



A brief history of organization theory

One of the enticements to study organization theory lies in the multi-disciplinary ideas upon which it draws. My way to indicate the broad range of founding ideas and the considerable span of time across which they entered organization theory is shown as a diagram in Figure 2.1. This historical overview indicates when different perspectives first became established within organization theory and the contributing disciplines and thinkers who helped develop them.

The timeline of Figure 2.1 is incomplete, indicating that more perspectives may yet take root in organization theory. You will meet some of the most promising contenders in Part III, while Part II focuses on concepts and theories developed within the modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives. However, since these perspectives can all be traced to seeds planted before organization theory was born, this history begins with theorists whose ideas predated its birth.

The prehistory of organization theory

There was precious little written about organizations and organizing as the industrial age took hold in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe and the US, but there was growing demand for knowledge coming predominantly from two sources. Normative interests expressed by executives and consultants to industry focused research attention on how best to design and manage organizations to enhance their productivity, while academic interests expressed by economists and sociologists focused attention on the changing shapes and roles of organizations within industrializing societies. Soon interest in the practical problems of industrial business management would extend to government bureaus and other public sector organizations as theorists made the conceptual leap from organizing to achieving efficiency in industry, to bureaucratic rationalization.

The executives and consultants who helped found organization theory offered solutions to common organizational problems and advice to those responsible for implementing them. **Because their primary audience was business managers and administrators of government and other public sector organizations, they came to be known as classical management or administrative theorists.** Their work was offered mainly in the form of normative

