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THE WORD AND THE WORLD: A CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATIONALISM IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Representationalism is the belief that our knowledge represents the world as it is. The purpose of this paper is to explore the representational epistemology that has historically underlain most management research, and submit it to critical scrutiny. It is argued that we can never show whether our knowledge corresponds to the facts; truth is a property of

sentences, not of the world. To talk about an object of study is to talk about a set of beliefs having a place in a language game. Social objects of study, especially, are practices and, as such, are constituted by self-understandings expressed as sets of background distinctions actors share. Our models of social reality, therefore, are internally related to practices so that the particular assumptions underlying a model of knowledge shape the background distinctions embodied in a practice. Concerning management studies, it is argued that far from merely representing organizational reality as it allegedly is, a representational epistemology is closely linked with a particular kind of action, viz. instrumental action, and a particular kind of organization, viz. bureaucratic organization. On the antirepresentational view of knowledge put forward here, it is suggested that our theories are tools for acting in the world rather than mirrors for reflecting it. As tools, questions concerning the purpose served by an inquiry are preferable to questions concerning methodology. The implications of an antirepresentational model of knowledge for management (both as an object of study and as a practice) are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Several meta-theoretical debates in management research have been, in one way or another, about the extent to which organizational phenomena can be considered as mind-dependent.[1] Consider, for example, the text that, more than any other, has helped to trigger off such debates, namely Burrell and Morgan's ***Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis***. The key dimension in Burrell and Morgan's typology of organizational theories is 'objective vs. subjective', that is the extent to which social reality is assumed to exist independently of actors or is rather deemed to be actors' construction.[2] For objectivists (or realists), our formal knowledge of empirical phenomena is true or false in virtue of an independently existing reality. By contrast, for

subjectivists (or antirealists), our knowledge has no objectively given referent, but is constructed by the inquiring subject.

Burrell and Morgan have argued that, in management studies, the objectivist approach has been dominant. In this paper I want to update their line of reasoning by drawing on the work of philosophers such as Rorty and Taylor, and extend it by demonstrating that an objectivist approach to management knowledge does not achieve its own purpose, namely to offer an accurate picture of how reality is. However, instead of using terms such as "objectivism" and "subjectivism", which originate from earlier philosophical debates concerning the mind and its relation to reality, I will be using, respectively, terms such as "representationalism" and "antirepresentationalism" which relate to contemporary philosophical debates concerning language and reality.[3] It will be argued that, historically, management studies has been dominated by a representational epistemology whose main postulate has been that our theories represent the key features of an independent world. It will be shown that, far from doing so, a representational model of knowledge actually *shapes* the world in its own image; it is intimately connected to a particular kind of action, viz. instrumental action, as well as to a particular kind of organization, viz. bureaucratic organization. On the antirepresentational view[4] put forward here, our theories are not reflections of the world but *tools* for acting in the world, something which is particularly relevant for such a practically-oriented field as management studies.

AN ANTIREPRESENTATIONAL ACCOUNT OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

Historically, scientific inquiry has been understood to be a culture-free activity whereby human beings come to know the nature of things, accumulate knowledge and, thus, are enabled to get closer to the truth. As Popper[5] tirelessly argued, we may not

be privileged ever to know the truth but, with every step we take to eliminate errors from our thinking, we certainly move closer to it. Admittedly, there are not many adherents to such a simplistic view of science these days. Kuhn and Feyearabend, not to mention several contemporary sociologists of science, have done much to shatter such a crude image of scientific activity. We are more sensitive today to the different ways of describing the world as well as to the fact that science is a *cultural* product, and that *what*, at any point in time, scientists choose to study relates less to the intrinsic properties of the object of study per se, and more to the language an inquiring community happens to adopt.[6]

Although we may be more sophisticated in our understanding of scientific inquiry today, there are still remnants of "realism" influencing our thinking. Thus, the idea that scientific inquiry is about finding out the nature of a pregiven world, a world which has its own context and speaks its own language, has not been abandoned.[7] To the extent that the natural sciences have been taken to be the role model for the social sciences, we see in the latter the same aim: how to represent a pregiven object of study as adequately as possible. Management studies has, for the most part, followed this trend too. Ansoff,[8] for example, in a relatively recent debate with Mintzberg on the nature of strategic management, has been one of the most recent exponents of the view that the business environment is a potentially fully describable entity which can be adequately represented via a set of dimensions, categories or variables, expressed, ideally, in quantitative terms. Thus, the concept of "environmental turbulence" is for Ansoff not merely a construct, but an objective property of all business environments, which researchers ought to capture with their instruments. Revealingly, in a moment of epistemological reflection, Ansoff remarks that for an observation statement to be valid, "it must be an accurate observation of reality".[9] In other words, it must be an adequate representation of reality.[10]

