 'common tongue and a unity of knowledge, for a set of "first principles" which, in the epistemology of learning, would underlie the modes of experience and the categories of reason and so shape a set of invariant truths' (Bell 1974: 265). This leads to an increase in the *scale* of institutions which, among other things, creates a vast interlocking network of relationships, more and more thickly integrated through the 'revolutions in communication and transportation' — the spread of cities, the growth of organizations, etc. The major social revolution brought about by modernism is the attempt to control 'scale' by new knowledge technologies such as real-time computer information and new kinds of quantitative and qualitative programming.

Added to the concept of the large-scale unitary system is the concept of 'performance'. In Bell's view, it is performance rather than size that distinguishes post-industrial systems. The definitive feature of performance is what Bell calls the 'economizing mode', most clearly seen in the idea of productivity: 'the ability to gain a more than proportional output from a given expenditure of capital, or a given exertion of labour, or more simply, society could now get more with less effort or less cost' (Bell 1974: 274). The significance of the modern corporation lies precisely in its invention of the idea of performance, especially in its economizing mode, and then creating a reality out of the idea by *ordering social relations* according to the model of functional rationality. Thus corporations, as the dominant social subsystems, become the paradigmatic organizations of systemic modernism. This conception of organization has been identified as an exigency of modern social systems by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann's work represents a formalization as well as a justification of the developments charted by Bell. In what is sometimes called the 'new systems theory', Luhmann spells out the inexorable rationality of systemic modernism in which Kant's notion of the critically rational subject is completely repressed in the interests of a machine-like system of social functionality. Society itself becomes a gigantic organization: 'The true goal of the system, the reason it programmes itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output — in other words, performativity' (Lyotard 1984:11). Now performativity in systemic modernism assumes a more fundamental function than the performance criterion noted by Bell; it becomes a generalized capacity to 'produce the goods' effectively and hence *it is also a principle of realization and objectification*. It therefore takes precedence over thought itself in the social mind. Luhmann recognizes this point when he says that in post-industrial societies the normativity of laws is superseded by the legitimation of

performativity. More specifically, the source of legitimation becomes the system's capacity to control its context (a form of contingency theory) by reducing the complexity external and internal to it; individual aspirations must therefore take a subordinate role. In fact, Luhmann argues that the system must make individual actions compatible with its own overall goals through a process of 'disturbance-free apprenticeship'. 'Administrative procedures should make individuals "want" what the system needs in order to perform well' (Lyotard 1984: 62). We have come a long way since Saint-Simon and Comte, and Kant has been thoroughly expunged.

Critical modernism stands opposed to the cybernetic-like monolithism of systemic modernism. Its chief exponent in contemporary social science is Jürgen Habermas whose project has been to reclaim the spirit of enlightened rationalism for late modernism. Again, discourse is the object of analysis. For Habermas, language is the medium of reason: 'All ordinary language allows reflexive allusions to what has remained unstated' (Habermas 1972: 168). This sets ordinary language, with its origins in the spontaneous activities of the common life-world, against the instrumental-calculative language of organized systems. Hidden but still active in ordinary language is a 'natural' kind of reason which speaks to us with the instinctive wisdom of an ancient oracle, thus guiding our communal works. The contemporary fate of this 'communicative rationality' has been its repression by the discourse of systemic modernism. For Habermas, the discourse of the ordinary life-world is the basis of his critical modernism and it is through the 'language of the community' that we may refind that lost sense of enlightenment which Kant first revealed to us. Moreover, the need for such critical reason is now more urgent than ever precisely because of the colonization of the life-world by systemic reason. Kantian reason takes on an added significance; it is no longer a measure of human 'maturity' but has become a *sine qua non* for emancipating individuals from the totalizing control of systemic logic.

Despite the difference between the systemic and critical forms of modernism — the one bent on the mechanization of social order; the other, on the liberation of the life-world — they share the belief in an intrinsically logical and meaningful world constituted by Reason or the universal firm foundation. This takes two forms: (1) that discourse mirrors the reason and order already 'out there' in the world, and (2) that there is a thinking agent, a subject, which can make itself conscious of this external order. In the case of systemic modernism, the rational subject is the system itself which works according to the cybernetic discourse of 'control and communication in the animal and the machine' (Wiener 1948); this discourse has its own laws which can be discovered through the application of scientific and mathematical techniques. In this context, reason is a privileged property of the system as distinct from its parts. For critical modernism, the thinking subject is the human individual or, more precisely, a network of interacting individuals who, through the commonsense of ordinary discourse, can reach a 'universal consensus' of human experience. There is thus a presupposition of unity which legitimates (i.e., provides an authoritative

'logic') to the critical position, so that what is critiqued are the forces that fragment the ideal of this unity or prevent its emergence as a possibility. It is such legitimating meta-positions to which postmodernism objects.