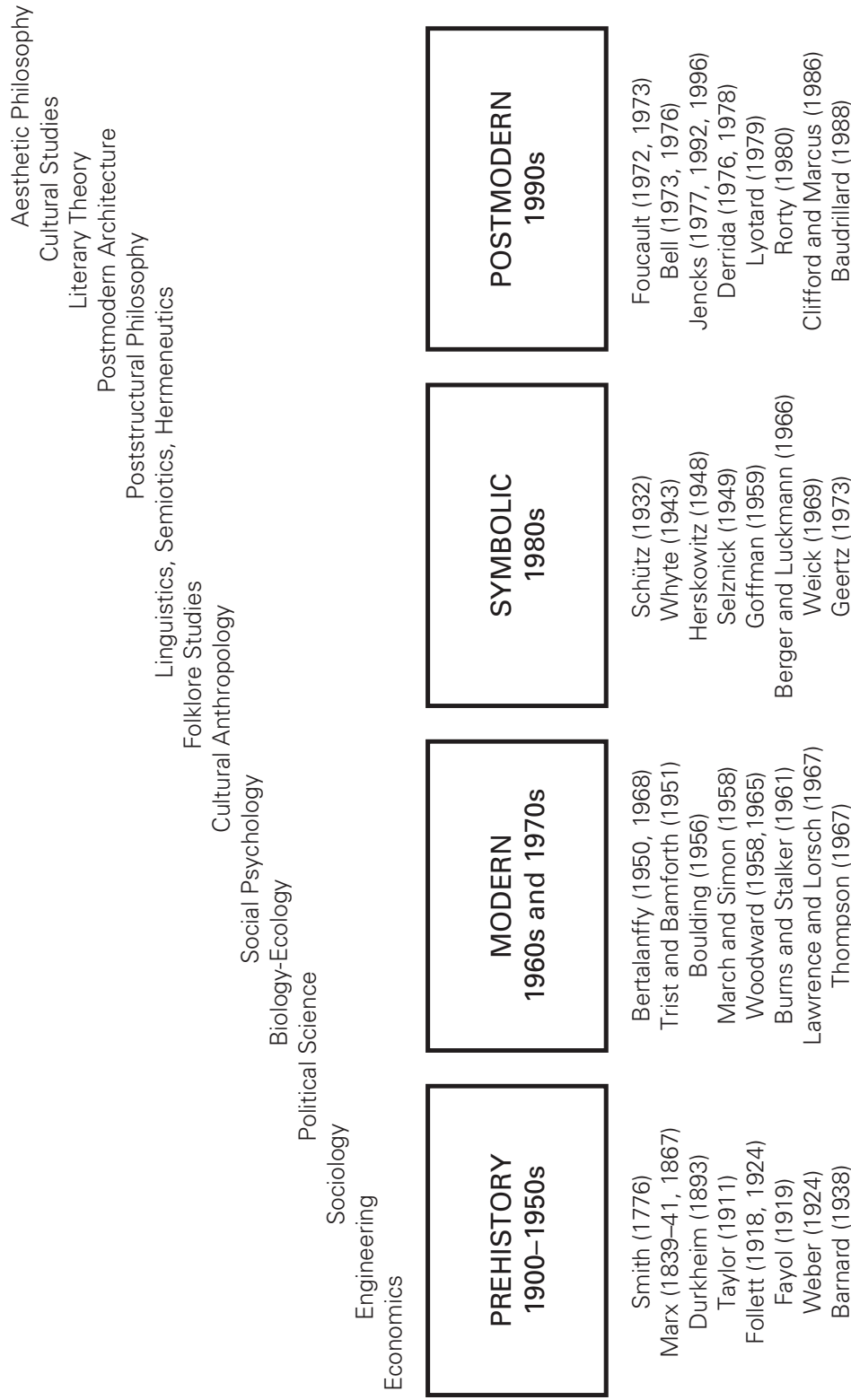


Figure 2.1 Sources of inspiration for the perspectives of organization theory

The boxes in the center of this figure are ordered along a timeline showing when the modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives became established within organization theory. The disciplines from which these perspectives are borrowed appear above the timeline in the rough order of their initial influence, while the contributing theorists are listed below, alongside publication dates for the works you will find referenced at the end of the chapter.

principles, but can be seen to have followed along lines laid out by political-economists and organizational sociologists who were hard at work studying how the industrial age was changing economic and social life. Together these diverse interests established organization theory as a field of study.

The diverse normative and academic interests present at its founding created a tension between practice and theory present throughout the history of this field.¹ Even if the label *organization theory* makes it seem like practice takes on less importance, practical application of theory has always been of concern to this applied discipline. But bear in mind that the challenges of applying theory, particularly in using abstractions to inform concrete situations, are never resolved. At their best, the interests of theory and practice produce creative tension; at their worst they form politicized factions.

Below you will meet in quick succession authors of classical management and administrative theories, political-economists, and sociologists whose ideas conjoined as organization theory emerged from both practice and theory.

Adam Smith, Scottish political-economist (1723–1790)

Although organizing and management were much in evidence in the pyramids of ancient Egypt and no doubt occurred even further back in human history, our formal knowledge does not extend to those times.² What we do know is that Adam Smith was the first on record to publish a theory of organization. In 1776, Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* explained how the **division of labor** creates economic efficiency. Be sure to notice **Smith acknowledging his debt to practice** as he explains how his theory applies to the efficiency of making pins:

To take an example . . . in which the division of labour has been very often taken notice of, the trade of the pin-maker; a workman not educated to this business (which the division of labour has rendered a distinct trade), nor acquainted with the use of the machinery employed in it (to the invention of which the same division of labour has probably given occasion), could scarce, perhaps, with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty. But in the way in which this business is now carried on, not only the whole work is a peculiar trade, but it is divided into a number of branches, of which the greater part are likewise peculiar trades. One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on, is a peculiar business, to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands, though in others the same man will sometimes perform two or three of them . . . I have seen a small manufactory of this kind where ten men only were employed, and where some of them consequently performed two or three distinct operations. But though they were very poor, and therefore but indifferently accommodated with the necessary machinery, they could, when they exerted themselves, make among them about twelve pounds of pins in a day. There are in a pound upwards of four thousand pins of a middling size. Those ten persons, therefore, could make among them upwards of forty-eight thousand pins in a day. Each person, therefore, making a tenth part of forty-eight thousand pins, might be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins in a day. But if they had all wrought separately and independently, and without

any of them having been educated to this peculiar business, they certainly could not each of them have made twenty, perhaps not one pin in a day; that is, certainly, not the two hundred and fortieth, perhaps not the four thousand eight hundredth part of what they are at present capable of performing, in consequence of a proper division and combination of their different operations.

