



Pandemonium : Towards a Retro-Organization Theory

By Gibson Burrell, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1997.

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Gibson Burrell, an academic with the faculty of Social Studies at Warwick and author of *Pandemonium : Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*, the book under review, starts with a provocative perspective - that organisational theory today and modern organisational life are corrupt and decadent. Organisations themselves, successful organisational men and academics who chronicle organisational life and construct organisation theories, are all equally culpable in the present state of affairs, where everything good, noble and wise has been suppressed or manipulated in the climb to the summit. The book continues in this impassioned vein.

Burrell has emphasised the fact that accounts of organisational life have been incomplete reflections of societies because hitherto they have excluded, for instance, the peasantry from their purview of research and analysis. This indeed is a significant lacuna. Especially when it is noted that in India, for example, about one-third of its populace constitutes the social form called peasantry. Organisational theory posited till now, from classical enquiries to post modernist approaches, is unable to adequately describe, predict, or control in the scientific sense, this social class so significant in numbers - the peasantry. And yet, thrice in this century, the peasantry have proved themselves significant in impact - in 1917 during the Russian revolution, in 1949 in the peasant uprising and the long march forward mobilised in China, and in the de-urbanisation of Kampuchea by the peasant forces grouped under Pol Pot in 1975.

Burrell has suggested that social forms like the peasantry can fall within the purview of organisational theory. These social forms however, cannot satisfactorily be researched through traditional organisational analysis. The peasantry constitutes a social form which is substantatively at the bottom of the heap and therefore necessitates the use of a different methodology of research. Cabbalistic or esoteric, occult

methods are a possible alternative. The techniques embodied in such methods were invented and systematised in the four leading civilizations of the world of 50 BC - India, China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Today, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term occult as "not understood or able to be understood by the mind; beyond the range of ordinary knowledge". Although cabbalistic methods include practices common to the occult, with their pre-occupation with intuition rather than logic, they do succeed in explaining incomprehensible phenomena in cause and effect terms. True understanding however is the prerogative of a select few; those who have been initiated in the methods and who are worthy of receiving privileged knowledge. Thus it seems appropriate that a magical, humanist but essentially cabbalistic approach be used to seek knowledge about social forms like the peasantry and to explain their behaviour.

One unusual approach to understanding the peasantry is by analysing "pain and disease" which as a class they have experienced most severely. Pain is in eternal dialectic with pleasure. Humankind is therefore in eternal pursuit of one or the other. Those who are depraved (and the tendency towards depravity is greater than the tendency towards normality) derive pleasure through the deliberate infliction of pain on others.

Extreme variants of such infliction Burrell has argued, include sadism, masochism, and other deviant behaviour of that genre. A detailed delineation is found in chapter six entitled "Satyrsville". This chapter is particularly repugnant and may be left unread without any loss accruing. Burrell has presented this chapter, probably to display his capacity to academically analyse even what is most depraved and decadent in human nature.

Since deviant tendencies are discernible in all individuals, organisation theorists take cognisance of this when designing structure. Thus we now live in a "panopticon" society where everybody is under surveillance. Lyon, in 1994, assembled extensive evidence to suggest that in high performing modern organisations, surveillance is so all-pervasive that no one has privacy.

Business schools have no overt surveillance systems but have co-opted systems which stand in their stead. They are guilty of veering away from the intellectual perspectives of their disciplines. Elevating the maxim 'the consumer is sovereign' to unchallengeable heights, what is emphasised in curriculum design and teaching is what young managers perceive will stand them in good stead on-the-job. One of the many mechanisms now well-entrenched in business schools to emphasise that MBA

course members are consumers rather than students, is the teaching evaluation or feedback system. The parlous state is particularly oppressive because it has led to a concentration upon tasks, material and outcomes which have a *demonstrable* link between their use and the course member becoming a better manager. Everything must be focused upon the obvious utility of the presented material to managerial tasks as perceived by the students.

Gibson Burrell's concluding chapter is the definitive part of his book. Here he recommends that humankind strive for greater balance and harmony in the lives of its members. Individuals should not deny their agrarian origins since in the final analysis everybody is descended from agriculturists. On the contrary, they should actively support the play of eclectic influences in their lives.

However, the author's plea for newer methods of study is more rigorous than actual studies that he has carried out. His analysis of agrarian units for example, is discursive, devoid of practical purpose, and has descriptive accounts rather than theory. For example, he traces his own family history to demonstrate that while he is an academician and his siblings, like himself, are cosmopolitan and upwardly mobile, they are actually descended from a line of agricultural labourers. In the middle of the

nineteenth century, his agricultural labourer forefathers became coal miners. They were then classified as urban and of the industrial working class. But the truth is, they were coal miners operating from an agricultural heritage.

Such quixotic analyses have not truly culminated in "retro-organization" theory. In any event, the peasantry of today are as much inheritors of a post-industrialisation era as proletariat are. To suggest, as Burrell has done, that thirty per cent of the world's population comprise peasants in organised forms unchanged since feudal times, is simplistic. For some years to come, organisation theory is more likely to concern itself with complex, efficient, and performance-enhancing modes of organisation than with nomads and pre-modern tribes.

-Nina Jacob

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