Introduction: Why Studying Organizations Matters to Me

The chief object of education is not to learn things but to unlearn things.
G.K. Chesterton

The purpose of this short book is to say some things about the study of organizations which seem to me to be true. In putting it that way, I am signalling that this is not a textbook, not just because it is far shorter than a textbook but because it has no pretensions to comprehensiveness, and I’m going to assume you’ve read a textbook or that you have some familiarity with ideas about organizations. Nor is it a specific contribution to scholarship advancing a novel or narrowly defined thesis. Indeed, it is scarcely original at all, except in the sense that the particular things I exclude and the way I put together what I do include are specific to this book. But that kind of originality may be as much a defect as a virtue.

It is, as I say, a short book, and that is for a reason other than laziness or ignorance on my part. The field of management studies, which is where most of the study of organizations occurs, is increasingly characterized by huge, door-stopping, wrist-aching textbooks running sometimes to many hundreds of pages, and also by a proliferation of readers, handbooks and treatises. Whatever merits they may have, they certainly have some serious disadvantages including the physical strain of carrying and reading them. The most obvious is that, in my experience, people don’t read them, at least not in their entirety. They are also expensive, sometimes prohibitively so. I wanted to create a book that would fit in the average sized pocket, and not burn a hole in that pocket; a book which could be carried and read on a single longish train journey, say. And I wondered if one way of achieving that was to write in a slightly different way to that which is the norm amongst academics.

Which brings me to my second motivation. Instead of writing a long, comprehensive, scholarly or original book I have tried to write an interesting book about studying organizations – in many ways a more
difficult task. Why is it worth undertaking? After all, is there really a need for yet another book on organizations? There are so many already, whether they bear the weighty burden of declaiming the subjects of organizational behaviour, theory and analysis; the advancement of a provocative new angle; or the populist desire to transform the thinking of travelling executives. How many of these are interesting, though, is another question. Many include material which is palpably false. Others announce the blindingly obvious. Still others specialize in the accidentally or wilfully obscure. And all three of these types conspire to be, with a few honourable exceptions, very, very dull.

And yet I passionately believe that organizations are incredibly interesting. In one way, to study them is to study just about every facet of human life. It’s true that most of the study of organizations has been concerned with the corporations and institutions where people work, and usually the larger ones at that. But more fundamentally, all forms of collective activity – politics, the family, as well as work – are about organization in some way. Which also means – and it’s a major failing of most books to ignore this – that to study organizations involves thinking about philosophy, politics, ethics and much more. And behind or beyond these abstractions are the lived experiences of people not just working together but joking, arguing, criticizing, fighting, deciding, lusting, despairing, creating, resisting, fearing, hoping or, in short, organizing. I don’t find it easy to imagine a world without organizations, but I also don’t find it easy to recognize that world in the mainstream books about organizations.

If this is so then organization theory – the study of organizations – must also be important. In this book I will talk about both organizations and organization theory because these are so closely related. The way we think about organizations – even to the extent of what we recognize as being an organization – is inseparable from some kind of organization theory. And organization theory has often been used not just to ‘think about’ but to act within and upon organizations, so that

---

1 I’ve tried throughout this book to dispense with what the novelist J.D. Salinger called the aesthetic evil of the footnote. But I will just say that all these terms have a currency, contested by scholars. I will use the term ‘organization theory’ throughout, just to mean the study of organizations. But I don’t mean theory rather than practice. Theory/practice is a false distinction. Theory is a practice – doing theory. Practice always involves a theory – some understanding of what is being done and why. But I’ll come back to this.
they bear its imprint. So I don’t think it is helpful to draw too much of a line between the two and, except where it is important to do otherwise, I won’t try to do so.

A more difficult distinction is that between organization theory and organizations, on the one hand, and management on the other. This is partly because management is, in most cases, an interesting and important part of organizational life and therefore of the study of organizational life. It is also partly because, as I have already mentioned, most organization theory is nowadays conducted as part of management studies. Relatedly, it is because much organization theory treats organizations solely or primarily from the point of view of how to manage them (better) – how to get the job done. For that reason, each chapter of this book discusses an aspect of the study of organizations but links this to an aspect of management.