In every other art and manufacture, the effects of the division of labour are similar to what they are in this very trifling one; though, in many of them, the labour can neither be so much subdivided, nor reduced to so great a simplicity of operation. The division of labour, however, so far as it can be introduced, occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour.³

Smith's theory of the effects of the division of labor on economic outcomes described important industrial management practices that would lead to widespread use of management techniques like production simplification and time and motion studies. The division of labor, including the **differentiation** of work tasks and the **specialization** of laborers, is central to the concept of **social structure**, one of the core concepts of organization theory. However, while Smith assumed that industrialization would lead to economic success and social progress, others saw reason to be skeptical about this assumption, starting with Karl Marx.

Karl Marx, German philosopher-economist and revolutionary (1818–1883)

Marx's **theory of capital** begins with the human need to survive, and the will to thrive once survival needs are met. According to Marx, survival needs create economic order when, in trying to cope with danger and feed, cloth, and house themselves, people discover the economic efficiencies of collective labor and the social structures that support it. Economic **efficiency** eventually creates resource surpluses of raw material and time that can be invested in cultural enhancement to fulfill desires for human self-expression and advancement.⁴

This is all well and good, but for the problem of power. In Marx's theory, the economic base on which people build their cultures is subject to the relations of power worked out between the interests of capital and those of labor. The relations of power pit the capitalists who own the means of production, including tools, equipment, and factories, against the laborers who produce the output of the production process. Their antagonism lies at the heart of capitalism.

Contention between the interests of capital and those of labor arises over how to divide the excess profits generated when products or services are exchanged on a market at a price that is higher than their costs. Since profit is generated by a combination of labor and capital, Marx explained, each side can reasonably claim this surplus. Laborers base their claim on having performed the profitable work, while capitalists claim that without their investment labor would have no work from which to profit.

The **social conflict** between labor and capital, Marx went on, intensifies with demands for **profitability**. Without profit, the survival of the individual firm and the entire capitalist economy would be in jeopardy because capital would cease to be invested and work would disappear. Profitability depends upon the organization of work activity subject to the laws of competition.

Competition from other firms puts downward pressure on the prices of products and services, which in turn causes firms to want to reduce their production costs in order to maintain profit for their capitalists. Since the biggest production cost is typically labor, capitalists pressure laborers to work more efficiently (or at least more cheaply), which is achieved by continuously imposing new forms of managerial control on work processes that put an even bigger squeeze on labor's claim to a share of the profit.

The story of labor under capitalism becomes gloomier still, Marx noted, when, in the drive for efficiency, capitalists define **labor** as a cost of production. Such thinking equates labor with any other commodity bought and sold on a market and gives humans a purely instrumental relationship with one another based on the economic value of their potential to do work. When this **commodification** of labor is deemed acceptable, labor can be treated like any other raw material that is exploited for its economic value.

By focusing on the economics of work rather than on the welfare of workers or society, the commodification of labor leads to the **exploitation** of labor by capitalists and to the **alienation** of laborers from their own work. Alienation occurs when workers, who see their labor as a commodity that they willingly sell, engage in self-exploitation by accepting terms of employment that favor the interests of capital. Unless workers organize resistance to **managerial control**, for example by forming labor unions, exploitation and alienation of workers under capitalism is inevitable.

Marx predicted that the dynamics of capitalist economies would sustain a society only until a culture willing to overthrow capitalism develops from its economic base. This has been the most controversial prediction Marx drew from his theory, and many people interpreted the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union as proof that Marx was wrong. However, recent social upheavals initiated by the Arab Spring, Los Indignados, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement suggest Marx's theory may yet prove insightful in explaining why new subcultures that question the distribution of the wealth produced under capitalism are forming and predicting the rise of some new means of organizing production and the material resources it consumes and controls.

Marx's ideas about labor and capitalism inspired critical theory thereby providing a foundation upon which to critique management as a profession. His focus on social conflict and the dynamics of change within politically influenced capitalist economies offered a point of stark difference with the more harmonious visions set forth by Durkheim and Weber.

Émile Durkheim, French sociologist (1858–1917)

Published in 1893, Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* explained the structural shift from agricultural to industrial societies in terms of the effects of the increased specialization of labor that industrialization brought about. Durkheim's theory echoed Adam Smith's, but added **hierarchy** and the **interdependence** of work roles and tasks to the division of labor. These ideas, known collectively as **social structure**, became core concepts for those adopting the modern perspective in organization theory, as were the **quantitative research methods** of statistical description and analysis that Durkheim promoted in two other books, *The Rules of Sociological Method* and *Suicide*.