However, the idea that scientific knowledge (or more generally, cognition) represents the world, or that truth is correspondence to reality, is difficult to be sustained. Admittedly, some trivially true statements—like "my book is on the table" or "The American South tends to vote Republican"—are true by virtue of simply confronting them with a relevant chunk of reality.[11] Moving, however, beyond such immediate low-level correlations to putting forward more complicated explanatory statements, the pairing off between such statements and chunks of reality is not easily made. The reason is simple. The number of features which can figure in such pairing offs (or correlations) is theoretically indefinite—an object or a phenomenon can be classified in a myriad of ways. Among those features only a few will yield correlations which will be of explanatory force. What are those features? Are they the most obtrusive? Historians of science tell us that this is not necessarily so. Distinctions that may appear to be obvious in a particular epoch may be discredited in another.[12] At the end of the day it depends a great deal on the system of thought that is dominant in a particular period. For Aristotelians, for example, the heavens formed as orderly and comprehensible a system as for Newtonians.[13] The theories of both schools did break the world up (albeit differently), and postulated explanatory relations between its parts. But which one did break it up the right way? Similarly: which one of the different theories in psychology gets closer to the nature of "intelligence"?[14] More generally: does our language, at any point in time, cut reality at the joins? How could one ever know?

Now, at this point, it might be remarked that although scientists may not be able to make claims to the truth they, nevertheless, deal with hard facts, freed from interpretation, that can help us adjudicate between rival theories. Is that so? Consider the modern observer who looks into the night sky and sees stars and planets. Compare now what he sees with what a medieval observer would see: chinks in a sphere through which the light beyond could be observed.[15] Do both observers see the same

thing? Well, to the extent there is the pressure of light waves on both observers' retinas it could be said that there is a brute outside world out there causing them to see small light patches against a dark surface. But, as Rorty remarks, there is no way of "transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to *facts*, to the truth of sentences".[16]

In other words, the world causes us to have beliefs but it cannot tell us what to believe. "The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that"[17] To put it differently, there are relations of *causation* (but no relations of representation) holding between nonlinguistic items and our beliefs, and there are relations of justification holding between our beliefs. Thus, although it is conceded to realists that there are objects which are causally independent of human beliefs and desires, it is also conceded to antirealists that one can never be certain whether one has got into the "nature" of an object of study, and it would pay us not to ask such questions. Instead, since beliefs can be compared only with other beliefs, what we should be asking is whether our beliefs cohere, and if not, we should try to reweave them so that they do.

On this view, therefore, objects retain their causal independence; they are the loci of causal powers providing the stimuli for manifold uses of language. But the moment we ask for *facts* about an object we are asking how it should be described in a particular language, and that language is inevitably an institution.[18] Thus, there are not any bare objects, stripped of human concerns and interests—they always come with beliefs attached to them. To talk about an object of study, whether natural or social, is to talk about something which is already invested with certain background distinctions, with a place within a language game.[19]

For example, as the Mintzberg-Ansoff debate has revealed, the concept of "environmental turbulence" is explanatorily significant (and therefore becomes a salient feature of business environments) within the language game of strategy-as-design and the associated formistic-cum-mechanistic type of knowledge.[20] Similarly, to talk about "political culture" as "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations towards politics among the members of a political system",[21] or to conceive of the individual as an independent, sovereign moral agent,[22] presuppose the language game of modern bureaucratic individualism. In other words, all objects of study are always already contextualized, and "all talk about doing things to objects [. . .] must be paraphrasable as talk about reweaving beliefs".[23]

The linguistic construction of objects of study is more vividly manifested in the case of social objects. The latter's causal capability varies across space and time, and is substantially modified when our way of describing them changes. This is so because social practices and institutions have the causal capability that they do by virtue of certain self-descriptions actors share. These self-descriptions are a set of background distinctions constitutive of the practices in question, so that when the distinctions change the practices change as well. As Taylor[24] remarks, "the language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is".

Consider, for example, the practice of decision making as described by most Organizational Behavior textbooks. In them, decision making is typically thought to begin with receiving information on a particular subject matter, interpreting it, outlining and debating different courses of action, choosing one, and acting on it.[25] Notice that such a notion of decision making is bound up with the impersonal character of the process of making decisions, and with the value it is attributed to painstaking analysis and to the confrontation of different views as the best way of arriving at decisions. It is a very 'rational' way of making decisions: first you

dispassionately analyze and debate, and then you decide and act. Reason and facts drive decision making, not personalities or human relationships.

Of course this is a very western, especially Anglo-Saxon, view of decision making. Other societies have a different conception of it. In Japan, for example, "company decisions emerge after exhaustive soundings have established what the majority feels (not thinks), rather than after somebody has analyzed the problem. However misguided the boss may be, his subordinates still believe they owe him loyalty".[26] Thus, a series of background distinctions constitutive of the western self-understanding of decision making (such as clarity of expression and articulation, confrontation between different views, and impersonal analysis with the view of 'getting at the heart' of a problem), have no place in the Japanese way of making decisions in which a different set of background distinctions prevails (i.e. compromise, consensus, respect for seniority, and 'saving face').[27]