Postmodernism

The key to understanding the discourse of postmodernism is the concept of *difference*: a form of self-reference in which terms contain their own opposites and thus refuse any *singular* grasp of their meanings, e.g., the paradox of the 'global village' in which the enlargement of the world through modern communication techniques actually makes it smaller. Difference is thus a unity which is at the same time divided from itself, and, since it is that which actually constitutes human discourse (Derrida 1973), it is intrinsic to all social forms. At the very centre of discourse, therefore, the human agent is faced with a condition of irreducible indeterminacy and it is this endless and unstoppable demurrage which postmodern thought explicitly recognizes and places in the vanguard of its endeavours. In this context, Lyotard has defined postmodern discourse as 'the search for instabilities' (Lyotard 1984: 53). Lyotard notes that modern science is based on indeterminacy: quantum theory and microphysics demand a redefinition of our ideas of determinate, predictable systems because their data reveal the world as a network of self-referential structures, e.g., it is found that far from uncertainty decreasing with more precise knowledge (i.e., greater control), the reverse is the case: uncertainty increases with precision.

Lyotard elaborates an argument of considerable seductive power which is mounted against the 'grand narratives' that legitimate the two major positions of modernism. Their drive towards determinacy — in the systems case, expressed as the mechanical harmony of interacting functional actors; in the critical case, as the agreement of men in bondage to emancipate themselves — is also a drive towards *consensus*. But we have seen that modern science poses a dialectic of difference and self-reference whose logic must thwart convergence. Lyotard argues that this also applies to consensus — the more one reaches for it, the farther away it seems to be: 'Consensus is a horizon that is never reached' (Lyotard 1984: 61). Instead of consensus being the power house of social action, it is dissensus which continually compels our attention.

In another text, Lyotard (Lyotard and Thébaud 1968) analyzes some of the less obvious aspects of this typically postmodern approach to discourse via the concept of the 'game'. He had already viewed social action as a 'language game' in which the participating actors made various 'moves' according to recognized rules (Lyotard 1984). This time he extends the idea of a language game to include the idea of 'agonistics' or contest and it is this which gives 'drive' to social life. As soon as the element of struggle goes out of the game, it loses its power to motivate human action. Thus mastery and domination obtain their vitality not from the complete annihilation of one player by the other but

through maintaining a state of continuous difference and provocation. The triumph of consensus is thus similar to the destruction of opposition, for it negates the very thing, dissensus, on which it rests. In an afterword to Lyotard, Samuel Weber interprets the dissensus of the game as a 'tension between unity and disunity' (Lyotard and Thébaud 1986: 113) and thus gives to difference and self-reference the function of an originary and irreducible *force* which pervades all social encounters as raw 'feelings of envy, jealousy, and rancour' (Lyotard and Thébaud 1986: 106). Difference is thus more than a theoretical concept since it takes on the force of elemental passion, a kind of prime energizer. Human action is thus seen to stem from drives beyond direct human control; behaviour, individual or institutional, is essentially a reaction to an originary force. The idea that we are controlled by forces that lie beyond us is fundamentally repugnant to modern rational thought which has constructed, over the centuries, a discourse more or less deliberately aimed at denying this possibility. We now know that organizational society set out to tame man's impulsive passions by attenuating them into social and economic 'interests' (Hirschman 1977). Passions as 'determining movements whose composition organized social life . . . were forgotten by the productivist economy of the nineteenth century, or rejected into the sphere of literature. The study of passions thus became a literary specialization in the nineteenth century; it no longer belonged to political philosophy or economy' (Certeau 1986: 25).

We have to turn to Nietzsche (perhaps *the* major influence on postmodern thought) to understand what underlies this particular insight into the nature of modernist rationality. For Nietzsche, the force of difference is *the active*, that which possesses power of self-transformation, i.e., self-reference; opposing it is *the reactive*, a form of action which is at once inferior to and dependent on the active. These opposed forces, the active and the reactive, constitute the basis of Nietzsche's concept of 'genealogy': 'the art of difference or distinction' (Deleuze 1983: 56). Genealogy is Nietzsche's way of showing how the superior force of the active becomes inverted in the inferior force of the reactive. The reactive denies its origin in the active: '. . . it is characteristic of reactive forces to deny, from the start, the difference which constitutes them at the start, to invert the differential element from which they derive and to give a deformed image of it' (Deleuze 1983: 56). In this way, the reactive reduces all knowledge and discourse to mere representation, to 'talking about', and, ultimately, negation. In the sciences of man especially we see that passive, reactive and negative concepts are everywhere dominant: 'utility', 'adaptation', and 'regulation' serve as the major explanatory motifs.