In addition to defining the social structure of formal organization, Durkheim proposed the concept of **informal organization**. This idea emphasized workers' social needs in

contrast to the **formal organization** embedded in the division of labor, hierarchy, and task interdependence. Studies revealing the effects of informal organization helped to establish the fields of organizational behavior and industrial and organizational psychology, and paved the way for organizational culture to make its debut in organization theory. Furthermore Durkheim's distinction between formal and informal organization exposed a tension in organization theory between (hard) economic and (soft) humanistic aspects of organizing that rivals the challenge of bringing theory and practice together under one disciplinary roof.⁵

Karl Emil Maximilian (Max) Weber, German sociologist (1864–1920)

Like Marx and Durkheim, Weber wanted to understand how industrialization affects society. What interested him particularly was a new kind of **authority structure** that industrial organization brought with it. According to Weber, before industrialization, societies organized themselves using either traditional or charismatic authority, but with industrialization came rational-legal authority.

Traditional authority rests upon inherited status as defined and maintained by such things as bloodlines and the ownership of property. For example, aristocratic societies transfer property and status from parent to child. While tradition stabilizes the social order in a traditional society, the heirs to status and power may not be fit or willing to lead. Succession issues also challenge societies organized by **charismatic authority** in which the attractiveness of certain individuals justifies and legitimates their influence over others. In ancient times Jesus Christ and Muhammad exuded charisma while more recent examples are found in Gandhi, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., each of whose deaths disoriented the societies they served.

Weber predicted that **rational-legal authority** would replace the nepotism of traditional authority and the personality cults of charismatic authority, with merit-based selection driven by rationally formulated rules and laws. Societies based on rational-legal authority would, in principle, ensure the appropriate behavior of those in charge by binding them to the same laws and rules that define their right to lead. What is more, they would draw on a bigger and better pool of leaders because almost anyone can lead by following the rules and laws of a society based upon rational-legal authority.

Weber was aware that the promise of rational-legal authority might never be realized in practice. He described the risks in 1924 in his *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. In this book Weber proposed that **bureaucracy** could extend the technical efficiency of industrial organizations to all of society by rationalizing the social order. His insight depended on an analogy between the way in which technology rationalizes the economic order of business organizations and how bureaucracy might similarly improve the efficiency of organizations such as government bureaus. Weber's analogy led modernist organization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s to believe the converse of Weber's point, namely that bureaucratic rationalization would produce technical efficiency.

Weber was the first to acknowledge that the outcomes of bureaucratic rationalization depend upon human values. In this regard Weber distinguished between formal and substantive rationality. **Formal rationality** involves techniques of calculation, such as those

developed by engineers to measure technical efficiency, or by managers to track and eliminate costs. **Substantive rationality** refers to the desired ends of action that direct the uses of the calculative or 'hard' techniques of formal rationality implying that the ends of management need to be questioned. Weber believed both were needed.

Adopting formal rationality without considering substantive rationality leads, Weber warned, to an **iron cage** capable of making every human a 'cog in an ever-moving mechanism.'⁶ Critical postmodernists echo this warning as they strive to free humankind from the restrictive practices of management driven, they believe, almost exclusively by **formal rationality**. At the same time Weber's interest in how cultural values, beliefs, customs, and morality influence social behavior contributes to the symbolic perspective of organization theory.⁷

Frederick Winslow Taylor, American engineer, manager, and founder of scientific management (1856–1915)

At the tender age of 28 Taylor was named chief engineer at the Midvale Steel Company where his first efforts to manage combined persuasion with force, the accepted practice of that time. Taylor became disaffected with this approach when he realized that, to manage workers effectively, he needed to know about the technical aspects of their work and workers' psychological motivations. Based on his belief that applications of scientific research methods would improve management practice, Taylor conducted scientific experiments at the Bethlehem Steel Company and several other places. His experiments focused on the handling of raw material, the use of tools and machines, and worker motivation.

His experiments inspired Taylor to develop the idea of **scientific management**, from which he derived many management principles. His principles included the use of work standards to provide a target rate of performance (to be set higher than the average rate at which laborers ordinarily worked), and uniform work methods to guarantee that workers could achieve the targets, including instruction cards, order-of-work sequences, materials specifications, and inventory control systems. Taylor also recommended skill-based job placement, supervision methods, and incentive schemes.