I will say a great deal about this elision between organization theory and management in this book, but for now I will just point out that when organizations are simply thought about in terms of ‘getting the job done’, it cuts out so much that matters – who says what the job is, who says how it should be done and how are people affected by getting it done this rather than that way? I think that these are really important issues and this book is animated in part by an anger that they are almost entirely ignored by the bulk of organization theory and the huge number of courses in business and management which are offered by universities. But I also think, with less anger but with a degree of sadness, that those people within organization theory who have raised the issues with which this book is concerned have often done so in a way which is inaccessible to all but a tiny fraction of the population. I am not pointing the finger in saying this, because I have done the same thing. But in this book I want to rectify this by communicating something of the more critical orientations of organization theory in a way that those who would not otherwise be aware of them can, without too much difficulty, understand.

It should be easy to write an interesting book about organizations, and difficult to write a boring one. I haven’t found it to be so and,

---

2 By critical I mean the growing approach, usually called Critical Management Studies, which explores the kind of alternative understanding of organizations which informs this book, and which should become clearer in the following pages. See Alvesson and Willmott (1992) for an exposition; Fournier and Grey (2000) for a commentary; and Grey and Willmott (2005) for a collection of readings.
most likely, haven’t succeeded in doing so. This book has taken a long
time to write, even though I’ve been thinking about it for ages. One
reason – maybe an idiosyncratic one – is that every time I tried to
write something interesting I felt, as it were at my shoulder, a hypo-
thesical reviewer criticizing. ‘The argument is confused’; ‘the author
seems unaware of Joe Blogg’s groundbreaking paper from last year’;
‘the author misunderstands Josephine Blogg’s seminal book’; ‘theoret-
ically naïve’; ‘lacking evidence’; or, worst of all, ‘Grey hasn’t got a
clue – as we have long suspected’.

To placate this imagined reader (who may well have been me), I
kept trying, so far as I was able, to refine arguments, close gaps, add
references, make qualifications, avoid sweeping assertions. I sought the
comments of colleagues, and tried to incorporate them. I worried more
about what I didn’t know than what I did. In short, I tried to be more
comprehensive and more scholarly. So the book got longer and longer,
and it was taking longer and longer to write (I’m talking years), which
meant that I had to keep reading new material being published. The
bibliography took on a nasty, spiteful life of its own. I felt more and
more bored by the whole thing. And reasoning that if even I felt bored
by it then most readers would surely feel even more so, I threw the man-
uscript in the bin (today – at the very moment I wrote these words). It’s
true that it lurks somewhere on my computer – partly as a terrible
warning, partly because I might at some point want to write a book
that bores me – but I felt the urge to try something different. This is it.

---

a different kind of book

Imagine a world where the thing which dominated it (God, the Party,
Parliament – whatever you want) was written about in one of three
ways. One was like a Bible: very heavy and entirely orthodox. The
second was amusing and readable but didn’t begin to tell you any-
thing you couldn’t think for yourself, and never once suggested that
the Bible was wrong. The third seemed to say some things you would-
n’t think yourself, and suggested flaws in the Bible, but you couldn’t
understand it because it was so obscurely written.

In that imaginary world you might well feel dissatisfied. In this
real world, the thing that permeates just about everything is organi-
izations and their management. You are born in a hospital; you live in
a family; you go to school; you go to work. You deal with – what? –
supermarkets, banks, mobile phone companies – whatever. And if
you want to understand these things – or, maybe, if you have to because you are doing a management course – then you have pretty much the same three choices as in the imaginary world of the previous paragraph. The textbook that gives you the authorized orthodoxy; the pop management book that you understand but which states the patently obvious and is no more than a better written version of the orthodoxy; or the scholarly book that may challenge the orthodoxy but which is mainly unreadable.

So maybe there is a space for a different kind of book. This is an attempt at it. What I want to capture is something which sometimes comes to me when I am teaching my undergraduate students. They typically know relatively little about the literature on organizations and what they do know they have some scepticism about. But they are intelligent, well-educated and curious. So in class discussions I find myself, on good days, talking with a degree of passion but with relatively little regard for ‘the literature’, for a ‘consistent’ theoretical position or for the reviewer on my shoulder. And at least some of my students seem to appreciate that, which makes me wonder if a wider audience, mainly of students but hopefully of others, might also be interested. This book doesn’t quite capture those classroom discussions – writing and reading are, after all, different media to talking – but it is written in that spirit. I have given myself the freedom to try to communicate, rather than to obscure. In some respects, the aspiration to write an interesting book raises higher expectations than those incited by a comprehensive or scholarly one. As I have said, I doubt whether I have succeeded, but I have found it more enjoyable than not to have tried. To my scholarly colleagues I offer an apology for the superficiality and violence with which I have treated their ideas, but make a suggestion I will return to: sophistication is sometimes bought at a price which is not worth paying.