If the preceding analysis is accepted and the notion that our theoretical descriptions should aspire to be accurate representations of the way the world is is rejected, what are theoretical descriptions for? Nothing more, says Rorty,[28] than tools: "way[s] of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations". While for representationalists our beliefs contaminate our descriptions, and should be purged as much as possible so that the world may be faithfully reflected in our descriptions, for Rorty our particular beliefs, concepts, and descriptions (in short: our languages) are precisely what makes the causal powers of the world work for us in one particular way rather than in another. We are subjected to the causal forces of the natural and social world, but what we make of them depends on how we describe them and, thus, what stories we choose to tell. The question then arises as to how such stories fit together, for they do not always do.[29] Indeed, often our stories conflict, our believes do not

cohere. In the 16th century, for example, the Aristotelian vocabulary got in the way of the mathematized vocabulary that was being developed. Similarly, the Weberian descriptions of organization with their insistence on the separation of means from ends, of facts from values, and the exaltation of managerial expertise,[30] are increasingly getting in the way of an emerging new vocabulary which puts emphasis on intersubjective values, holistic understanding, dispersion of knowledge and expertise, spontaneous initiative, and continuous innovation.[31]

When our stories conflict, this is a sure sign that our old tools are becoming inefficient and that new ones must be developed. The purpose of scientific inquiry (both natural and social alike) is not to reveal the true nature of things but to respond to the incoherence among our beliefs and desires produced by novel stimuli. Our web of beliefs and desires should be rewoven so as to accommodate new beliefs and desires. The interesting questions, therefore, are: "Which beliefs are more worthwhile than others?", "Which purposes should we be bothering to fulfil?"[32] It is not the nature of an object of study that guides our inquiry since, as argued above, objects have no nature and speak no language, but the particular set of beliefs and desires we espouse.

REPRESENTATIONALISM AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Representing and Managing

Managing a social system is a practical activity which is inextricably bound up with making three sets of assumptions. First, assumptions about the nature of a social system as well as about the relationship between the latter and a manager (ontological assumptions). Second, assumptions about a manager's knowledge of a social system as well as about the types of knowledge that are

desirable in assisting its management (epistemological assumptions). And third, assumptions about the type of action that is deemed appropriate. In other words, managing presupposes answers to three fundamental questions: What are the salient properties of the social system I am supposed to manage? What do I need to know about this system, and how can I increase my knowledge of it so that I become more effective? How should I act?[33]

To these questions, historically, and for the most part, the following answers have been provided by management researchers. First, organizations have typically been viewed as orderly entities by design. Indeed, most mainstream scholars in Organizational Behavior (OB) and Strategic Management (SM) have concerned themselves with designing organizations rationally so that their coherence and match to their environments are both maximized.[34]

Organizational order is thought to be empirically manifested as a set of stable regularities which are linguistically expressed in the form of propositional statements (i.e. 'if x, then y'). For example: "if size is large then formalization is high"; "if technology is routine then complexity is low; "if the environment is stable then centralization is high".[35] Propositional statements have usually been conceived as revealing the nature (or logic) of organizations, namely a set of objective mechanisms underlying diverse organizational realities.[36] For several scholars the aim of management research has historically been to generate increasingly sophisticated propositional statements in order to capture more and more aspects of the empirical world, for the purpose of bringing it under rational control.[37] Management research is thus modelled on the natural sciences and, consequently, action is thought to relate to theory in a technical, instrumental manner.[38]

Second, an organization is assumed to be an entity which is independent of the cognitive activity of those who manage it and, thus, the relationship between the two can be ignored or construed

as being merely *external*.[39] This assumption allows managers to think that they can represent in their descriptions and plans the systems they manage, in a way that is not affected by their relationship with those systems. Moreover, what a system consists of, and the objectives which it aims to achieve, are either taken for granted or regarded as being imposed by the environment in a manner that is independent from individuals' beliefs and interpretations.[40]

Third, the orderly nature of organizations enables managers to accumulate explanatory and predictive knowledge about them.[41] Managers' claim to status and reward is indeed based, to a large extent, on their alleged ability to possess a stock of law-like generalizations enabling them to exercise their predictive power.[42] Management researchers are supposed to be the dependable suppliers of such generalizations.

Fourth, knowledge about organizations is reliable and, therefore, can be trusted only if it is, ideally, scientific knowledge, that is knowledge that has been formally produced according to the classical canons of the scientific method. Lay knowledge, obtained in the course of one's organizational and social lives, is not to be taken seriously and ought, ideally, to be replaced by formal knowledge. For example, addressing the readers of his OB textbook, Robbins[43] remarks in no equivocal terms: "One of the objectives of this text is to encourage you to move away from your intuitive views of behavior toward a systematic analysis, in the belief that the latter will enhance your effectiveness in accurately explaining and predicting behavior."[44]

To sum up, historically, and for the most part, management researchers are supposed to search for the regularities manifested in organizations, represent them in their theories, and codify them in the form of propositional statements which managers would then be able to put into practice with reasonable confidence.[45]

The Trouble With Representationalism: Two Illustrations

As argued earlier, social theories and models are about practices which are constituted by certain self-understandings. To the extent that theoretical descriptions transform the background distinctions that are constitutive of those self-understandings, they also transform the practices themselves. In other words, there is an *internal* relationship between actors and the practices they attempt to influence, which is underestimated by a representational epistemology. The models through which we view the world are not mere mirrors upon which the world is passively reflected but, in an important sense, our models also help *constitute* the world we experience.[46] This will be illustrated below with two examples. The first illustration aims to show the intimate connection between language and reality, so that when the former changes so does the latter. With the second illustration I make a stronger claim: the knowledge generated within a representational epistemology is not so much a representation of how the world is, as assumed by its adherents, but is rather a tool for shaping it. It tends to lead to a bureaucratic form of organization and is closely associated with an instrumental mode of action.