The work of another postmodern thinker, Jacques Derrida, extends Nietzsche's analysis of differential forces but turns it in an unexpected direction. Starting from the position that meaning and understanding are not naturally intrinsic to the world and that they have to be constructed, Derrida develops a *deconstructive* method which, in reversing the process of construction, shows precisely how artificial are the ordinary, taken-for-granted structures of our social world. Derrida's purpose is to show that rationality and

rationalization are really processes that seek to hide the contradictions at the heart of human existence. What motivates the call to organize is the recognition of a discursive 'gap' which organization serves to cover up. Derrida's analysis is focussed on the processual, as opposed to structural, character of human institutions. He wants to show that the world of commonsense structures is the active product of a process that continually privileges unity, identity, and immediacy over the differential properties of absence and separation; in this active privileging there emerges the element of contestation in which the logic of unity and identity is pitted against the forces of difference and undecidability. Modernist reason now becomes more like Lyotard's conception of a contest in which reason is aligned against unreason, truth against error, etc.

Nietzsche's genealogical method leads to another feature of postmodernism: the idea that knowledge is the result of a force that compels us to render the world thinkable, i.e., determinate. As we have seen, the world is not already there, waiting for us to reflect it. It is the result of a complex process of a *will to know* which orders and organizes the world because it cannot tolerate not knowing; contradiction and ambivalence are forms of abnormality which have to be exorcised. What Luhmann identifies as the need of modern systems to run smoothly is seen in postmodernism as a gigantic social version of the 'haste of wanting to know'. What modernism considers 'rational', postmodernism sees as the attempt to canonize the discourse of the normal over the abnormal. Rorty (1980) captures the spirit of these conflicting interpretations in his distinction between 'systematic' and 'edifying' discourses. The former serves to justify and ground everyday actions and beliefs by making them seem logical, even natural; it provides an order of reassurance. 'Edifying' discourse helps us 'break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes' (Rorty 1980: 12); it seeks to auraticize (i.e., eroticize) discourse and knowledge, to show the extraordinary within the ordinary, the active within the reactive.

Now for Nietzsche the forces surrounding the active-reactive opposition are focussed on the body — biological, social or political — and it is the materiality of the body, the lived social organism in its physical expression, that provides the *perpetuum mobile* of social life. The body is self-referential in the sense that every social action originates in it and returns to it: '. . . the animal body is the great central ground underlying all symbolic reference . . . Every statement about the geometrical relationships of physical bodies in the world is ultimately referable to certain definite human bodies as origins of reference' (Whitehead 1929: 198). The immanence of the body in social life, universally neglected by social scientists, is taken up as a pervasive critical theme by postmodern thinkers and its institutional and organizational implications worked through perhaps the most thoroughly by Michel Foucault (e.g., Foucault 1980). For Foucault, the body is the locus of the auratic and not merely a physiological structure; it is the place of passion, will, 'desires, failings and errors . . . and a volume in perpetual disintegration' (Foucault 1977a: 148) — in short, the body is the organ of *difference*.

In Foucault's work, the auratic dimension appears as a form of 'estrangement' in which the normal and familiar come to be seen in a novel and sometimes disturbing way. In order to see the ordinary with a fresh vision, we have to make it 'extraordinary', i.e., to break the habits of organized routine and see the world 'as though for the first time'; it is necessary to free ourselves of normalized ways of thinking which blind us to the strangeness of the familiar. Hence Foucault's use of provocative images and tropes to stop the reader's understanding in its tracks: the hypothesis that the idea of man is a modern invention, scarcely two centuries old; the grotesque description of Damians, the regicide, whose body was publicly tortured, fleeced and dismembered as a symbol of penal repression (i.e., legalized violence) in the eighteenth century; the idea that modern medicine, far from having its origin in altruistic humanisms, developed out of the State's concern for the management of the 'bio-mass', i.e., the population of bodies. Foucault reminds us that all discourse has an inbuilt censoring function which represses the intrinsic strangeness of symbolism and that the first step in analysis is to recognize this as a way of 'enlightening' ourselves. Thus enlightenment takes on a new aspect here. For Kant, enlightenment was a rational but still normalized mode of critical thought. For Foucault, enlightenment is the experience of sudden and spontaneous insight when one is seized by a power beyond rational, conscious thought, i.e., by the auratic. Foucault reveals the experience of estranging enlightenment most notably through his adaptation of Nietzsche's method of genealogy (Foucault 1977a: 139-164). Genealogy is opposed to the search for pure and ideal forms which pre-exist our profane, everyday world. Instead, the genealogist finds that ideal essences, essential truths, are fabrications taken from 'alien forms'. What we find at the so-called origin of things is not a reassuring state of perfection, now lost but still reclaimable; instead there is disparity, difference, indeterminacy. Foucault's genealogical method is therefore similar to Lyotard's agonistics and Derrida's deconstruction: all deny the concept of a perfect origin and substitute for it a process of differential contestation. For this reason, Habermas criticizes Foucault (and the postmodernists in general) for being 'irrational'. Habermas (1984) considers reason to be conditional on a concept of the perfect origin; his 'communicative rationality' presupposes just such an ideal state. But the logic of postmodern thought starts from a different understanding of reason, one that appears at times more veraciously argued than that of rival positions. It is a rationality that is based not on finding answers to problems but of 'problemizing' answers. This is entirely consistent with the genealogical position which says that disparity (and not parity) is the source of human structures: answers are merely temporary inversions of problems. Whereas Habermas is looking for *the* answer (or at least an approach to it), Foucault can only see answers as ways of short-circuiting problems, as expressions of the 'haste of wanting to know'. His analysis always proceeds from the complex process of how thoughts are structured so as to give a solution. In the human world, this is always subject to the work of power, inevitably because power is intrinsic to the agonistic logic of

