

Global Management

UNIVERSAL
THEORIES
and LOCAL
REALITIES



EDITED BY Stewart R. Clegg | Eduardo Ibarra-Colado | Luis Bueno-Rodriguez

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Universal Theories and Local Realities

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Stewart R. Clegg, Eduardo Ibarra-Colado and
Luis Bueno-Rodriguez



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Preface

Without the existence of a ‘virtual organization’, APROS (Asia Pacific Researchers in Organization Studies), and a ‘real’ organization, Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM), Mexico City, this book would never have come into existence. The chapters collected in this book were all first presented at the Sixth APROS International Colloquium, organized by the editors, and held in the beautiful and historic city of Cuernavaca, Mexico, in December 1995. With this conference APROS made its third venture into the eastern Pacific Rim (earlier conferences had been held in Kyoto, Japan, and Hawaii, USA), but its first in Latin America.

The conference was supported by UAM and we wish to thank them for their assistance. Subsequently, editing of the volume took place in three continents. First, Asia, notably in the special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (thanks to Hong Kong University and the Hong Kong Baptist University, who both supported Stewart Clegg as he worked on the book at various times). Secondly, Latin America, in Mexico, where Eduardo Ibarra and Luis Bueno worked on it, and, thirdly, Australia, where the book was finally put together when Eduardo Ibarra visited the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) at the end of 1997 and worked on the penultimate version with Stewart Clegg. Subsequently Stewart edited the entire manuscript. We would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the School of Management at UTS in the book’s final production, especially the assistance of Anne Ross-Smith, Stella Ng, and Cathy Wright.

Stewart Clegg, Eduardo Ibarra-Colado and Luis Bueno-Rodriguez
Sydney

Introduction

*Stewart R. Clegg, Eduardo Ibarra-Colado and
Luis Bueno-Rodriguez*

Global Myths that Changed the World

Management theory, in the past, has provided a set of fashionable recipes frequently marketed in such a way as to lead one to regard them as the best solution to the problems of how to manage, and how to organize, modern enterprises. Such theories have promoted a series of representations, myths and legends that have pervaded management thought and shaped managers' actions. Managers, above all, are practical people, beset by many contingencies on a daily basis, some routinized, others not. If Mintzberg (1973) is a reliable guide, they need to find solutions to new problems every ten minutes or so. Not surprisingly, they have little time for other than the most local, contextual and bounded of rationalities. Yet, managers, much as any agents in local contexts, do not conceive themselves immaculately: they take their shape from wider, more discursive rationalities that are available to them. While many forms of knowledge may in practice enter their calculations, in formal theoretical terms the chief forms of knowledge among these will be those represented as theories of organizations and management.

Organization theories have provided, as a best solution for the problems of managing modern organizations, a set of recipes. Such knowledge promotes a series of representations of and for management thinking, often used retrospectively to constitute those actions that have already been undertaken as being in accord with some rationality, as being, thus, legitimated. Hence, accounts are not so much causal springs of actions; rather, actions can be brought-off, justified, in terms of the accounts that discursively, legitimately, seem to be available at any time. However, between these 'accounting' solutions, often presented as universal solutions to particular problems, and the pressures of concrete situations, there exists a tension. In this tension is inscribed management and organizational functioning.

One can clarify the tension if one confronts the organizational rationality of the current epoch with the cultural and institutional forms of local and national realities. On the one hand, that an organizational rationality is presented as such, signifies the triumph of fashionable recipe knowledge.

Organizational theory proffers rationalities that can make the particular universal, that can ascribe the particular as an instance of that which is universal, and thus able to pass as if it were universal, while at the same time they are subject to very specific local modes of production. Thus, when we apply these theoretical rationalities, we can never apply them universally: they always finds application in very different settings, in diverse realities, one might say, with quite locally contingent results. Between the universal prescriptions and the discourses that they privilege reside the local realities.

Management and organizational theories constitute grand narratives that exploit fashionable myths associated with signs of success, such as 'competitiveness', 'excellence', and 'quality', for example, for a global industry. The book market has been inundated with best-sellers from the gurus of management (e.g., authorities such as Peter F. Drucker, Tom Peters, Michael Hammer and James Champy, and Peter Senge). In these books the world is informed through logical sequences, simple principles and platitudinous precepts, how to solve local organizational crises and to succeed in an internationally competitive environment. Where the gurus do not persuade, then perhaps war-stories might: there are many manuals that tell one 'how to', based on unique practitioner 'know-how', as well as biographies that celebrate the innovative capacities of their heroes as they fought strategic campaigns.

Consider the scenarios of innovation and change that are confronting organization managers today and the role that such universalizing theories play as practical knowledge in these local scenes. Chart the distance that separates the universal imaginary from the specific realities in which it must find expression, for it is the latter that determine the exact balance between the recipes and the performance. The cultural and institutional diversity of the world confronts universal organizational rationalities common to the representation of each historical epoch; that is to say, while each may be universal, each is so only for an epoch. (Who, for instance, now recalls the fuss about 'informal organization' and hygiene factors that characterized the 1960s?) In the century whose time has just about past, organizational and management representations were invariably cast in terms of universalist themes. After all, universalism, in its eclipse of particularism, was the very hallmark of modernity, according to influential theorists such as Talcott Parsons.

Increasingly, after Burrell and Morgan's (1979) work, this universalism was constructed, platonistically, in paradigmatic terms. Thus, fashionable recipes, when they display family resemblances, assume a certain coherence, usually discussed in terms of their sharing a common paradigm arranged around systems of values that provide an interpretation of the world. Defining the limits of action, such paradigms establish the rules and procedures that all who would be legitimate are entitled to respect. The fundamental ground of all paradigms is constituted by a presumed universalism, a universalism which projects a paradox. The paradox resides in the particularity of the universal: that which is presumed to be universal is