1. Until 1987 the USA government had barred car makers from pursuing joint R&D projects on the assumption that if they were allowed to collaborate they would delay the introduction of new technologies. The notion of a purely competitive market in which firms only compete against each other, but never collaborate (because if they did they would probably spoil the purity of the market), has long been a distinguishing feature of American capitalism.[47] Largely under the influence of competition from Japan and of Japanese industrial practices, such an assumption has been subsequently relaxed. In the late 1980s, and increasingly more in the 1990s, R&D collaboration is no longer anathema, while antitrust legislation has also been softened.[48]

Thus, a social practice, such as the way business organizations in the same industry relate to one another, is what it is by virtue of the key self-understandings embodied in the practice. Such self-understandings are not reflections of the world as it is (relationships between firms are neither competitive nor collaborative by nature) but inter-subjective meanings "which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act."[49] When actors' self-understandings change (as happened in the case of the American government) so do the constitutive features of practices. If this is accepted, it follows that the identity of social phenomena in management studies derives, at least in part, from conceptual structures and meaning systems which have developed in particular contexts over time. The idea, therefore, that one can produce a generic theory of organizational behavior, as Thompson[50] and Simon[51] seemed to have desired, which would be independent of time and context, must be viewed with incredulity. Unlike what a representational model of knowledge assumes, theories in management are incorrigibly bound by time and context.[52]

2. Since 1993 each local authority in England and Wales has to publish annually, in the local press, 152 performance indicators covering a variety of issues of local concern, from how accessible public buildings are to people in wheelchairs to the number of pot holes in their area. The Audit Commission will collate the information nationally and produce a national league table. Allowing citizens to compare the indicators over time and across the country, the objective of this exercise is to make local councils' performance transparent and, thus, offer them an incentive to improve their services. The idea is that an informed electorate would be able to use their votes to punish underperforming councils.[53]

All this may appear as if accountability is enhanced, and few would argue with such a laudable objective, except that what is underestimated in exercises of this kind is precisely the internal

relationship between a policy-maker's model of a social system and the latter's behavior. Indicators are supposed to reveal an objective reality (i.e. councils' performance). But what is often ignored is that the very same reality is crucially *shaped by* the indicators. At first glance such a claim may sound strange, but councils are bound to want to look good in the league table, since to do otherwise will almost certainly expose them to criticism as well as to the potential threat of seeing their government funding tied to their league-table performance.[54] This in turn implies that councils will have a strong incentive to abandon policies tailored-made to suit the demands of the local population, if those policies do not give councils enough of a high profile, opting instead for policies which will enhance a council's standing in the league table. Thus, instead of the league table being a snapshot of a council's activity, it rather serves as a spur for action: it pushes councils to undertake policies in particular directions.

The use of league tables as a major mechanism for influencing the behavior of government-controlled organizations has relatively recently emerged in (chiefly) Anglo-Saxon countries,[55] and it is part of a wider trend in late modern societies for the auditing of increasingly more and more socio-economic activities.[56] Notice, however, that such a representational model of knowledge far from mapping reality as it supposedly is, it actually *shapes* it in a particular way: it pushes it towards the bureaucratic form of organization. Moreover, it encourages the instrumental type of action by managers and policy makers. This happens because the regularities in a social system are captured via propositional statements, which are then translated into explicit rules for instrumentally guiding human behavior (and vice versa).

To put it another way, the more we hold a representational model of knowledge about the functioning of a social system, the more the latter's functioning will be conceived in terms of applying rules instrumentally; and the more rulebound a social system is the more regularities we will be able to discover.

Bureaucratic rules, instrumental action, and propositional statements all feed into one another. Such a conclusion is not dissimilar to that drawn by Mintzberg[57] who, summarizing the relevant literature in Organization Design, has noted that "the greater the external control of the organization, the more centralized and formalized its structure".[58] Bureaucratization is due, in part at least, to the representational model underlying the practice of external control groups. Holding an organization (or a division, a department, etc.) accountable on the basis of how well it achieves certain targets, or whether it exhibits certain expected behaviors, tends to push the organization to formalize the behavior of its members and centralize its functioning, in order to make sure it conforms to outside expectations.[59] Indeed, for Mintzberg, this is the main reason why the divisionalized organizational form, although allowing autonomy to division heads, tends to degenerate into the machine bureaucracy.[60]

DISCUSSION: BEYOND REPRESENTATIONALISM IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Below I discuss how a representational model of knowledge limits our understanding of key aspects of organizational phenomena, and outline some of the benefits that accrue if an antirepresentational epistemology is allowed to inform our research. Three aspects of organizational phenomena are addressed (although, no doubt, many more could have been included): (a) the relationship between organizations and their environments; (b) the role of history and process in accounting for organizational phenomena; and (c) the role of contingencies in engendering organizational outcomes.