disparity. Discourse is the expression of power that is centred on problems. Power precedes the answer through its subtle and covert prior structuring of the problem. This is why Foucault is so concerned with 'problemizing', since the proper understanding of a solution can only be got from seeing how the problem was structured in the first place. All of Foucault's work deals with this issue in one way or another: the development of the problem of madness in medieval times, the origin of modern medical discourse with the organization of specialist clinics and hospitals in the eighteenth century; the rise of the social sciences as devices for structuring problems so as to make them more amenable to management and administration.

Discourse is no longer a neutral means for communicating about the world. Instead, it is the discourse of difference and self-reference. It is no longer an extension of human organs or faculties; it is the latter that are extensions of discourse.

Organizational Analysis

The object of orthodox organizational analysis is *the* organization: a bounded social system, with specific structures and goals which acts more or less rationally and more or less coherently. Within this context, the concept of organization itself functions as a metadiscourse to legitimate the idea that organization is a social tool and an extension of the human agent, an 'auxiliary organ' by which 'man has . . . become a kind of prosthetic God' (Freud 1961: 92) in pursuit of the *idea* of anthropocentric order. Bell's (1974) account of the modern corporation represents the apotheosis of this idea. Now the cognitive mode of this form of organization is based on what Varela (1979) calls the 'control' image of the 'computer gestalt' which, like Lyotard's systems of performativity, programmes itself in order to optimize its overall input-output ratio (Lyotard 1984). Since inputs must 'correspond' to outputs, the computer gestalt is a referential model of organization which employs information/knowledge (discourse) in a fixed, operational and 'instructive' sense. However, Varela reminds us that referentiality is merely a special or limiting case of self-referentiality so that the latter has to be seen as the more encompassing (Varela 1979: 265-267). Varela wants us to see organization as a product of self-reference and thus decentre the role of rational purpose.

It is common for social scientists to think about social systems, and perhaps especially organizations, from the referential point of view, even when their explicit purpose is understanding rather than social engineering. This of course is a recognized criticism of the systems paradigm whose functional emphasis serves to suppress the action of difference and self-reference (Cooper 1986). We see such suppression at work in Blau's theory of organization which relies centrally on the concept of 'differentiation' (Blau 1974). By 'differentiation', Blau means the divisions of labour (specialization) and authority. Since he is predisposed to viewing organizations within the functional (i.e., referential)

perspective of the computer gestalt — the 'defining criterion of formal organization . . . is the existence of procedures for mobilizing and coordinating the efforts of various, usually specialized, subgroups in the pursuit of joint objectives' (Blau 1974: 29) — Blau is then led to place the emphasis on *specialization and authority rather than on differentiation*, i.e., the perceptual centring on 'control' seduces him into defining structure in terms of *static* difference, the *active* nature of difference becoming hidden from awareness and therefore unavailable to analysis. Like most theorists, Blau begins his analysis from a position which omits the originary step of differentiation or division in social organization. Organization therefore appears *already formed*.

It is exactly this issue that is raised in Mayntz's criticism of the dominant models of organizational decision-making for being *normatively rational*: goals are set by the organization and this step is followed by a search for the best solution from competing alternatives (Mayntz 1976). Thus, 'action appears to be touched off by preconceived goals or purposes' (Mayntz 1976: 119). Mayntz reverses this order of decision analysis by suggesting that organizational processes are in reality *reactions* to 'local' perturbations: 'organizational activity in general and policy-making in particular is primarily triggered by situational factors which constitute a *pressure to act*, rather than being generated by deliberations on how certain abstract values can be achieved' (Mayntz 1976: 119). This criticism also significantly emphasizes the 'interactive' or 'agonistic' nature of organizational activity for Mayntz reminds us that, in contrast to the normative-rational model, decisions are rarely, if ever, taken by individuals but are invariably embedded in an active network of people within a *division* of labour.