people who study organizations

Trying to write an interesting book is one thing, but, going back to the first sentence of this introduction, another set of issues obtrudes. I said that I wanted to write some things about the study of organizations which seem to me to be true. That, I think, will be a perfectly intelligible goal to most readers. It may seem a peculiar or even eccentric goal – why don’t I just do some DIY or go the pub like everyone else? – but, given that eccentricity, at least it makes sense.
Yet, curiously and perhaps worryingly, this very first sentence will raise the hackles of just about all of my colleagues whose academic profession is the study of organizations. I think it’s worth saying something about this, partly for them but mainly because, for others, it may clarify the purpose, and difficulty, of this book.

Organization theorists – the people who study organizations for a living – come in all kinds of hues. They adhere to a multiplicity of schools of thought which they defend and aggress with remarkable passion. But there are some quite fundamental camps into which many, or most, fall. One distinction is between those who believe that organization theory is, or will become, a science not unlike the natural sciences. It’s a loose term, but that view can be described as ‘positivism’. Maybe the core of positivism is that there exists an observable, objective organizational reality which exists independent of organization theory. The task of organization theory is to uncover this reality and discover the laws by which it operates, and perhaps then to predict future events. They tend to favour quantitative research. Then there is a second camp, which denies this scientific view. They might be called ‘interpretivists’ or ‘constructivists’ or ‘relativists’, and in their view (or views, for these are not quite identical terms) organizational reality does not have an objective existence but is constructed by people in organizations and by organization theory itself. There are no laws to be discovered and prediction is well-nigh impossible. They tend to favour qualitative work.

One simple way to think of this distinction is to imagine a cricket umpire making an LBW decision or a football referee judging an off-side. The ‘positivist’ view would be that it either is an LBW or it isn’t, and the umpire either gets it right or wrong. The ‘constructivist’ view would be that if it’s called as LBW then it is LBW. One appeals to an objective fact (what the ball did) and the other to a social fact (how it was interpreted by people). Actually, the constructivist might go further, and say that the rules about what counts as LBW are socially made anyway (and so could be, and sometimes are, changed). Note that either of these views can be called ‘realistic’, the first because it is about what really happened with ball, leg and wicket; the second because it is about what really happened in terms of the batsman being given out and being back in the pavilion. They are just different versions of what might be meant by reality. Perhaps there is also a psychological issue here as well. On the first view the batsman can feel cheated – it wasn’t right. On the second view the batsman can feel ‘philosophical’ – it’s just the way it goes.
As this book goes on I will touch again on these debates but for now I want to point out that, from both of these positions, the aspiration to ‘say some things about the study of organizations which seem to me to be true’ looks distinctly dodgy. For the positivists, the problem is the ‘seem to me’ part. ‘Why should we be interested in Grey’s subjective ramblings’, they will complain. What we want are the facts of the matter, as established by research. For the constructivists, it’s the ‘true’ part that is a worry. For them, there is perhaps only interpretation, and to dress this up as truth is an unbearable conceit.

My own sympathies are more with the latter (interpretivist, constructivist) view than with the former, and that is why the truth I am claiming to represent is of the ‘seems to me’ variety. But I will say to my positivist colleagues and readers who share their concerns that this book is a little bit more than subjective ramblings: it is, or aspires to be, an argument made up from fragments of the arguments of others and, if successful, articulated in a way which is plausible to the reader. And maybe that will assuage the constructivists a little, because it means that the truths I am so presumptuously offering are only staking a claim to plausibility, not to objective reality. To the positivists I want to say that the confidence with which they speak their truths is only achieved at the cost of an indefensible philosophical naïvety. But to the constructivists I want to say that the ultimate difficulty with their position is that they can become scared of saying anything at all (not that there is much sign of that) for fear of appearing philosophically naïve. In that case, we might as well all pack up and go home, which might save some paper but would be a shame given the enduring and endemic experience of organization in this and other societies.

There are other kinds of distinctions amongst those who study organizations. I’ve glossed the positivists as numerically-inclined scientists and the constructivists as description-inclined interpreters (and glossed is the right word). But another distinction which hazily and paradoxically links to this is that between managerialists and critics. The managerialists are interested in organizations from a particular point of view: that of how to manage them more effectively. This also implies that they share the interests, both political (whose side they take) and intellectual (what is analytically important to them), of managers. There is quite a bit of variety here, but these same people are very often the positivists. It isn’t hard to see the linkage, for the goal of providing fact-based, reliable organizational predictions would, if realized, be very useful to managers. The paradox, of
course, is that the traditional model of science has it as a value-neutral rather than a politically partisan enterprise.