1. Organizations and their environments. A representational epistemology construes an object of study as having its own intrinsic nature. Management research guided by this assumption has tended to conceive of organizations as freestanding entities,

having a single, given identity which emanates from the intrinsic properties organizations are supposed to have.[61] In this way of thinking it is difficult to relate organizations to their environments —which are usually understood as collections of other organizations—except externally. This means that the identity of an organization as a distinctive collective entity is thought to be independent of the environment in which it is embedded.[62] The image of billiard balls colliding on a table may not be inappropriate to invoke in order to describe how mainstream OB has tended to conceive of interorganizational relationships. What such a conceptualization excludes is considering the organizational environment as a repository of intersubjective meanings providing the key self-understandings by virtue of which important organizational practices are constituted.

To take an example from recent comparative-cum-institutional organizational research, one cannot understand the behavior of, say, overseas Chinese firms in sharing the risks of business specialization through short-term commitments to particular industries and resources, and a low degree of dependence on employees, unless one also understands the historical difficulty of Chinese in developing long-term trust relations with outsiders, the lack of merchant security in pre-industrial China, and the equal inheritance practices which have encouraged the preference for entrepreneurial activities rather than for salaried work. These phenomena, in turn, cannot be adequately understood unless one traces them back to the weak cohesion of pre-industrial Chinese villages in which loyalties and commitments were focused more on families than on collective village organization.[63]

In other words, following this reasoning, one soon realizes that the relationship between business organizations and their environments is internal rather than external: the identity of organizations is derived not so much from some intrinsic organizational properties but from the place organizations have in a historically developed social matrix of relations and intersubjective

meanings. In short, organizations and their environments are mutually constituted.[64]

2. History and process. Talking about organizations as if they had a given nature independent of context and time, significantly underestimates their *historicity*.[65] On this view, relevant empirical phenomena tend to be construed as the outcomes of an inexorable logic whose origins it is rarely thought necessary to be explicated or, if it is, it is usually assumed to be derived from a universal set of Benthamite "first principles" concerning social existence (e.g. avoidance of pain, pursuit of pleasure). Yet, as argued earlier, comparative organizational research has shown that history is extremely important in accounting for organizational and management practices. Roe,[66] for example, has convincingly argued that the American corporation owes its shape more to American politics, and in particular to the traditional American mistrust of concentrated financial power, which led to the enactment of corresponding legislation, than to the inexorable drive for efficiency.[67]

The rationalist overtones of a representational model of knowledge make it almost inevitable to think of organizations (and institutions in general) as responding "rationally" to the constraints, demands or problems presented by their pregiven environments. Those subscribing to such a way of thinking, however, fail to appreciate that "ways of doing things [typically] begin for reasons that relate to the various purposes of the actors involved and to the structures of relations they are embedded in".[68] From the observation that organizations appear to be well matched to their environments, several researchers have concluded that key organizational features were created (i.e. caused) by environmental characteristics. Notice that in the representational epistemology underlying this type of research, both human agency and process are dispensable—causality needs no mediators.[69] In the long run, no matter what actors think or how they act, or what

circumstances they face, the ironclad logic of the business environment comes to be reflected unproblematically onto the shape of the organization—time, chance, and process hardly matter. To paraphrase Rorty,[70] the organization is the blank and the environment is the die; the former takes its form from the latter.

What this way of thinking underplays is that organizations "may seem well matched to their [. . .] environment precisely because they have modified that environment to *make* it more suitable".[71] Organizations not only react to but, quite often, enact their environments[72] and, obviously, a particular enactment is crucially shaped by the *process* through which it occurs. Mintzberg's[73] writings on the formation of strategies, for example, bear out the importance of the historical trajectory, including the local feedback processes occurring in any open interactive system, for explaining what an observer is able to discern *ex post facto* as a distinctive strategy.[74] The significance of time- and path-dependent processes for explaining outcomes is also captured by the cybernetic insight that "the output of a complex system is dominated by the feedback and, within wide limits, the input is irrelevant".[75]

3. Necessity and contingency. Underestimating the explanatory significance of historical processes in the generation of particular outcomes in social systems, is closely related to the representational dualism positing necessity vs. contingency, or reality vs. appearance, and the privileging of the former over the latter.[76] Since the logic of the organization or the environment is accorded a causally primary status in bringing about observed outcomes (i.e. necessity), events that are "outside" that logic are treated as negligible specifics, ephemeral contingencies that are causally unimportant. As Granovetter[77] has noted, such an approach relegates the specifics of social relations to a minor role and treats them as mere epiphenomena.