Mayntz's criticism is reflected in similar analyses by writers in fields as diverse as economic development, technological research and development, and policy-making (Hirschman and Lindblom 1962). This gist of this work is that there are no perfect theoretical solutions to problems which we can prepare in advance and that decisions have to be made as *remedial* moves in situations marked by uncertainty, disorder and imbalance. In these analyses, practice usurps theory, and organization, far from being a structure of calculated, deliberate actions, is in reality the *automatic* response to an impending threat. The analyses thus suggest that rational control subserves a more fundamental process which acts autonomously in much the same way that Varela suggests that referentiality subserves self-referentiality (Varela 1979). In short, the process of organization is self-originating and automatic.

Insights into this alternative way of thinking about organization may be sporadically discerned in the literature of social and organizational analysis. Gouldner's concept of 'functional autonomy', which states, among other things, that organizational activity is focussed on the boundaries or divisions *between* system parts, is an early recognition of self-reference at work in formal organizations (Gouldner 1959). Specifically, Gouldner argues that organizational divisions exert an autonomous pressure on organizational activities

because they are the source of paradoxical interactions constituted by the mutuality of 'separation' and 'joining'. The theme of self-reference also pervades Merton's analyses of social systems: the formal rationality of bureaucracy paradoxically produces 'dysfunctions' alongside its 'functions' (Merton 1968: Ch. 8); social beliefs may function as 'self-fulfilling prophecies' (Merton 1968: Ch. 13); intentional social actions may lead to unintended consequences (Merton 1976: Ch. 8). Despite Merton's recognition of the interplay between the referential and the self-referential, his bias (as a self-confessed functionalist) is towards the former so that a fuller understanding of self-reference itself is left, finally, in mid-air. Nonetheless, these brief references to the social science literature do indicate an awareness of two opposed ways of thinking about organization: (1) a 'control' model which is referential, instructional and conceived as the expression of human rationality; (2) an 'autonomy' model which is self-referential, processual (i.e., without fixed location) and which acts automatically, i.e., independently of external (human) control. The 'control' model approximates the modernist view of the world, especially in the idea of the ultimate rational subject who can 'meta-organize'. In contrast, the 'autonomy' model approximates the arguments of postmodernism, especially the rejection of the omniscient, rational subject.

Postmodern thought begins with the insight that all discourse suffers from an intrinsic *reactivity* and this has to be addressed as a problem before the epistemological possibilities of the 'autonomy' model can be properly realized. Hirschman and Lindblom characterize the reactivity problem as the tendency of rational actions to be *remedial*, i.e., 'they move *away* from ills rather than *toward* known objectives' (Hirschman and Lindblom 1962: 216). If this diagnosis can also be applied to academic discourse, we can perhaps begin to see that the dice are already loaded against the development of postmodern methodology in the social sciences. Postmodern analysis confronts this issue with Nietzsche's genealogical method. As we have noted, genealogy defines difference in terms of the *active-reactive* distinction. The active and reactive are, respectively and roughly, Varela's (1979) concepts of 'autonomy' and 'control', except that in Nietzsche's formulation the former are regarded as forces, sources of power, rather than just intellectual concepts. The active is the 'essential priority of spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions' (Deleuze 1983: 41) but which must be tamed, even denied, by the countervailing forces of the reactive which thus function *remedially*.

The genealogical displacement of difference from mere concept to active force is effectively the inversion of the traditional (i.e., referential) understanding of difference as a *static effect* of separation (such as we saw in Blau's use of 'differentiation') to an awareness of difference as active co-dependence; from simple division to unitary flow, from isolated term to interactive process. A definitive feature of autonomous systems is their intrinsic resistance to division, partialization and classification. Viewed in this way, an organization is a unity

