

Watterson

# Postmodernism' is of little use to the practicing manager

By Juan Watterson  
University of Lincoln, UK

## ABSTRACT

In this essay, it is argued that postmodernism has acquired an organisational theory, and it is accepted that the tools of postmodernism can be translated into the workplace. It has been proposed that postmodern tools are merely a means of oppression, following a lineage as old as organisations themselves. It has been negative and doom-laden in tone, with management potentially wielding the power of the resource metaphor over the subjected employees.

## A NOTE ON REFLEXIVITY

*An immediate analysis of the question in hand conjures up notions of comparison between the modern and the postmodern, juxtaposing their tools and justifying postmodernism's usefulness to practising managers. Due to this, I have decided to bravely avoid this argument, and set the question and postmodern thought in quite a different context of use.*

## INTRODUCTION

In arguing that postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory, it must be remembered that postmodernism was not designed for organisations, but is instead something that has been adopted and interpreted by organisations for their own use. In that postmodernism has been translated into management and organisational theory, it implies that there must indeed be a use for its philosophy, but what is it?

It will be (bravely) argued that managers have found in postmodernism a tool for repression and oppression. It is the intention of this study to explore the Marxist notion of class struggle and show how capitalist oppressors seek to perpetuate this through their use of language, or dialectic. To support this, the belief must be held that organisational theory is just a form of shared language used by those sharing the context of organisation. Theories help us

to "orientate ourselves in the world." (Popper, 1994, pg. 53), be that in an organisation, society or indeed any situation. When meta- or philosophical theory is translated into organisational theory, the language of the philosophy is associated with the actions and events of organisational life. Organisational theory is about finding a language to associate with the referents of experience and meaning that are constantly changing in organisations. In other words, organisational theory is the exploration of language to find new terms to account for and describe new experiences and events in organisational life. It should provide the rational language for the organisational experience.

## THE CHANGING FACE OF MANAGEMENT

In an oppressive society, there are those whose interests must be served and those who must serve them, at least two classes, the class struggle. Over time, these two groups have tried to move away from their identities of rulers and ruled via language games and beliefs in continual betterment, and that they are ridding themselves of oppression. It is instead offered that the *social experience* and language used merely change, whilst the ultimate outcomes (wealth creation and oppression) do not.

This system has always required functionaries to mediate between the rulers and the ruled, in effect being stuck in the

middle. These have changed from craftsmen, to bureaucrats to a postmodern almost obviation of this middle tier.

Boje (2000) compares "The Revolutions of Management", and charts how craftsmen were the skilled middle tier in pre-modern society, craft-based management. In the modern era, the bureaucracy "was seen as a way to resolve the exploitation of feudal lords and barons by implementing rules, procedures, specialised positions, and layers of administrators". As I have argued, the more things change, the more they stay the same. People only conceive of a change through a feeling of betterment, caused by the social changes of the industrial revolution. In fact the modernist system permitted greater oppression of the workforce, by reducing them to the level of the machine, and allowed "great pyramids of managers...to put all the cogs [people] together again" (Boje, 2000). In the post-modern revolution, he asks have "the forces of darkness learned to substitute words like total quality management, sociotechnical systems, empowerment, and, flexible manufacturing systems, for the modernist command and control words or even the pre-modern torture and sovereignty words?"

The question then arises if postmodern organisational theory is merely a linguistic command and control tool that the "practical manager" can use in order to subordinate workers from owners, the haves from the have nots. On the contrary therefore, postmodernism can be of help to the manager, as over the ages the job of manager has relied on this system of domination and subservience.

#### POSTMODERNISM AS EPISTEMOLOGY AND LANGUAGE GAME

This discourse of oppression however is based on the controversial premise that postmodern is an epoch as opposed to an epistemology. As an epistemology, postmodernism "suggests that the world is constituted by our shared language...meaning

is constantly slipping" (Hassard & Parker, 1993, pg. 3). It is this use of language that can be used oppressively, and as it continually slips, permitting both the feelings of betterment and ridding of oppression as well as the new linguistic justification for the maintenance of the oppression.