Taylor believed that the standards and principles he based on scientific research and experimentation would allow managers to pay high wages while lowering production costs. He believed this would maximize the benefits of factories to society and achieve high levels of cooperation between management and labor. Scientific management practices, according to Taylor, would maximize capitalist profits by motivating workers to perform at or above the standards set for them, and that paying workers fairly in accordance with their productivity would avoid the social conflict Marx predicted would topple capitalism.

Taylor's work inspired an international efficiency movement. Among the early adopters of his ideas were time and motion studies experts like Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, a married couple who devoted their lives to enhancing worker productivity. For example, Frank Gilbreth invented a method of bricklaying that reduced the number of movements required to lay one interior brick from 18 to 2, thus increasing the bricklaying rate of a single individual from 120 to 350 bricks per hour.

Such impressive productivity gains led many heads of state and business leaders including Lenin, Stalin, and Henry Ford to adopt scientific management, which many also referred to as **Taylorism**. Today quantifying workers' inputs and outputs for the purpose of evaluation and control can be observed in businesses around the world. When applied to assembly line production some call Tayloristic management practices **Fordism** in homage to Henry Ford's more or less wholesale adoption of scientific management techniques.⁸

At the time Taylor's scientific management appeared, many workers and even business owners considered it dangerous and subversive. They believed it would ruin trust and cooperation between management and workers, threatening capitalism in the ways Marx had predicted. In this milieu, attempts to introduce Taylor's principles into a government organization led to union opposition and a strike, which precipitated an American Congressional investigation of scientific management. Fears were soon replaced, however, by the threat of communism that led to the disenfranchisement of Marx's theories in the US. Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, and Denmark, where worker rights were better defended along with Marx's theories, scientific management was resisted for a longer time. Today it appears that these societies, too, have succumbed to Taylorism as devotion to technical efficiency and formal rationality spreads throughout the globalizing economy.

Taylor's belief in the powers of objective measurement and the discovery of laws governing worker efficiency carried over into the modern perspective where scientific management techniques justify all manner of **rationalization** schemes. Critical postmodernists, on the other hand, regard Taylorism, not as a way to make organizations more rational through efficiency, but as a rationale to justify the unprecedented power capitalists and managers enjoy today.

Mary Parker Follett, American scholar, social reformer, government and management consultant (1868–1933)

Based on consulting work with community centers, government, and business organizations, Follett formed her theory that the principles that make social communities strong can be applied to creating successful government and other organizations. In 1924 Follett presented a management theory based on the principle of self-government, which she claimed would facilitate 'the growth of individuals and of the groups to which they belonged.' She argued that 'by directly interacting with one another to achieve their common goals, the members of a group fulfilled themselves through the process of the group's development.' Her ideas anticipated by many decades the current interest in **workplace democracy** and **nonhierarchical networks**.

Follett promoted the view that organizations within a democratic society should embrace democratic ideals, and that power should be power *with* not power *over* people. As she put it:

You cannot coordinate purpose without developing purpose, it is part of the same process. Some people want to give the workmen a share in carrying out the purpose of the plant and do not see that that involves a share in creating the purpose of the plant.⁹

Thus, in opposition to Marx, Follett proposed the idea that power is a source of creative energy. She saw the process of creating joint power over a conflict situation as an alternative to viewing power as a competitive force based in domination.

Follett considered domination to be only one of three possible approaches to conflict resolution. Compromise, the second, is just as negative as domination, in that none of the parties' interests are served completely. Of the three, only integration respects everyone's interests by realizing all in a creative redefinition of the problem. To illustrate integration Follett used the example of two people reading in a library. One wants to open a window; the other prefers to keep it shut. While a dominant person might exercise their will at the expense of the other's interests, an integrative approach would be to open a window in an adjoining room. Follett arrived at the integrative solution by recognizing that the person who wants the window open really only desires fresh air (opening the window being only one means of achieving this goal), while the person who wants it closed merely does not want the wind to blow directly upon them. This solution is not a compromise because both parties get what they want (fresh air, no wind).