The critics are more concerned with an understanding of the organization as a whole, with some partisan preference for the managed rather than the managers. And these critics are more commonly to be found in the constructivist camp. Because they do not hold out the hope of organizational predictions and control they tend to be seen as less useful to managers. In any case, they are much more likely to question, in all kinds of ways, the organizational status quo. This also means that, because the bulk of organization theory is currently done in management schools, the critics are considerably more marginal than the managerialists. The paradox is also present, in a rather more muted form, for in moving away from the values of management, the critics provide something more like, not a value-free account, but an analytical account of organizations.

Beyond the paradoxes there is an irony. The managerialist-positivist camp, for all their desire to speak effectively to the world of practice, have consistently failed to come up with anything of much use to managers or others, a fact for which they are consistently criticized by others and over which they themselves persistently agonize. Whereas the constructivist critics at least provide an account which is recognizably about actual people in organizations, rather than the abstract statistical hypothesis testing of their more mainstream colleagues.3

Within this axis, I position myself much more as a critic than a managerialist. There are all kinds of reasons for this, which I guess in the end just come down to politics. I don’t particularly want to side with the relatively more powerful and I’m sceptical about the benefits of management in the ways that that activity is usually conducted. I think there is much more to organizations than the managerialists typically recognize and, indeed, that the conventional ways of managing organizations represent just one way in which organization could be conducted. In this sense I am, to borrow the words of Martin Parker (2002), ‘against management’ but ‘for organization’.

Throughout this book, I will be conducting a kind of ongoing conversation across managerial and critical approaches. Sometimes

---

3 Compare Vroom’s (1964) proposition that motivation $M = f(E.V)$ with the statement ‘John would have worked hard for promotion, but as there was no chance of promotion he didn’t bother’. Face it, the latter is better.
I will be explaining one or other approach, but more often I will be trying to juxtapose them. Indeed, and this I know introduces some complex problems of exposition, in this conversation I am really using organization theory in two quite different ways. On the one hand, I will be talking about organization theory as a body of thinking espoused in mainstream and textbook accounts, usually of a managerialist kind. On the other hand, I will be using concepts from critically orientated organization theory to illuminate and challenge the conventional wisdom. Hopefully it will be clear at each point what meaning of organization theory I intend, but in any case this problem is an unavoidable result of the fissured character of organization theory. Of course I could just do what most writers do, which is to ignore those fissures and simply write from within one or other camp. But that would defeat my primary purpose, which is to provide for students with a mainly mainstream knowledge of organization theory a mainly critical commentary upon that knowledge. Many others have provided expositions of the mainstream, managerialist approach – almost all textbooks being examples. A few have outlined the critical approach (for example, Casey, 2002). But because they tend to ignore each other, the former do not challenge established wisdom whilst the latter are too far removed from what non-specialist readers already know.

All of this self-positioning is meant to introduce those who are not already aware of it to some of the ways in which organization theory is a schismatic field in which every word used betrays an allegiance to this or that view. Organization theory is itself organized, and it is impossible to write about it without treading on someone’s toes. The broad-brush account I have given of its schisms will have done just that for those initiated into these debates. But I would rather make broad, committed (and perhaps occasionally foolish) statements than to become paralysed by unreadability by qualifications and elucidations. I think the impasse that organization theory has reached is that those with sophisticated understandings of organizations can only write for each other, whilst those who can write for broader audiences have only the most banal things to say.

To those of my colleagues who may blanch at the liberties I have taken with the ideas that they, and elsewhere I, propound in complex and elaborate terms in – oh, woeful phrase – ‘the literature’, I say two things. One is that, unfortunately for us, and perhaps for them, almost no one reads the literature. The other, more controversial thing is this: the demand for purity and sophistication is not always a noble defence of rigorous standards, it is sometimes a psychological
defence which allows a feeling of superiority over others. It is easy and comforting to see one’s own ideas as so sophisticated that any attempt at making them intelligible is to diminish them (and oneself). However, given that organizations are such a pervasive and important feature of life it seems perverse to me that the most important contributions to organization theory can only be understood by a few hundred people in the world – if that many. I sometimes find myself in academic seminars and have the experience of simply not understanding what is being said. If that is true of someone who has spent some twenty years working in the field, who has contributed a fair amount to its literature and, modesty aside, is not a complete idiot, then something is wrong. Wrong with me, perhaps, for not understanding what is said; but as I have got older I have begun to acquire the self-confidence to believe that there may be something wrong with those doing the saying, or at least the way that they say it.

