

Chapter 1

Watercolour: Toward a Socio-Cultural and Post- Modern Approach to the Study of Post-Bureaucratic Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter analyses the post-bureaucratic phenomenon, adopting a socio-cultural perspective and post-modern approach. According to the theoretical perspective proposed in this chapter, organizational systems should be considered a specific type of socio - cultural system. The apparent paradox of the dual nature of organizational systems, that may be conceived at the same time as autonomous and as interconnected socio-cultural realities, offers an extraordinary conceptual and methodological challenge for organization studies. The duality of complex organizations dynamics is, according to the theoretical perspective adopted in this chapter, also one of the key concepts to unlock the real nature of post-bureaucratic organization, beyond the dichotomic approach adopted by post-Weberian studies. Moreover, post-bureaucratic organizations, may be seen also as hybrid organizations (Bergquist, 1994), that are characterized by a high agree of cultural variety. This chapter proposes an integrated theoretical framework, aimed to recompose the apparent incoherent picture of contemporary post-bureaucratic organizations. The present chapter analyses the post-bureaucratic phenomenon, adopting a socio-cultural perspective and post-modern approach. According to the theoretical perspective proposed in this chapter, organizational systems should be considered a specific type of socio - cultural system. The apparent paradox of the dual nature of organizational systems, that may be conceived at the same time as autonomous and as interconnected socio-cultural realities, offers an extraordinary conceptual and methodological challenge for organization studies. The duality of complex organizations dynamics is, according to the theoretical perspective adopted in this chapter, also one of the key concepts to unlock the real nature of post-bureaucratic organization, beyond the dichotomic approach adopted by post-Weberian studies. Moreover, post-bureaucratic organizations, may be seen also as hybrid organizations, that are characterized by a high agree of cultural variety. This chapter proposes an integrated theoretical framework, aimed to recompose the apparent incoherent picture of contemporary post-bureaucratic organizations.

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*Uma folha qualquer Eu desenho um sol amarelo (Que descolorirá!)
E com cinco ou seis retas É fácil fazer um castelo (Que descolorirá!)
Giro um simples compass Num círculo eu faço O mundo (Que descolorirá!)...
Aquarela (Watercolour), Toquinho*

INTRODUCTION

The present chapter analyses the post-bureaucratic phenomenon, adopting a post-modern approach and a socio-cultural perspective.

Postmodern organizations may be conceived as complex subsystems, that show all the main characteristics of the “macro-system” and therefore are the mirror of the wider social reality. Moreover, according to so-called “subsystem mirroring” theory, formulated by Teillard De Chardin (1968), it is possible to assume that a social subsystem show all the properties, the essential aspects, the relations of the more general social system. Organizational subsystems, therefore, are also a representation of complex social reality.

It is possible, then, to assume the theoretical stance of “collective person” (Coleman, 1986). According to this perspective, complex organizations may be seen as an intermediate territory of social relations (in the context of the “micro-macro” relationship), and as an extremely particular dimension of social activity, where “a wide range of fundamental social processes” are enacted (Scott, 1994; p. 25).

By the way, it is possible also to argue that (complex) organizational systems are a specific type of socio - cultural system and, therefore, it is assumed the validity of the equation “organization-as-culture”. In other words, organizations reflect the reality but are not a mere representation, at meso-micro level, of the wider social systems, since complex organizational systems are characterized also by *auto-poiesis*. This theoretical stance (Bodega, 1997; Hatch, 1999) is based on the supposition that complex organizations, being also social (sub)systems, are not mere “places of imitation” of the external reality, but are rather an extremely particular kind of “cultural bearing milieu”, according to Louis’ expression (in Pondy-Morgan, 1983). Social contexts (Crespi, 1996, pp. 228-231) where values, symbolologies, norms, artifacts and works are continuously produced and reproduced. Cultural paradigms are then translated in models of action, that characterize the “specificity of existence” of the organizational systems, in terms of its relationship with the external environment and the internal socio-cultural reality. The apparent paradox of the dual nature of organizational systems, that may be conceived at the same time as autonomous and as interconnected socio-cultural realities, offers an extraordinary conceptual and methodological challenge for the advancement of organization studies and, particularly, to shed light to the complex dynamics of post-bureaucratic organizations.

Contemporary post-bureaucratic organizations, moreover, may be seen also as hybrid organizations (Bergquist, 1994), that are characterized by a high agree of cultural variety, that leads to the creation of cultural subsystems and forms of cultural syncretism. Paraphrasing the popular song composed by the Brazilian artist Toquinho, the post-bureaucratic organization may be seen as an “aquarela” (watercolour), composed of different colours and thicknesses. As when you look at a Van Gough painting, to get the general picture, it is necessary to find out the right point of observation. If you are too close, then you see only a mess of colours, if you are too far, you get a homogenous picture, that does not let you to perceive all the nuances that make the painting a masterpiece.

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