or coherence of forces which we lose sight of when we apply the accepted academic specializations (sociology, psychology, economics, political science, etc.) and methodologies. In the latter, we merely *represent* the *structures* of social systems, the representations being representations for a subject who (or which) attempts to appropriate and master the system as a field of knowledge. A genealogy of system and organization begins with the recognition that representations and structures derive from a more fundamental process of materiality and energy. Ideas, images, discourse itself, are now to be viewed as a material force that dissolves the conception of the human world as a series of divisions. This view is elaborated in a key postmodern text by Deleuze and Guattari in which social 'bodies' are defined as productive 'machines' which are continually engaged in the processing of matter (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). The unitary point of view taken by Deleuze and Guattari rejects the representation of separate social terms, which means that the concept of the productive machine applies to everything in the human (and natural) world: machines are individuals, groups, organizations and whole societies. This approach also means that we have to reject the usual conception of machines as extensions of human power; in fact, Deleuze and Guattari argue that man is actually an appendix of machines. This is because machines are powered by the irresistible force of the active. In effect, machines produce remorseless flows of matter-energy; they then divide the flows, codify them and, finally, inscribe the codifications on the 'body' (the material source of the flows) in order to establish boundaries. A simple illustration of this process is the animal which uses its flow of bodily secretions to mark out its territory; the animal is thus a machine which produces a habitable territory. By the same token, organizations are social machines which produce elaborate discourses of information/knowledge in which human subjects are a necessary part of the material flow on which the discourses are inscribed. Organizations operate either directly or indirectly on the world of nature and, because of the self-referential logic of autonomous systems, this necessarily includes 'human nature'.

The conception of the 'body' as material flow has two important consequences for organizational analysis. First, the idea of 'flow' draws attention to the essential instability of the human environment, including the human body itself. There are no absolute constraints in life or nature. 'Nothing in man — not even his body — is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men' (Foucault 1977a: 153). Second, the role of the human subject in traditional organizational analysis has been shaped by certain functional requirements: the subject is a 'decision-maker' or a 'worker', for example; that is, the definition of the subject is dependent on the prior acceptance of a normative-rational model of organization. In contrast, the genealogical conception of the subject as a body in material flow leads us to think of it as a machine that produces itself; it thus places the subject at the origin of the organizing process instead of seeing it as an adjunct. These points demand a radical reevaluation of the traditional concept of organization as a circumscribed administrative-economic unit as

well as the methodologies that go to define it. Instead, we need to see organization as a *process* that occurs within the wider 'body' of society and which is concerned with the construction of objects of theoretical knowledge centred on the 'social body': health, disease, emotion, alimentation, labour, etc. In other words, to understand organizations it is necessary to analyze them from the outside, as it were, and not from what is already organized. It becomes a question of analyzing, let us say, the production of organization rather than the organization of production. Hence the importance of starting from genealogy rather than from organization itself: organization as an object of knowledge emerges out of the contestation intrinsic to the logic of difference and self-reference — as we saw, for example, in Hirschman's study of the reactive origin of modern organization in the eighteenth century as a device to subject and harness man's impulsive nature to social and economic production (Hirschman 1977).

Perhaps the first step towards a postmodern interpretation of organization is the recognition that all organized human activity is essentially reactive or defensive. This would then logically imply recognition of the active, especially as the superior force. These fundamentals are universally absent from orthodox organization theory. It is difficult, for example, even to catch a glimpse of the active-reactive dynamic at work in the static picture of organization drawn in terms of the bureaucratic paradigm (e.g., the dimensions of authority, structuring of activities, standardization of procedures, etc.). A massive shift in theoretical perspective would be needed to translate the bureaucratic model into the active-reactive model, especially to do justice to the insight that all institutional and organizational activity is basically self-referential. Postmodern thought begins with the latter thesis and always comes back to it. We see it constantly at work in Foucault's analysis of organizational processes where 'organization' is viewed as a series of interrelated rationalities of *programmes*, *technologies* and *strategies* which are forever beset by the problems of recursion endemic to self-reference (Gordon 1980). A programme is, minimally, a set of instructions for achieving a goal. Less obviously, it *presupposes* a knowledge of the field on which it is to operate by rendering reality 'in the form of an object which is programmable' (Gordon 1980: 248). The programme is therefore a version of Mayntz's (1976) normative-rational model of organization as well as invoking Bell's (1974) prototypical post-industrial organization which runs on theoretical knowledge. Built into the programme are 'mechanisms of correct functioning' which in social systems appear as *norms* of appropriate behaviour for individuals and collectives. Now the norm itself is a product of techniques of normalization which structure discourse in terms of the correct-incorrect, the desirable-undesirable, etc. In fact, the programme becomes actual to the extent that it is supported by a technology. There is thus a co-dependent (i.e. self-referential) relation 'between the programmatic and the technological, the normal and the normative' which 'is in turn the outcome of the conceptualization within the discursive form of the programme itself of an ineluctable discrepancy between

discourse and actuality' (Gordon 1980: 250). This is because the peculiar logic of self-reference dictates that terms necessarily contain their own opposites, as we have seen, and this means that for every programme there is an un-programme, for every norm there is an ab-norm. Deviations and errors are no longer to be thought of as adventitious effects of imperfect rationality for they are built into the very instruments which seek to annul them. Programmes and technologies are therefore, in this odd sense, anti-functional. Among other things, this means that 'every programme caters in advance for the eventuality of its own failure' (Gordon 1980: 250). Foucault instances prisons as organizations which, while continually besieged by their failure to attain their planned goals as reformatories, have sought just as continually to reorganize themselves on the model of their original but failed programme:

'One should . . . recall that the movement of reforming the prisons, for controlling their functioning, is not a recent phenomenon. It does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison "reform" is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme. From the outset, the prison was caught up in a series of accompanying mechanisms, whose purpose was apparently to correct it, but which seem to form part of its very functioning, so closely have they been bound up with its existence throughout its long history.' (Foucault 1977b: 234)

It would be hard to find a more telling example of organization as *remedial reaction* which, as it were, thinks on its feet. Here we have the work of *strategies* which, in contrast to the normative rationality of the programme, are pragmatic, instinctive and improvizational. Strategy operates at the level of practice rather than theory. This is because its action occurs in a complex and heterogeneous field of instantaneous forces where it exploits 'possibilities which it itself discerns and creates . . . strategy is the arena of the cynical, the promiscuous, the tacit, in virtue of its general logical capacity for the synthesis of the heterogeneous' (Gordon 1980: 251). Strategy operates at the labyrinthine core of organization — the eye of the vortex — where difference and self-reference reign. In emphasizing this level of institutional action, postmodern analysis wishes to draw our attention to the central role of autonomy (in Varela's sense) or the machine (in Deleuze and Guattari's sense) in social systems. It is this primary force which, via the level of strategy, animates programmes and technologies rather than the reverse.

Lyotard (1977) provides an illuminating analysis of strategy at work in his concept of the *mise-en-scène*, the complex play of operations which make the basic components of social organization 'come alive'. In the organizational context, we are faced with a set of primary data constituted by programmes and technologies. These are essentially groups of discourses belonging to different systems of rationality (legal, economic, scientific, etc.). They thus represent a heterogeneous field with two noteworthy features: it is 'inert' and, because of its diverse origins, it has a potential for 'disorder'. The *mise-en-scène* lays hold of this intractable space and 'gives it life'. To 'give life' means to transcribe the inert discourses of programmes and technologies onto living bodies. The transcription involves the translation of the inert and heterogeneous into the elementary unity of the 'polyesthetic' human body considered as a 'multi-

sensory potentiality' with its 'capacity to see, to hear, to touch, to move . . .' (Lyotard 1977: 88). It involves a movement from the referential register of programmes and technologies to the self-referential register of the *mise-en-scène*, which now has to be understood as the active origin of organization. Organizations do not first pre-exist and then create their relationships; they *occur* in existential gaps which lie beyond knowledgeable discourse. These gaps are the loci of operation of *mise-en-scènes* and strategies which focus their attentions on, and emerge out of, the unprogrammable and non-discursive. Organized rationality, far from originating in *beau-ideals* and consummate logics of efficiency, is founded on sleight-of-hand, vicious agonisms and *pudenda origo* ('shameful origins'). This is the revisionary lesson that postmodernism brings to organizational analysis.

Post Scriptum

Let us remind ourselves that the subject of organizational analysis is *formal* organization. It is not organization as such that demands analysis but its 'formal' character, though this is often forgotten. Ordinarily, the word 'formal' signifies what is proper, methodical, and punctilious. In the context of formal organizations and institutions, the 'formal' is not just the proper and methodical but also the 'official'; it becomes raised to the level of law and public truth. What is formally organized takes on the virtue of a moral order. Hence the emphasis in modernism on the search for 'rational authority' as the basis of the *good* social order. But the logic of human discourse insists that every symbol carries within it its own opposite, so that the 'formal' is continually shadowed by the 'informal'. Douglas (1970: 100) develops this opposition within the context of social organization: 'Formality signifies social distance, well-defined, public, insulated roles. Informality is appropriate to role confusion, familiarity, intimacy'. In other words, the 'formal' has all the characteristics of classical reason as conceived by the Enlightenment: it is referential, transparent, closed, monumental. 'These are the terms of Foucault's "*regimen*" and Weber's "rationalization", the strong forms of functional purity which, certainly by the eighteenth century in England, led to the great age of "institutionalizing" — asylums, hospitals, schools, barracks, prisons, insurance and finance houses — which, as Foucault has suggested, embody and assure the maintenance of classical bourgeois reason' (Stallybrass and White 1986: 22). As Douglas' definition suggests, the 'informal' is that which threatens to transgress the 'formal', it is the local and immediate, that which resists categorization and rationalization. In short, the 'informal' is the self-referential and as such it is the special province of postmodern analysis.