So my intention in this book is to try to say some fairly sophisticated things in a way which is fairly simply expressed. Of course these things are relative: and I am aware that, despite my best efforts, for some this will still seem like a heavy read. There is a certain point beyond which it is impossible to simplify without ceasing to say anything that isn’t banal. But I’ve tried to write in an informal and conversational tone and I have also avoided those textual devices – lists of bullet points, key concepts, text boxes – which, whilst beloved by publishers for their supposed accessibility, I always find patronizing, infantilizing and not even helpful. I’ve tried to write in a way that demands intelligence, but isn’t pompous or patronizing, so those who object on the grounds that it is either too demanding or insufficiently weighty might with great wisdom choose to put it back on the bookshelves right now.

For those who continue with it, I hope this book will leaven the rather stodgy dough of, in particular, the textbooks, and it could be read as an accompaniment to many of these. I have deliberately framed much of the discussion around topics and authors which form the staple of textbooks, rather than introduce some of the more abstruse or obscure theorists (though there’s a bit of that) because I want to take some rather tired old material with which students are already to some degree familiar, and comment upon it in ways which hopefully will be a bit fresher. But, to repeat, this is not itself a textbook – if anything, it is an antidote to textbooks – and one difference is that I will not attempt anything like a comprehensive
coverage of ‘the literature’. Instead, I will mention those sources which I have found particularly inspiring (or, occasionally, particularly loathsome) to say what I want to say.

Another reason for doing some self-positioning in this introduction is to send a certain sort of signal, which the writing style hopefully reinforces. It is commonplace for books, especially but by no means exclusively textbooks, to be written as if their author were absent or, anyway, detached. The first person is avoided or muted, the book is entitled a ‘survey’, ‘overview’ or ‘introduction’. This betrays a particular way of thinking about knowledge, not unrelated to the issue of positivism. It is as if the author is irrelevant, a reporter on the field of knowledge, not a participant within it. This makes a kind of sense if organization theory is thought of as science, I suppose. But I think of myself not as a reporter or a scientist but as a commentator or conversationalist. So, as I said a moment ago, this book is meant to initiate a conversation, albeit of a peculiarly narcissistic sort in which I am the only one who gets to speak.

where i am coming from

Having so presumptuously put myself at centre stage, I suppose that I should – and anyway that I can – say a little bit more about myself and in particular about some of the things which have informed the thinking expressed in this book. When I first went to university (Manchester, in 1984) it was to study economics. I liked economics because, I suppose, I had been good at it at school and because it seemed to offer a neat and comprehensible explanation of human behaviour. In classes I sometimes asked my lecturers about the way that economic theories always made assumptions, some of which seemed to be dubious, especially those about rationality. Economics seemed to assume that people somehow formed individual preferences (there was no suggestion that these might be learned or that they might reflect the society in which those individuals had grown up) and that they could and did calculate how to maximize the satisfaction of those preferences. I knew from my own experience that people were often not that rational, and I didn’t even think that I myself was much like that. I was told that, in due course, these assumptions would be refined. They never were. Instead, economics as I studied it, and I was fortunate to be taught by excellent teachers who represented the best
people in the field, developed a more and more sophisticated mathematics to (allegedly) map and predict human behaviour.

Economics is profoundly influential in the study of organizations and management. Many of the core subjects take on board the assumptions of economics – not just, but certainly including, organization theory. Finance, marketing, operations research and economics itself form the bedrock of management degrees. One of the world’s most distinguished organizations theorists, Jim March, who over five decades has provided some of the most influential and sophisticated thinking in the subject, wittily remarked that just as economics suffers from ‘physics envy’ so too does organization and management theory suffer from ‘economics envy’ (March, 2000).\(^4\) But the consequence of this is that organization theory, like economics, says less and less about the people who I know and who, as a matter of fact, actually inhabit organizations.

Having gone to university to study economics, I was obliged to take some other courses in various social science subjects. Initially, these seemed to me to be a waste of time. Not only did I want to study economics, with a view to being an investment banker (or, rather, merchant banker as it was called in those far-off days), but also I was irritated by the way that so many of these other subjects seems to be concerned with vague airy-fairy debates with no definite answer and, apparently, no real point. But I came to change my view quite radically.

