

Chapter 7.21

Social Philosophy, Communities, and the Epistemic Shifts

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INTRODUCTION: DOMINANT AND PERIPHERAL 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 20th century.

BACKGROUND

At the end of the 19th 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 17th and 18th centuries, which followed from the 15th and 16th 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 20th 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 19th century and together with Saussure, created the two large schools of semiotics that have been largely influential throughout the 20th 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), Eijjnatten'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

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