Organization Studies

Book Reviews

Joseph L. Soeters

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Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson: Organizational *Mis*behaviour

1999, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage. 184 pages.

Joseph L. Soeters
Royal Netherlands
Military Academy
and University of
Tilburg,
The Netherlands

In general, standard textbooks are rather optimistic about the nature of men and the possibilities to organize conforming and dutiful behaviour of employees. This undoubtedly is a reflection of our prosperous times and business successes, which mark the beginning of the new millennium. Perhaps conforming to a certain 'political correctness', academics in organization studies, in addition, like to stress the capabilities and competencies of human resources rather than point to flaws of personnel. In the seventies — the era with a considerable amount of friction in labour relations — the general tone in organization studies was rather different. The literature was not only occupied with potential hostilities and contradictory interests of employers and labour unions, but also with less valued behaviour on the employee side, such as (frequent) sick leave and pilferage. Even then, organization theorists tended to express themselves as true believers in the good nature of human beings. The striking thing about organization studies in both decades, in addition to abstract theorizing, is the prevalence of this pre-scientific optimism, to the extent of more or less neglecting the actual behaviour of people in organizations. Everyday reality in organizations has hardly been described, since we used not to study organizations in a more down-to-earth, if one wishes anthropological, manner. Everyday phenomena, such as gossiping and humour at work and gender-related tensions between people in organizations, have not been mainstream objects of study in organizational academia. More often than not, these phenomena are considered to be parts of the informal organization 'only', and hence it is thought that not much attention needs to be paid to such 'marginal' subjects in standard textbooks.

This observation has induced Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson to write

a new textbook specifically aimed at organizational misbehaviour. As such, it certainly fills a gap. It adds to Scott-Morgan's more popular management book on the *Unwritten Rules of the Game* (1994), a book which indeed also emphasizes the informal organization, including its less positive aspects. Different from Scott-Morgan's book, the work by Ackroyd and Thompson is less prescriptive and more academic, containing a large survey of academic literature on the subject. They start by delineating the concept of organizational misbehaviour, including the question of who's misbehaviour we are talking about. It would certainly be a considerable flaw to concentrate on employees' behaviour only, ignoring organizational misbehaviour by managers and other people in charge at the various levels of the organization. This is a trap which Ackroyd and Thompson can be expected to avoid. They are certainly sensitive to the power-related dimensions of organizational misbehaviour. However, the subject is like ice: it may be too thin or too slippery; in both situations, people dealing with the subject may get into trouble.

In exploring their subject, the authors develop a scheme of dimensions of organizational misbehaviour, distinguishing between the (unjust) appropriation of time, work, product and identity. The appropriation of products, for instance, may vary between perquisites (perks), which goes along with committed organizational behaviour, via pilferage and fiddling to straightforward theft of the organization's belongings, which is obviously illegal, and hence very much a question of organizational misbehaviour. The appropriation of identity varies between goal identification, which is considered to be positive, via joking, subcultures and gender-related tensions to negatively appreciated class- or group-related solidarity and conflicts. The latter, in particular, underlines the tricky character of the subject of this book, since many authors — not even just the radical ones — would claim that class-related solidarity and conflicts are not necessarily to be regarded as organizational misbehaviour.

This difficulty comes more explicitly to the fore in the chapter on the 'recalcitrant worker'. This chapter contains literature surveys on 'soldiering', as well as pilfering and sabotage, going back as far as Frederick Taylor. Furthermore, it pays attention to the control/worker resistance paradigm, as developed by sociologists such as Edwards and Friedman. One of the interesting points the authors make is that, in our IT era, the recalcitrant worker still has ample and even more opportunities to pursue his or her interests. Computer hacking or deliberately placing viruses in software systems may be devastating for the organization.

Highly interesting is the chapter on 'self-organization as the infrastructure of misbehaviour'. In my view, self-organization — a hype among management and organization theorists — should definitely be approached more critically and, for that matter, more empirically by organizational academics. Theorists should really start opening their eyes to see what organizations really do when they talk about self-organization. More often than not, managerial attention to self-organization is lip-service only: in everyday reality, employees' behaviour is moulded and bonded by the organi-

zation by means of numerous new management practices, as has been explained by George Ritzer in his famous work on the *McDonaldization of Society* (1993). The reason for this is that self-organization may lead to irresponsible autonomy or opportunistic behaviour on the part of the 'self-organisers'. But there again, this is a two-sided matter: it relates to the behaviour of individual employees, but it is more likely to do with attitude and performance on the managers' side of the organization as well. This leads to a beautiful *exposé* on the complicity of management and an insightful typology of managerial regimes, distinguishing between managerial obsession with control, managerial indulgency and managerial trust. The authors pursue their work with a chapter on joking at work, in the sense of it being harmful for individual employees ('please don't tease!') and damaging to the organization (organizational cynicism). A chapter on 'ruling passions' (sexual misconduct at work) and an essay about the question of whether or not organizational misbehaviour will disappear conclude the book. Ackroyd's and Thompson's answer to the latter question is well-balanced; in accordance with other work, they see that new management practices and managerial attempts to 'manage the employee's heart' or to 'govern the employee's soul' may be rather successful in realizing a 'capitalism without conflict'. However, Ackroyd and Thompson advocate that there will still be reality gaps: employees will continue to look behind the aims and claims of managerial innovations. Hence, organizational misbehaviour as part of everyday organizational life will not disappear, at least not as seen from a managerial perspective. This seems to be a rather realistic conclusion.

Are there any flaws to be discovered in this book? Obviously yes: conspicuously missing is some kind of cultural sensitivity in a Hofstedean sense of the word. The book is very, very Anglo Saxon. Furthermore, there is no mention of the work by Norbert Elias, who has pointed to the long-term, society-wide development of increasing self-control among people, irrespective of managerial attempts to achieve this. Finally, no connection is made between academic work and the more popular prescriptive management literature. Probing and reflecting on this type of literature should be done more often by academics. Nevertheless, the book is good: it brings to light subjects which are too often neglected, and it provides an understanding of phenomena which are so common in organizations, but at the same time so vague and incomprehensible.

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