At more or less the same time I studied, in economics, Coase’s theorem with respect to pollution and, in political theory, ideas about power. I make no pretence to representing either of these sets of ideas accurately, not because I am too lazy to look them up but because I want to capture how they struck me at the time.\(^5\) Coase’s theorem, as I understood it, said that if a locality was being polluted then those affected, if they didn’t like it, would get together and pay the polluter to stop polluting them. Now in one way this chimed with all that I had learnt about economics; in brief and in general, that the way things were was an outcome of the relative values put upon those

\(^4\) This tells us something about the field, but also about the people who work in that field. In this book I make it very clear that I am part and parcel of what I have written. In general, though, writers on organizations conceal the way that their own identities contribute to the supposedly objective knowledge they produce.

\(^5\) So I apologise if I am doing a disservice either to Ronald Coase or to my lecturers.
things by those involved. But, at the same time, I realized that this account of pollution was, in real terms, nonsense. What if those affected did not communicate with each other? What if, having done so, they could not afford to buy off the polluter?

In political theory I was studying power and, by coincidence (or, who knows, by some clever design of the politics lecturers) there was mention of a study of pollution (Crenson, 1971). This study (discussed in Lukes, 1974, a book I still think of as one of the best things ever written in social science) compared two towns in the US, very similar in all respects except that one had enacted legislation to control a company polluting it whilst the other hadn’t. And the explanation of this difference was in terms of the local political set up and power relations between the two towns.

For me, this was something like an epiphany. Economics had offered an explanation that was meant to apply to all people at all times who were faced with pollution. The answer was self-evidently wrong, and in a particular, and very worrying, way. For it implied that if pollution existed then it was because those affected didn’t put enough value on the problem to pay to rectify it. This was a fundamentally conservative explanation, of course. Because it said that if there was pollution then it was because no one cared enough to stop it and that if there wasn’t it was because enough people were against it to put an end to it. I guess that it was around the same time that I read Voltaire’s *Candide* where the character Pangloss enunciated the philosophy (in real life associated with Leibniz) that the way things are is by definition the best possible outcome (‘all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds’), a view stingingly satirized by Voltaire. Thus the hapless Candide, subjected to all kinds of sufferings and humiliations, is given ‘panglossian’ explanations as to why things must be that way, couldn’t be otherwise and that, actually, it was a good thing that they were.

By now sceptical of economics, the political explanation made much more sense to me. If similar towns came to dissimilar solutions then I could see that the explanation could not possibly lie in some general calculus of preferences but in how power was mobilized in different contexts with different results. For example, did people see the pollution as a problem and did they think it could be dealt with? More importantly, did the pollution problem ever get on to the agenda of the local authority or not? What influence did the polluting companies have in each case? I could see that these were real issues, whereas the economic explanation seemed to have no reality at all.
I think that at that point I saw things in terms of better or worse explanations of reality, which is not a bad way to look at things. But subsequently I also came to question whether reality was a good enough test. As I have said, I was a student at Manchester in the 1980s and the biggest political issue then was the miners’ strike. Ostensibly the rationale for this was a struggle between the economic reality of the unprofitability of pits and the unrealistic demands of the miners for continued employment. I supported the miners on principle and was involved in a very minor way in various activities including the (probably now forgotten) ‘Battle of Brittan’ when the then Home Secretary Leon Brittan’s visit to Manchester was disrupted by student protestors (of whom I was one) and which led to a violent confrontation with the police, which I well remember (somewhat ingloriously, I ran away and hid in a back garden). But at that point I nevertheless believed that it was true that the pits were uneconomic and my objections to their closure didn’t include any denial of this, just a concern about its effects and, from what I can recall, a generalized hostility to all things Thatcherite.6

But at the same time that I was hiding in gardens, one of my future PhD supervisors, David Cooper was researching in (what was then) the National Coal Board, looking at accounting practices (Berry et al., 1987). He and his co-workers concluded that the claim that certain pits were uneconomic was founded upon particular ways of making the accounting calculation. Make different assumptions and the reality of the economics of the coal industry was different. And the assumptions made were not grounded in ‘reality’ but in the interests of various different people involved in the industry. Moreover, the release of these research findings was met with a highly political campaign, albeit unsuccessful, to censor and discredit the researchers. I didn’t know about any of this until 1987, when I began PhD work, but when I did it made me realize that knowledge itself was political. It wasn’t just, as the Crenson study had shown me, that economic calculations ignored political factors but that economic calculations were themselves political in nature.