Now that we have a better understanding of organizational dynamics and change we know how impoverished such an assumption is. Industrial accidents, for example, almost invariably begin as small changes, as "negligible specifics" which, through processes of positive feedback, get amplified until they overwhelm the system.[78] Similarly, before they win wider acceptance, new strategies often start locally and quite a few times entirely accidentally; it is only after local practices have proved their worth, and support has been mobilized in their favor, that they are adopted by the organization and become "strategies".[79]

Comparative-cum-institutional organizational research has similarly demonstrated what Rorty,[80] in a different context, has aptly called, "the contingency of various putative necessities", namely the absence of stable, "natural" criteria underpinning the emergence of social phenomena. On the contrary, comparative-cum-institutional organizational research has highlighted the contingent links among clusters of factors—links that *happened* to be formed in the course of time and, subsequently, gave rise to particular organizational phenomena. Thus, what Weber[81] thought was a necessary link between aspects of western culture and capitalism turns out now to have been a contingent one, a mere accident of history.[82] Similarly, Weberian notions of bureaucracy, far from being the necessary attributes of modern organizations *in toto*, turn out to be historical coincidences, contingent on the particular culture and circumstances within which modern organizations first emerged.[83] It is probably a safer bet to assume that today's necessities are tomorrow's contingencies.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

According to an antirepresentational account of scientific inquiry objects of study have no nature and speak no language. The truth is not out there waiting for us. We cannot compare linguistic with non-linguistic items and decide whether they match

or not. For our verdict would inevitably be couched in language, and we would still be wondering whether it really corresponds to the way things are. Truth is a property of sentences, not of the world. Human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences. Our descriptions of the world cannot be said to represent it; they are rather ways of talking about it and, therefore, for intervening in it.

This does not mean, however, that the world is in our heads: it is causally independent of us and never fails to provide us with novel stimuli which occasion manifold uses of language on our part. Our theoretical descriptions are ways of putting the causal powers of the world to work for our purposes. The moment we talk about objects of study, be they natural or social, we talk about sets of beliefs having a place in a language game. In the case of social objects especially, objects are practices and, as such, are constituted by certain self-descriptions, namely by sets of background distinctions actors share. Social reality is almost impossible to be distinguished from the language embodied in it.

On the antirepresentational view, we are thus inescapably locked into "strange loops".[84] Knowledge about social practices is internally related to the background distinctions constituting practices, so that the particular assumptions underlying a certain model of knowledge shape the background distinctions embodied in a practice. As Piaget so aptly remarked, "intelligence organizes the world by organizing itself."[85] Our models and theories are more like tools for doing things in social systems than mirrors reflecting the way social systems are.

An inquiry informed by representationalism is supposed to be purposeless: its only task is to map the world. Accordingly, the ensuing types of action and organization are deemed to be natural enough—our knowledge enjoins our behavior. However, as I have tried to show here, this is far from being the case. A representational epistemology does serve a particular purpose, except that it

is not articulated and, as such, it cannot be debated. The purpose is to make social systems objects of manipulation. This is achieved by supplying managers with "scientifically validated" propositional statements which allow instrumental action to take place. They also provide the basis for the design of bureaucratic rules to guide actors' behavior. Thus, an inquiry whose only purpose is supposed to be finding out how things really are, turns out to be intimately linked with a particular type of action, namely instrumental action, and with a particular type of organization, namely bureaucratic organization. Instead of being a mirror, it becomes a tool—a tool for manipulation.[86]

An implicit antirepresentational epistemology has lain behind much new thinking in management studies.[87] In the previous section, it has already been discussed, albeit briefly, how an antirepresentational model of knowledge allows us to incorporate into our theories elements which have traditionally been ignored: the mutual constitution of organizations and environments, the significance of history and time-dependent processes in generating organizational outcomes, and the role of contingency. By way of illustration, one can point to a number of authors whose work has been informed, implicitly or explicitly, by an antirepresentational model of knowledge.

Thus, for example, March[88] and Starbuck[89] have demonstrated that, in organizations, it is not only problems looking for solutions but also solutions looking for problems. Weick[90] has made us see that organizations, more often than not, talk in order to discover what they are saying, and act in order to discover what they are doing. Bolman and Deal[91] have argued that leaders have the followers they deserve as much as the other way round. Cooper[92] has shown how key features of the environment are reproduced inside organizations and how some of the latter's practices are reproduced in the environment. Institutional theories of organization have made it possible for us to understand that the way we organize our lives, far from being guided by necessity, is

rather incorrigibly contingent on societal self-understandings and history.[93]

What is common to all those authors is their pointing out, at different levels of analysis, to the *circularity* that characterizes organizational behavior.[94] Organizations reproduce the beliefs and institutional practices of the society in which they are embedded, and in so doing they help perpetuate them; interacting with their "environments", organizations do not confront independent, language-free entities, but engage in processes whereby organizations create opportunities for understanding themselves, and in so doing they shape their links with other organizations in their own image;[95] individual as well as organizational action is never purely instrumental—it is more like a display at which organizations look to find out what they are; leaders do not manage individuals with pregiven properties, but purposeful agents whose behaviors are crucially influenced by the assumptions leaders make about them; professionals and experts are not presented with objective problems, but they actively construct the problems they are faced with through the application of the symbols, categories, labels, and assumptions contained in the body of knowledge upon which their expertise is based.[96] In short, knowledge (and hence action), as Glaserfeld[97] aptly remarked, is not "the result of passive receiving but originates as the product of an active subject's activity".

To conclude, an antirepresentational epistemology alerts researchers to what Giddens[98] has called "double hermeneutics" (namely that researchers are in the business of interpreting already formed interpretations), and thus makes it possible to discuss the *purpose* a particular social scientific inquiry serves as opposed to what the demands of an object of study are.[99] It also channels practitioners' attention to the way *they* construct the phenomena they experience through their acts of interpretation. In short, an antirepresentational understanding of knowledge reminds both researchers and practitioners that "our perceptions, appreciations,

and beliefs are rooted in worlds of our own making that we come to *accept* as reality."[100]

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2. Burrell and Morgan, ***op.cit.***, pp. 22-35.