Parker and Slaughter (1988) see empowerment of the worker as merely a language game, whilst Braverman (1974) focuses on "worker alienation from ownership of the means of production, and look at the extractive power of one social class over another through control of the labour process" (Boje & Rosile, 2000). In other words, material ownership is the source of power in an organisation, ownership of power is a potential for oppression. Hassard & Parker (1993) accept that "much post-modernist theorising is negligent of power and oppression", allowing the powerful to use postmodernism as a tool for oppression, indeed just using it to "deflect attention from attention to power" permitting the oppression that is the very focus of this study.

#### POSTMODERN TOOLS - AN ANALYSIS OF OPPRESSION

Postmodern tools can provide an interesting subject for the perpetuation of oppression within organisations. For example, the notion of discourse and voice could both be used as a means of simulated listening as well as a means of enforcing the discourse of the organisation. For example, Borman (Boje, 1988 & Rosile, 2000) suggests that employees have a voice in interpreting organisational objectives, this I would call *simulated listening* by management as workers are being given a voice without any responsibility or power over the organisation or its objectives. Daft (1995, pg. 412) also talks about "getting employees committed" to their jobs and organisation as a means of power creation. Barker (1993), Parker (1993) and Clegg & Hardy (1996) also question "whether conditioning workers to internalise organisational goals, is empowerment". Again, responsibility and power are not evident for

## Watterson

the worker, just simulated listening. Managers have the opportunity to provide feelings of betterment with this term called "empowerment", however what the term means is far from giving a sense of ownership, and is very much still about subjecting workers to management. This demonstrated how managers could use the postmodern notion of discourse and voice oppressively in order to impose the dominant discourse of the organisation.

Equally oppressive can be the notion of de-centring the subject. As the owner of the situation, managers can choose what the subject is that they actually want to de-centre, whilst to others, the issue to be de-centred may be the fundamental issue they wish to discuss. As with reflexivity, the starting point of conversation, dialogue or discourse, is under the control of the manager, who is able to steer and inflect it in order to achieve oppressive aims. Managers can use their power over employment, or just knowledge of organisational culture or linguistic play to impose meanings and attitudes on employees, and by doing so managers can intimidate them and exert their will. Management always hold the trump card. It is in the representational linguistics of postmodernism however, that the manager finds his oppressive tools most workable. Derrida (1981, pg. 19) admits that "everyday language" is not innocent or neutral. Words after all, merely represent existing things in the world, containing presuppositions so that our knowledge of the world becomes "constructed as a problem of 'representation'" (Hassard & Parker, 1993, pg. 12). Here, management can play the word games of postmodernism in order to represent situations and experiences, and provide a "process of professional self-justification". This again reflects management's ability to dominate and subvert the worker, to enforce the discourse of the organisation. Given that almost any situation can be professionally self-justified by postmodern language, this would seek to perpetuate a theory of management dominance and scope for oppression.

"Writing is the means by which social actors define order in their environments" (Hassard & Parker, 1993, pg. 13). However, all language is polysemous and suffers from supplementarity. Due to this, writing is perceived as a more logocentric form of language, as it is permanently inscribed. Writing is also only half of the greater activity. Reading is the interpretation, 'listening to the text' (to use a metaphor) and is that activity (reading) which gives meaning to the text. We can now see why writing tends to be the preserve of the bureaucratic manager, using writing as a tool of spreading oppression. In pre-modern times, writing would have been a characteristic of the wealthy, educated classes that modern management still represents. Workers' ability and necessity to write was (and in some cases still is) peripheral and unnecessary to the tasks they complete. Writing therefore is more than just a tool that can be used to convey the discourse of the firm, but is also an inherently class-ridden and a socially superior activity.

It has been suggested therefore, that many of the fundamental tools of postmodernism can be subdued to serve oppressive purposes. Indeed, organisational theory itself can be seen as an oppressive activity, seen just as the ever-changing language of oppression, always ready to fit with whatever circumstances are brought to meet it. But the discussion so far has centred on postmodern tools, as opposed to any view of the *postmodern organisation*. If it is to be decided that postmodernism is a tool of oppression for managers to wield, then surely the postmodern organisation is the medium for the message (and therefore to some extent the message itself).