6 Don’t ask me to explain how I reconciled this with my desire to be a merchant banker. I don’t know whether I knew at the time, and I certainly can’t make sense of it now.
I am giving all of this autobiographical detail partly because it helps to explain some of the views expressed in this book. I think that in many ways what I want to urge is a ‘political’ rather than an ‘economic’ understanding of organizations. But I have also told this story because I want to explain that the issues I have raised in this book don’t come from a kind of ‘holier than thou’ attitude in which I take some moral high ground. I am – just about – young enough to remember being a student and to remember the worthy, patronizing tedium that I was sometimes subjected to. It’s difficult to write a book like this, after years of being an academic, without falling into some of that tone and I know that I have done so. But I do want to try to say that I was once a 19-year-old student, studying economics, not management, but with a pretty similar attitude and set of aspirations to today’s average management student. I wanted clear, certain knowledge that I could learn to pass exams and give myself a good career. I didn’t give up those aspirations for ‘politically correct’ reasons, but just because they no longer made sense. I changed my view (and my course).

That was twenty years ago, but I am still pre-occupied with how people do things (organizations, politics, whatever) together, and the gap between the realities of this and the way that conventional academic texts describe it. I think that (some) academic ideas help us to understand everyday life and I don’t think that there is a world of theory (books, ideas, models) that is dissociated from practice (getting on with things). For – and how boring this will seem – theory is not the realm of abstract theories and practice is not the realm of honest-to-goodness action.

theory and practice

Let me finish these introductory remarks by saying a bit more about that last point. I have come to think that theory is best understood as a way in which people try to pursue particular agendas. Theory is a weapon used to bludgeon others into accepting practice. It almost never reveals that, but still it is true. A good example is the way that Darwinian theory (or, more often, some debased version of Darwinism) is used to justify this or that state of affairs. An example might include the idea that men have evolved to be aggressive and women to be nurturing (I have five sisters, and I can tell you that this is by no means true). Or (closely related) economic theory tells us that
the most efficient companies survive because they give better value (never mind that the survival of companies often owes a great deal to their near-monopoly positions – think of Microsoft; or that we often get pretty poor service from companies but the alternatives are much the same – think of banks). So theory in this way isn’t separate from practice, it is a way of at best explaining and at worst justifying practice. It is ‘panglossian’ in that it defends the status quo as being unavoidable or, even, more desirable than anything else.

Now of course theory often advances a different agenda, one for change. But always it is about a change in practice. Fundamentally, theory is about mobilizing ideas, arguments and explanations to try to make sense of practice, but also to influence practice. See things differently and you will do things differently. No sensible person can say ‘well, these are just words’. For we all know that words have the power to influence, to move, to inspire, to hurt and to repel people. Think of how you try to win arguments. Words, as one anonymous saying has it, are loaded pistols: we use them at our peril. Ask any politician and s/he will tell you that the practice of talking is the most important political art. Even – and I’m not much given to seeking biblical authority – the Bible tells us: in the beginning was the word.

And what about practice? Well, this too is invoked rhetorically. The person who says ‘well that is all theory but this is practice’ is trying to convince you that the practice is better, more worthwhile, more real than theory could ever be (people only say that about theories they don’t like, of course). But practice is always based, even if those involved don’t know it, on some kind of theory. The husband slamming his fist into his wife’s face (the theory, perhaps, women should know their place); the racist beating up an immigrant (the theory, perhaps, whites are superior); or in organizations, the manager making an employee stay until stopping time (the theory, perhaps, people need to know who’s boss); or another manager letting a worker go home early (the theory, perhaps, be flexible and people will work harder).

Much organization theory is very closely allied to management practice. It too pursues a particular agenda. It is an agenda which incorporates and validates all kinds of assumptions about organizations, of course, but also about people, politics and ethics about, in short, how the world we live in is organized. I think, and I will explain why in the book, that it does so in a way which is flawed, highly partial, largely indefensible and both morally and practically wrong. I mean, if it did work then it would be wrong, but it doesn’t work very well anyway.
what you will find in this book

I’m not going to spend too long on this. After all, the whole point of writing a short book is that people can read it, which is obviously the best way of discovering its contents. But I should maybe give some explanation of what it covers and why.

