

# Social Philosophy, Communities, and the Epistemic Shifts

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## INTRODUCTION: DOMINANT AND PERIPHERICAL INFLUENCES

It is critical to distinguish between mainstream traditional management theory and the myriad of complementary approaches that have contributed to the development of alternative approaches to organisational and management theory. The dominant stream of management theory is still largely influenced by the command and control paradigm developed over a century ago by early theorists such as Weber, Taylor, and Fayol. Though the control paradigm today is closely connected to a technocratic and functionalistic perspective of management science, there is a growing awareness of the dangers of assuming a reductive and limited view of organisational complexity. In other words, it is important to recognise the role of bureaucratic, functional, and procedural-like aspects of organisational life, though it is critical to complement these perspectives with richer and more human-centred interpretations of organisational reality. This critical role is performed by, among others, communities of practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Brown & Duguid, 1991). In order to better understand the developments in terms of management thinking, it is relevant to revise the sequence of the different schools of thought that influenced the social sciences throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## BACKGROUND

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the spreading and dissemination of the use of electricity for industrial and domestic use implied profound changes in the way people lived and organised their lives. In parallel with this technologic development, there was a radical change in mentalities. The confident and

self-assuring concept of human beings as rational, independent, and autonomous individuals had been the product of the Enlightenment movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which followed from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries' scientific revolution. Opposing the rationalist and utilitarian perspective, there emerged the idea that humans present different forms of rationality, some of which imply conflicting perspectives; that human beings are not that independent from the social structures in which they are immersed; and that there are hidden inner processes which undermine their apparent autonomy (Foucault, 1972). Following this process, holistic and systemic perspectives had to be incorporated and integrated into social sciences in order to acknowledge this complexity.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or rather throughout the whole century but more visible in the last quarter of the century, a similar move has occurred which has intensified the previous development. This development is still going through, and may go unnoticed if we fail to recognise the need for a change in perspective and of point of view. This change places its focus and its epicentre on the intrinsic and inherent nature of all human action and thought as socially embedded phenomenon. In order to grasp the importance of this change, it is critical to point out that this notion of social embeddedness has surpassed the traditional binary opposition between individual and social issues which still permeates current and mainstream management and organisational perspectives. Instead of opposing or separating psychological and sociological issues, it treats the individual and the collective, the internal and the external, the inner and the outer world as a unique single reality. In other words, it does not partition and divide, study each isolated part, and then take the result of this process for the whole. Rather, it takes the whole from the start.

Several contemporary organisational theories follow this pragmatist approach. Pragmatism was developed by Peirce who, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and together with Saussure, created the two large schools of semiotics that have been largely influential throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among these non-dualistic, post-cognitivist, and post-structuralist thinking approaches are Stacey's complex responsive processes (2001), Checkland's soft systems methodology (1984, 1999), Eijnatten's chaordic systems thinking (2003), Alvesson and Skoldberg's reflexive methodology (2000), and Weick's organisational sense-making (1995, 2001).

## **MAIN FOCUS: THE EPISTEMIC SHIFTS**

The importance of the concept of communities of practice at an organisational level is parallel to the growth in the interest of management approaches such as organisational learning and knowledge management. At a broader level, this development reflects the reactions from the management and organisational areas to the reality of the knowledge economy of the information age (Kearmally, 1999). This movement may be considered as the tip of an iceberg, as the culmination of a long process of development that is still going on.

Social philosophy is a valuable reading matrix for the interpretation of the current complexity of an organisation's environments. If we want to understand the work of Aristotle, we have first to grasp what issues and questions he was trying to answer—his context. In order to understand how to implement organisational practices such as collaborative work and learning, or knowledge creation and sharing, we first have to grasp the necessary conditions for them to work—that is, the relevant community of practice, of learning, or of interest. Communities refer to the form and context of human interaction, to the situated and embodied character of human action and thought. The community concept brings up the social, cultural, and historical underpinnings of individual embeddedness. The hidden part of the iceberg includes a myriad of threads which the philosophy of the social sciences may help to untangle.

Applying this line of reasoning to the field of communities of practice is equivalent to trying to

unveil the hidden influences and underpinnings that condition its development, as well as its potential for action: the exploration of the full capacity of the communities of practice theory and practice within organisational settings, the thought-possibilities and action-possibilities of communities of practice as such.

The argument is that social sciences, as a whole, frame and condition the emergence of theories and concepts such as, for example, communities of practice theory. Foucault did a historical analysis of social sciences, or the "human sciences" as he called them (Foucault, 1970; Delanty, 2003; McHoul & Grace, 1993). He looked at the structure of knowledge of a time, at its way of establishing order. He starts long before the existence of the human sciences, and examines the development of the fields known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as general grammar, natural history, and the analysis of wealth. He considers the question of what marks the shift into the modern world and claims that before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, man did not exist. Of course human beings existed before that, and may even have looked at themselves as the centre of the universe. But they were central because God had made them that way. Man was then left with only himself at the centre, as the sole source of knowing, and thus turned to intense examination of what this knowing being was. The Human Sciences sprang up as old fields were re-examined, with a new notion of Man as both the object and the subject of study.

From empiricism and positivism, through rationalism, structuralism, interpretativism, pragmatism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, the development of the philosophy of social sciences presents a broad array of trends and approaches. Though each one of them may still be present today through the influence it had in the development of specific knowledge areas, when taken as a whole it is possible to differentiate four epistemic shifts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Delanty & Strydom, 2003). The first and second shifts developed in the first part of the century, and the third and fourth on the second part. These divisions are not to be taken as once and for all changes, as each one of them still persists today. They mutually influenced and reacted against each other from the start.

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