We have already noted that modernism puts the answer before the question and thus acts on the principle that it 'already knows'. It thus privileges the idea of formal organization (i.e., the organization of the 'formal') while at the same time rationalizing away the existence of the 'informal'. It is not difficult to see

this process at work in the literature of contemporary organizational analysis which unknowingly repeats the formalized structures of organization in its own methodology. Various studies of organizations have identified 'formalization' as a major feature of organizational structure (e.g., Hall 1972: 172-199). To simplify, these studies indicate that formalization is concerned with the definition and maintenance of 'correct' behaviour or what we here call the 'formal'. As we noted, behind the idea of the 'formal' is a moral imperative (i.e., an 'order') which demands the total exclusion of the 'informal' (which now becomes the 'immoral'). It is this process of exclusion that constitutes the already-made-up-mind of formalism and of course it is present in all formalizations, including those that make up the methodologies of organizational analysis. Let us briefly illustrate this idea with the concept of 'uncertainty' which has received extensive treatment in various areas of organizational analysis (e.g., decision-making, technology, environment). In these analyses, the indeterminateness intrinsic to uncertainty (by definition, an aspect of the 'informal') is viewed in terms of the 'formal', e.g., the well-known framework that reduces task uncertainty to the 'non-routine', thus defining uncertainty from the point of view of the 'routine', i.e., the certain (see, e.g., Perrow 1972: 166-167). The same tendency to formalize the unformalizable can be seen at work in Luhmann's (1976) analysis of uncertainty in complex, organized systems where, among other things, the concept of self-reference is discussed entirely in referential (i.e., determinate) terms. In short, formal organization is characterized by an inveterate urge to suppress its own opposite in such a covert way that we remain unaware of its censoring function.

The task of postmodern thought is to expose the censoring function of formalization and, what is more, to show that the 'informal' actually constitutes the 'formal'. The 'formal' and 'informal' reflect each other like the obverse and reverse sides of a coin; to the extent that they can never be separated, they are not just mutually-defining but can be said to be the 'same' or self-referential. It is from this point of view that writers such as Foucault and Derrida view and analyze the 'formal', so that it is no longer a privileged and unassailable site in social discourse. The purpose of Foucault's analysis of the emergence of formal organization at the time of, and subsequent to, the Industrial Revolution is to show how the 'formal' was constructed out of the 'informal' through the processes of discipline and normalization. Significantly, the style of discourse he employs to do this is itself 'informal', e.g., the modern reader's understanding of 'organization' is turned upside down by Foucault's depiction of it as a 'disciplinary technology'. The normalized world of formal institutions becomes part of the grotesque side of life. The concept of power is similarly reversed when one is forced to view it from an 'informal' or self-referential perspective. Formal views of power are centred on such formalized units as 'individuals' or 'organizations' and one is led to think of power as a kind of property that is owned and manipulated by such social units. The 'informal' perspective makes us see power as an autonomous system of compulsion which *works through* formal systems of discipline and organization. One consequence

of this is that social science disciplines such as psychology and sociology themselves become formal discourses that normalize and anaesthetize us to the 'informal' substrata of human life. Postmodernism reveals formal organization to be the ever-present expression of an autonomous power that masquerades as the supposedly rational constructions of modern institutions.

These considerations lead us to the general observation that two radically different systems of thought and logic are at work in the modernist-postmodernist confrontation. There is some reason to believe that they are fundamentally irreconcilable because they derive from that basic split in the structure of human logic associated with the 'formal'-'informal' distinction which has been exacerbated by the extension of formal organization into so many facets of modern life. In fact, it may be more appropriate to view these competing views on organized systems less as competing conceptual positions and more as symptoms of the problematic that they aim to analyse and understand. It is this angle that we shall pursue in taking the work of Foucault, Derrida, Habermas and Luhmann as subjects for more detailed and systematic exposition of the modernist-postmodernist debate in relation to the study of organized systems in subsequent issues of *Organization Studies*. On the postmodern side, Foucault and Derrida have dealt, in their different ways, disabling body blows to the traditionally unquestioned pillars of modern institutionalized thought, centring their analyses on the organized and even manufactured status of the discourse used to support these pillars. On the modern side, Habermas has been vigorous in his criticisms of Foucault and Derrida, defending particularly the concept of critical and responsible human agency (which postmodernism puts in question) against the massive, machine-like instrumentalization of social life by large-scale formal systems; Luhmann's response to the progress of complex, organized systems is more benign, for he is the cartographer of modern, instrumental systems whose analyses tell us how to find our way about them. The significance of these four thinkers in the present context lies in their counterpointing of issues and concepts that lie at the heart of the organizing process, for they deal essentially with the same themes — differentiation, power, authority, discipline, etc. — but produce radically different interpretations of them. It is this agonistic rivalry — sometimes overt, sometimes mute — that in our view brings out the relevance of the modernist-postmodernist debate for the reinvigoration of analysis of social systems in general and organizations in particular.

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