## WHAT OF THE POSTMODERN ORGANISATION?

The postmodern organisation "may be defined as that comprising a networked set of diverse, self-managed, self-controlled teams with poly-centres of co-ordination that fold and unfold according to the requirements of the tasks. Likewise, these teams are

organised in flat design, employees are highly empowered and involved in the job, information is fluid and continuous improvement is emphasised throughout." (Boje & Prieto, 2000). This model of an organisation does appear to hold great similarity with Beer's (1985) model of the Viable Systems Model (VSM), where networked teams have five essential systems or functions for viability. The implementation, co-ordination, control, intelligence and policy systems permit the "folding and unfolding" of "complexity" within the organisation within a continually improving, but flexible structure.

This frame and structure does not seem one conducive with oppressive management, mainly as one of the first questions to arise from it is *Where is the manager?* The managers within this postmodern organisation reside within the control, intelligence and policy functions of the organisation. Whilst the role of management is justified by the principle of providing value-added to the work of the employees, that is not to say that they cannot still act to oppress. It is still management that directly regulate and enforce the policy of the organisation on other workers, there can still be a privileging of discourse and an imposition of oppressive will. The recursive structures of the VSM do allow greater worker power over the resources of the firm, but this is regulated and monitored within the rules laid down by the policy and co-ordination functions. In other words, workers receive enough empowerment to be empowered, but no more than they are given, and are essentially without challenge in pursuing greater control over the assets and resources of the firm.

In that postmodernism has more to offer than a singular, simple organisational theory, we find instead that postmodernism pervades organisational theory through interpretation. Indeed, organisational theory borrows as much as it lends to the philosophy of postmodernism.

## POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEXT

In this essay, it has been argued that postmodernism has acquired an organisational theory, and it is accepted that the tools of postmodernism can be translated into the workplace. It has been forwarded that postmodern tools are merely a means of oppression, following a lineage as old as organisations themselves. It has been negative and doom-laden in tone, with management potentially wielding the power of the resource metaphor over the subjected employees.

## REFERENCES

- Beer, S. (1985). *Diagnosing the System for Organisations*, Wiley: Chichester
- Boje, D. (1999). *What is postmodern organisation science?*, from <http://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/postmodscience.html>
- Boje, D. & Dennehy, R. (2000). *Managing in the Postmodern World*, 3rd Ed, from <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/pages/INTRO.htm>
- Boje, D. & Prieto, L. (2000). *What is Postmodern?*, from <http://www.horsesenseatwork.com/psl/pages/postmoderndefined.html>
- Boje, D. & Rosile, G. (2000). *Where's the Power in Empowerment? Answers from Follett and Clegg*, from [http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/papers/CleggFollett4\\_1.html](http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/papers/CleggFollett4_1.html)
- Bormann, E. (1985). Symbolic convergence theory: a communication formulations based on hommo narrens. *Journal of Communication*, 35, 128-139.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press: London

### Watterson

- Daft, R. (1995). *Organisation Theory and Design*, 5th Ed., West Publishing Co: Saint Paul
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions*, Athlone Press: London
- Hassard, J. & Parker, M. (1993). *Postmodernism and Organisations*, Sage: London
- Karr, A. (1849) quoted in *Le Guêpes*, from <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=2159>
- Kearins, K. (1996). Power in Organisational Analysis: Delineating and Contrasting a Foucauldian Perspective. *Electronic Journal of Radical Organization Theory*, 2(2).
- Newton, T. (1996). Postmodernism and Action. *Organisation*, 3(1), pp7-29.
- Parker, M. & Slaughter, J. (nd) Managing by stress: the dark side of the team concept", *ILR Report*, 26(1), 19-23
- Popper, K. (1994). *The Myth of the Framework: In defence of science and rationality*, Notturmo, M.A. (Ed.), Routledge: Oxford
- Seligman, A. (nd). Towards a Reinterpretation of Modernity in an Age of Postmodernity. In Turner, B.S. (1990). *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*, (Eds.) Sage: London
- Styhre, A. (2000). Escaping the Subject: Organisational Theory, Postpositivism and the Liberation of Transgression. *Electronic Journal of Radical Organizational Theory*, 6(2).