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Book Review: Christopher Grey: A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Organizations

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Christopher Grey: A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Organizations

2005, London: SAGE

DOI: 10.1177/0170840606064450

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One of the first things I learnt as an undergraduate was how to do a ‘shotgun’. Fortunately there were no rifles involved. This kind of shotgun is a method devised to allow the thirsty undergraduate to down a can of Speights (the local brew) in a few seconds. It involved puncturing a hole in the bottom of the beer can, holding the newly created hole up to one’s mouth, opening the can from the top and then sucking down the beer as rapidly as possible. It was fast, efficient, and looked damn impressive. In many ways, Chris Grey has invented a genre of writing about organization studies which is strangely reminiscent of this drinking manoeuvre — let’s call it ‘shotgun critique’.

The first experiment with shotgun critique can be found in the pages of *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about studying organizations*. This experiment has produced an excellent, lively and accessible summary of some of the central insights produced by the labours of organization studies. With shotgun in hand, Grey leads us on a hunt of all the prey in the world of organization studies. Bureaucracy, scientific management, human relations, culture, corporate change all come into his sights. At the end of the book he targets a more exotic beast — the business school itself. In this tour most of the important highlights are covered, and the novice hunter departs satisfied. It is inevitable that the more advanced boffin will surely be left unsatisfied with the ease of Grey’s hunting tour. It is all too easy to predict these kinds of hobbyist reactions Grey will receive — ‘what about Foucault’s theory of ethics’, ‘where is Luhmann’, ‘you don’t address my foundational historical revision of why change management is wrong’, and of course, ‘where are the data that support these hollow conjectures’. While these kinds of reactions may be correct in the most narrow sense, they will inevitably be pathetic. These kinds of reactions miss the whole spirit of what Grey is trying to do here. Grey’s real purpose is to engage with organization studies with the knowledge of a skilled professional and the playful spirit of an enthusiastic amateur.

But does Grey do more than simply deliver a shotgun tour of organization studies? Yes! In many ways Grey’s book is a diet plan for the field. Just like the youth who gorges junk food and spends their time playing video games, organization studies is getting fat. Literally. Witness the fattening up of the literature. Publishers are no longer pleased with only having fat textbooks, they want super-sized handbooks. Now even the Handbook isn’t big enough. Encyclopaedias are being taken up with glee. We even have eight-volume compendiums of classic articles. The result is that our bookshelves look like they have been on a McDiet. They are now weighed down with increasing amounts of expensive hardback texts. Grey’s little pocket-sized volume provides a welcome relief from this obesity epidemic. Grey’s text is not just

an introduction to organization studies for the rapscallion student. It is a manifesto for a different kind of organization theory: an organization studies which is slimmed down, personal, direct and unpretentiously engaged. One cannot help but suspect that Grey's little book will put some of the eminent professors who specialize in producing turgid tracts out of business!

As well as being small, Grey's text is wonderfully crude. It doesn't have room for the kind of empirical or philosophical niceties which we have grown too used to. He does not spend his time discussing the psychological life of F. W. Taylor, nor does he delve into the details of process philosophy. He is direct and to the point in a wonderfully unsophisticated way. It would be tempting to say that the style of argument which Grey is championing here is the kind which many eminent Englishmen are so fond of — saying the plain truth in plain language. One can almost hear Grey saying behind the text — 'enough of this French theory that takes hours to cook up and is smothered in all sorts of strange sauces, give me good old meat-and-potatoes English directness!' The result is a refreshing voice which is stripped down, repetitive, lyrical, catchy and goes right to the heart of things.

As well as providing a new style of writing, Grey's text seems to be pointing towards a brand of thought which has rarely been touched in organization studies. This is pragmatism. Instead of seeking to predict, explain, expound or critique, Grey's text sets out first and foremost to do something. The book doesn't expound a philosophy of pragmatism, it simply does pragmatism. It teaches through example, not through instruction. The task at hand is to provide a critical introduction, and he achieves this nicely. He uses just the right amount of empirical and analytical tools to do the job, no more, no less. This begins to show us how rethinking organization might be undertaken in a more pragmatic fashion, and how we might actually do things with words.

If Grey is a champion of a pragmatic organization theory, what kind of handy work is he engaged in here? The central craft here is a shoot-em-up job. Grey is a gleeful practitioner of the labour of negativity. He lines up many of the managerial bad guys who clunk around the hallways of every organization and takes pot shots at them. One minute we have scientific management in the sights, the next minute it is Peters and Waterman, then it is the business school itself. Grey's well-choreographed assassinations of management hit the targets. But what are we left with? A pile of rotting corpses which we continue to take potshots at? How sad! What's more, most of the corpses that are lined up are already riddled with bullet holes. After all, what kind of marksman would shoot at such rotting prey as Peters and Waterman?

What if Grey chose the freshest managerial mystifications as our targets (talent management or neuro-linguistic programming for instance)? Would his target practice be acceptable? My answer is a qualified 'No'. Grey's shotgun critique might be a necessary move in bringing down some of the sillier manifestations of managerialism, but it is certainly not sufficient. If organization studies is going to live up to its big promises, it needs to be able to do much more than just engage with the labour of negative that Grey shows us here. It needs to be able to say not only what it does not want. It also needs to say what it wants. It needs to be able to put forward affirmative and reasoned demands as well as negative critique.

Fortunately Grey's little book is not just shotgun criticism. Amongst the carnage there are two figures which are left alive — politics and ethics. Towards the end of the book he mentions these two words with the hope that they might build the platform of organization studies to come. I was left asking, what would it look like if we took Grey's invitation seriously? What would organization studies built upon ethical theory and political philosophy look like? How would it compare to the rather gaudy lean-to we have constructed out of an unholy mix of sociology, literary theory, social theory, and a few half-baked political sentiments? It would not simply involve the descriptive ethics and politics which organization studies currently clings to. Rather, this would push organization studies to engage in an active and impassioned engagement with normative political and ethical theories. These theories would not only seek to bemoan the state of managerial thought we might be trapped in. The organization studies would seek to affirm a way of organizing. It would not only be 'for organization', but it would be clear about exactly what mode of organizing it is for. It would seek to rationally justify why we should prefer this mode of organizing rather than another mode of organizing. It would even seek to show how the modes of organizing which we thirst for might already be at work in the elemental communisms of a professional community, the micro-economies of online music trading, and the micro-emancipation of viral social movements. This affirmative critique of management would provide a way out of the cynical world where we pretend to see through the hollow tongues of managerial diktat yet offer no alternative language. It would create a possibility of casting off the resentful consciousness which the critic loves to wallow in so much. It might even allow us to put down the shotgun.

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This is a provocative tract. It sets out 'some things about the study of organizations which seem (to the author) to be true'. Swirling through the text, however, are two basic theories:

- 1 Too much 'organization theory' is pro-managerialist in its approach and seeks to understand how employees might be controlled in order to further the agendas of top executives and shareholders.
- 2 Much 'organization theory' is weak on empirical underpinnings, erroneously supporting an ideology that managers are able to manage/manipulate/leverage change. This 'conceit' of management, i.e. the idea that managers can take actions 'that lead to predictable outcomes and only to those outcomes' is a false aspiration. Therefore business schools are fundamentally misguided. They are part of the problem because they