3. Rorty, R. ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 2.

4. Although the term "representationalism" is fairly widely used by several philosophers and social theorists, there is a variety of different terms standing for antirepresentationalism. Rorty, for example, uses this term but often does it interchangeably with "pragmatism" (see Rorty, ***op. cit.***). Taylor prefers "hermeneutics" as the opposite of representationalism (see Taylor, C. ***Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers***, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), while Varela, Thompson, and Rosch use the term "enaction" (see Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., and Rosch, E. ***The Embodied Mind***, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991); and Watzlawick the term "constructivism" (see Watzlawick (ed.). ***The Invented Reality***, W. W. Norton, New York, 1984). Despite their occasional disagreements

(such as for example between Rorty and Taylor), all these authors converge on the view that language is not a medium for representing the world but a tool for intervening in it. For the sake of terminological consistency I have grouped here all these authors, on whose work I have drawn in this paper, under the term "antirepresentationalism." I am aware of the negative connotations of the term but, as the reader will hopefully later realize, this need not be the case.

5. Popper, K. ***Conjectures and Refutations***, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972.

6. von Glaserfeld, E. "An Introduction to Radical Constructivism," in P. Watzlawick, ***op.cit.***, pp. 17-40; Lyotard, J-F. ***The Postmodern Condition***, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984; von Foerster, H. "On Constructing a Reality," in Watzlawick, ***op.cit.***, pp. 41-61; Prigogine, I. "The Philosophy of Instability." ***Futures*** 21 (1989):396-400.

7. Rorty, R. ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op. cit.***, p. 96.

8. Ansoff, I. "Critique of Henry Mintzberg's 'The Design School: Reconsidering the Basic Premises of Strategic Management.'" ***Strategic Management Journal*** 12 (1991):449-461.

9. ***Ibid.***, p. 455.

10. For a similar, although more sophisticated, view see Simon, H. ***Administrative Behavior***, 3d ed., The Free Press, New York, 1976, pp. 248-253; and Thompson, J. D. "On Building an Administrative Science." ***Administrative Science Quarterly*** 1 (1956-57):102-111.

11. For Varela, Thompson, and Rosch this is a "weak" form of representation "because it need not carry strong epistemological or ontological commitments" (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, ***op.cit.***, p. 135). "It refers to anything that can be interpreted as being about something" (***ibid.***, p. 134).

12. Taylor, for example, remarks as follows: "The crucial features, laws or correlations concerning which will explain or help to explain phenomena of the range in question, may at a given stage of the science concerned be only vaguely discerned if not frankly unsuspected. The conceptual resources necessary to pick them out may not yet have been elaborated. It is said, for instance, that the modern physical concept of mass was unknown to the ancients, and only slowly and painfully evolved through the searchings of the later Middle Ages. And yet it is an essential variable in the modern science. A number of more obtrusive features may be irrelevant; that is, they may not be such that they can be linked in functions explanatory of the phenomena. Obvious distinctions may be irrelevant, or have an entirely different relevance from that attributed to them, such as the distinction between Aristotle's 'light' and 'heavy' bodies" (Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 61). See also Foucault, M. "Orders of Discourse." ***Social Science Information*** 10 (1971):7-30.

13. Doyal, L. and Harris, R. ***Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality***, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1986, pp. 28-30.

14. Sternberg, R. J. ***Metaphors of Mind***, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

15. MacIntyre, A. ***After Virtue***, 2d ed., Duckworth, London, 1985, p. 79.

16. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 81. And he continues: "The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many facts are brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal transaction. As Donald Davidson says, causation is not under a description, but explanation is. Facts are hybrid entities; that is, the causes of the assertibility of sentences include both physical stimuli and our antecedent choice of response to such stimuli" (***ibid.***, p. 81).

17. Rorty, R. ***Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity***, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 6.

18. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 84; Taylor, ***op.cit.***, pp. 15-57.

19. Taylor, ***op.cit.***; Winch, P. ***The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy***, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958.

20. Tsoukas, H. "Refining Common Sense: Types of Knowledge in Management Studies." ***Journal of Management Studies*** 31 (1994):761-780, pp. 771-775.

21. Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 31.

22. MacIntyre, ***op.cit.***, pp. 62-78.

23. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 98.

24. Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 34.

25. Robbins, S. ***Organizational Behavior***, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1989, p. 109.

26. ***The Economist*** 30 (April 3, 1994):65; Dore, R. ***British Factory-Japanese Factory***, University of California Press, Berkeley, pp. 222-263.

27. Of course, it might be argued that in both societies we are dealing with, broadly, the same phenomenon, namely "decision making," and the differences are in the manner in which it is manifested. Such a view however would miss the point made earlier, namely, that social phenomena are what they are because of the background distinctions they embody. Accordingly, as Taylor, ***op. cit.***, p. 33 remarks: "The word, or whatever word of their language we translate as ["decision making"], must have an entirely different gloss, which is marked by the distinctions their vocabulary allows in contrast to those marked by ours. But this different gloss is not just a difference of vocabulary, but also one of social reality. [. . .] The realities here are practices; and these cannot be identified in abstraction from the language we use to describe them, or invoke them, or carry them out."

28. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 81.

29. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 82.

30. MacIntyre, ***op.cit.***, pp. 85-86.

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Newbury Park, California, 1992; H. Tsoukas (ed.). ***New Thinking in Organizational Behavior***, Butterworth/ Heinemann, Oxford, 1994.

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38. Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 92; MacIntyre, ***op.cit.***, pp. 88-108.

39. The distinction between "external" and "internal" relations has been drawn by several philosophers and sociologists. Since it is a distinction that appears several times in this article, it may be useful to explain it in a little more detail. The relation between two objects is considered to be external if the identity of each object does not depend on its being into a relation with the other (e.g. an individual vis-a-vis a stone). Conversely, a relation is deemed to be internal if the identity of each object is dependent on its being into a relation with the other (e.g. a manager and a worker) (see Sayer, A. ***Method in Social Science***, Hutchinson, London, 1984, p. 82). See also Bhaskar, R. ***The Possibility of Naturalism***, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1979, p. 54; Elster, J. ***Logic and Society***, Wiley, London, 1978, pp. 20-25. In a similar vein, albeit in different contexts, MacIntyre makes a distinction between "internal" and "external goods"; Taylor distinguishes between "constitutive" and "regulative rules" (***op.cit.*** p. 34); and Winch defines as "internal" the relation between an idea and its context, for the former derives its meaning from the latter (Winch, ***op.cit.***, p. 107).

Likewise, in sociological research, Berger has characterized the relations between social phenomena as "intrinsic," or "extrinsic." "An intrinsic linkage," he says, "is one without which the phenomenon could not be imagined; conversely, an extrinsic linkage can be ascribed to this or that historical contingency and can, therefore, be 'thought away' from the phenomenon" (Berger, P. ***The Capitalist Revolution***, Gower, Aldershot, 1987, p. 26). See also Tsoukas, H. "The Validity of Idiographic Research Explanations." ***Academy of Management Review*** 14 (1989):551-561, p. 554.

40. Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 102; Vickers, G. ***The Art of Judgement***, Harper & Row, London, 1983, pp. 39-42.

41. Sayer, ***op.cit.***; Taylor, ***op.cit.***; Rosenberg, A. ***Philosophy of Social Science***, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.

42. MacIntyre, ***op.cit.***, p. 106.

43. The authors of several Organization Behavior textbooks do not seem to appreciate that, as Varela, Thompson, and Rosch have argued, we cannot hope to understand cognition and effective practical action without taking seriously into account common sense. A cognitive subject lacking in common sense would be highly ineffective in his/her dealings with the world at large (see Varela, et al., ***op.cit.***, pp. 148-150).

44. Robbins, ***op.cit.***, p. 4.

45. Thompson, ***op.cit.***; MacIntyre, ***op.cit.***, p. 86; Lupton, T. ***Management and the Social Sciences***, 3d ed., Penguin, London, 1983; Thomas, A. B. ***Controversies in Management***, Routledge, London, Chapter 8; Tsoukas, H. "Refining Common Sense: Types of Knowledge in Management Studies," ***op.cit.***, p. 12.

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62. It is perhaps worth noting that an external relation between objects does not preclude relations of causality holding between them (see Sayer, ***op.cit.***, p. 82). When Dr. Johnson kicks a stone in London to prove the existence of the external world, he clearly stands in a causal relation to the stone

although, at the same time, his relation is also external (see note 39). Thus, representationalists accept relations of causality between environments and organizations but they also see those relations as external.

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83. Biggart and Hamilton, *op.cit.*; Whitley, *ibid.*

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86. Since the word "manipulation" signifies practices of which most people are rather critical, it is easy to slip into using a condemnatory language. However, as Taylor has commented on the critique of modernity launched by post-structuralists and critical theorists, such a language would be "inauthentic." That is, manipulation, the bureaucratic mentality and, what Taylor calls "the disengaged identity," are "far from being simply wrong and misguided, and besides, we are all too deeply imbued with [them] to be able really and authentically to repudiate them. The kind of critique we need is one that can free [the disengaged identity] of its illusory pretensions to

define the totality of our lives as agents, without attempting the futile and ultimately self-destructive task of rejecting it altogether" (see Taylor, ***op.cit.***, p. 7). It is in this spirit that I have criticized representationalism here and its associated modes of organization and action.

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96. Morgan, ***ibid.***, pp. 321-337; Morgan, ***Imaginization***, ***op.cit.***, pp. 271-294; Schon, ***op.cit.***; Schon, D. ***Educating the Reflective Practitioner***, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991; Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. ***Soft Systems Methodology in Action***, Wiley, Chichester, 1990; Vickers, ***op.cit.***; Soros, ***op.cit.***; March, ***op.cit.***

97. von Glaserfeld, ***op.cit.***, p. 31.

98. Giddens, ***op.cit.***, p. 162.

99. Rorty, ***Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth***, ***op.cit.***, p. 81.

100. Schon, D. ***Educating the Reflective Practitioner***, ***op. cit.***, p. 36.