In the first two chapters of the book I talk about what can be called ‘classical’ issues in the study of organizations. They are classical partly because they are the earliest contributions to the subject we now call organization theory, but they are also classical because they set out a series of themes, issues and ideas which keep recurring in later work even if in a different language. Sometimes later authors don’t realize this, or don’t want to (for who wants to hear that their latest thinking just repeats what lies in a dusty corner of the library?). These issues – bureaucratic theory, scientific management and human relations theory – form the bedrock of the knowledge taught on just about every university course on organizations and management. This means that most readers will already have a certain amount of knowledge of them which is helpful to me in my attempt to offer a rather different take on them. And if I can do that successfully then it follows that the same angle can be applied to their recurrence in later work.

In next three chapters of the book I focus on more contemporary issues in studying organizations. As I’ve already implied, these grow out of, draw upon and sometimes react against the classical work. They also inform much of the experience of work in organizations during the last twenty years or so. For from the 1980s onwards there has been an apparent acceleration of the influence of organization theory in providing at least a vocabulary of, for example, quality, excellence, empowerment, customer service, flexibility and change which impacts very directly upon organizational life. Anyone who has had a job in recent years will recognize that lexicon. Even those students who have never worked will have seen its effects, say in the way that they now complete evaluations of their lecturers at the end of courses. Such a development, whilst minor in itself, arises out of the contemporary issues which I discuss in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. I certainly won’t cover all the ins and outs of these issues, but want to deal with their common, central features. Thus I will focus in Chapter 3 on organizational culture, which has not just been a theme of contemporary organizational life in its own right but which is also at the heart of a whole range of other initiatives which position ‘values’ and their management at the heart of organizations. I will then, in
Chapter 4, talk about post-bureaucracy as a catch-all term for the range of (supposedly) new organizational forms that (apparently) have supplanted the classical ways of organizing by stressing agility, fluidity and change. Again, students will be familiar with these ideas from their courses but, again, I want to offer a somewhat different angle to that normally taught. In the fifth chapter I try to locate recent developments in organizations within a broader context of ideas about ‘fast capitalism’ in which speed and re-structuring produce a kind of ‘rootlessness’ with many consequences for individuals and society. Part of what I am suggesting here especially, but throughout the book I hope, is that studying organizations is ultimately inseparable from wider political and social issues.

Since I am making a pitch based on the difference between my approach and that typically found on the courses that most readers of this book take, an obvious question arises. What is going on when what is normally taught differs more or less markedly from what I am saying in this book? One possibility is that I am just wrong, but clearly I think there are better explanations. In Chapter 6 I try to address this by looking at how the study of organizations is itself organized. In this introductory chapter I have talked about this from my perspective, but in Chapter 6 I try to explain what I think is going on in the business schools where, predominantly, the study of organizations occurs. One of the shocking things about these schools is that they rarely have, or impart to their students, any sense of their own nature and purposes other than the claim that they produce better managers – a claim which in my view is untrue. By studying the organizations that study organizations it is possible to understand why the way you study organizations on your course is different to the way I study them in this book. (What was that about readability?) Inevitably this chapter has a slightly different character to the others, because they deal with topics which, one way or another, feature on most courses on organizations. By contrast, Chapter 6 addresses something which is rarely explicitly considered on such courses but which, in my view, should be.

I should stress, though, that the kind of approach I take in this book is becoming much more common whilst still being in the minority. However, even those who have already been exposed to this type of thinking will hopefully find some points of interest.
Although each chapter is primarily concerned with a set of ideas about organizations, I have also linked these to an idea about management. As I have already indicated, management is not just a part and parcel of organizations but also, in terms of the study of organizations, is often the context and motivation for that study. Organization theory is most often studied inside a management course, and usually by people who are, or who aspire to be, managers. So although there is no necessary conjunction between organizations and management I would be foolish if I failed to talk about the contingent connections between the two. In brief, I associate ideas about bureaucracy with scientific management; human relations with people management; culture with self-management; post-bureaucracy with change management, fast capitalism with the end of management and business schools with the myth of management education. These aren’t by any means hermetically sealed notions of management for there are continuities as well as discontinuities between them. Still, they serve to capture how ways of studying organizations link to ways of conceptualising management.

Finally, conventionally enough, there is a conclusion. But this does more than try to tie things together. Earlier on I mentioned my own passionate conviction about the importance of studying organizations, and I have also tried to show something of the way that that passion was formed. In the Conclusion I want to urge again the idea that all of this stuff matters. It is fundamentally about the kind of world we want to live in. We have choices about that, which ultimately means that studying organizations is not just about what I say to you, and that the conversation is not so one-sided after all. All I can do is to bring what I think is true about studying organizations to your attention. In the end, it is your responsibility what you, as students and as citizens, choose to think is true and how you choose to act upon it.