Although Follett's work is currently experiencing something of a revival, many are surprised by how often historical surveys of organization theory ignore her. By contrast her work has long been recognized in Japan where the Mary Parker Follett Association dedicated to the dissemination of her ideas has existed since the 1950s. Some feminists attribute the slow uptake of Follett's ideas in Europe and the US to her gender, an interesting comment on the influence of power conceptualized as domination. Even so, Follett's work on organizations as communities contributed to theories of organizations as communities of knowledge, practice, and learning and her democratic principles of organization apply wherever workplace democracy is invoked as an ideal.

Henri Fayol, French engineer, CEO, and administrative theorist (1841–1925)

Fayol, an engineer and manager in the mining industry, earned great admiration as a CEO for his successful turnaround of a failing French mining company. Upon retirement he established a center for the study of administration to codify and pass on the **administrative principles** he had followed during his career. In 1919 his book *General and Industrial Management* presented universal principles applicable to the rational administration of organizational activities.

Among Fayol's rational principles, **span of control** defined the optimal number of subordinates to be overseen by one manager. That subordinates should handle **routine** matters using standardized operating procedures was his principle of **delegation** designed to leave managers free to handle exceptions as they arose. The principle of **departmentalization** involves grouping similar activities within units (or departments), each of which takes responsibility for a portion of the overall activity of the organization. The **unity of command** principle states that each subordinate should report to only one boss.

Fayol also addressed **esprit de corps**, which he defined as the unity of sentiment and harmony existing among employees in smoothly functioning organizations. This idea would later reappear in the concept of strong culture popular amongst those adopting the modern perspective in organization theory.

Luther H. Gulick, American administrative theorist (1892–1992)

In 1937 Luther Gulick, Professor of Municipal Science and Administration at Columbia University, co-edited with Lyndall Urwick a collection of articles by various authors known as *Papers on the Science of Administration*. In his own chapter entitled 'Notes on the Theory of

Organization' Gulick wrote that organizational efficiency in government could be increased by dividing work into small, specialized segments, allotting the work to those skilled in that specific segment, and coordinating the work through supervision, clear task definition, instruction, and direction.

Gulick thought that a science of administration could be a means of rationalizing and professionalizing management and public administration and he proposed seven functions for realizing this ambition that were based on Fayol's list of five (planning, organizing, commanding, coordination, and control). Gulick's list, captured by his famous mnemonic **POSDCoRB** includes planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting.

Chester Barnard, American executive and management theorist (1886–1961)

In Barnard's 1938 book *The Functions of the Executive*, this former president of the New Jersey Bell Telephone Company suggested that managing the informal organization identified by Durkheim was a key function of successful executives. Barnard presented normative advice for developing organizations into **cooperative social systems** by focusing on the **integration** of work efforts through the communication of **goals** and attention to worker **motivation**, ideas that echoed Mary Parker Follett as well as Frederick Taylor.

Postmodernists sometimes blame the significance Barnard attached to the cooperative aspects of organizations for having blinded early organization theorists, especially in the US, to the importance of conflict that Marx suggested was a fundamental aspect of all organizations. Nonetheless, the consideration Barnard gave to issues of value and sentiment in the workplace identified themes that reappear in symbolic research on organizational culture, meaning, and symbolism.

As you should be able to see by now, economic and sociological theories about how industrial management practices affect society blended together with early management and administrative scholarship focused on how best to organize and control workers. The confluence of these ideas cleared the ground on which organization theory would build. The first edifices constructed there took shape within frameworks defined by the modern perspective.

Modern organization theory

The story of modernism, from which the modern perspective derives its name, reaches back to the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe. Also known as the Age of Reason, this historical period was filled with the hope of human progress held dear by those emerging from the Dark Ages. Celebrated Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes (France), John Locke (England), and Immanuel Kant (Germany) sought to free humankind from slavery and superstition with the help of reason. **They believed that an accumulation of rational knowledge would propel humankind ever forward, an idea that considerably preceded the Enlightenment.**

In 1159 John of Salisbury attributed the progressive idea that 'we stand on the shoulders of giants' to twelfth-century French philosopher Bernard of Chartres:

We frequently know more, not because we have moved ahead by our own natural ability, but because we are supported by the mental strength of others, and possess riches that we have inherited from our forefathers. Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to puny dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.¹⁰

Kant's ideal of a human race unified by justice and individual freedom provided another source for modernism. Unfortunately, according to postmodern critics, these ideals turned into ideology. This ideology, used in the twentieth century to justify colonialism on the grounds that it would lead to universal improvement of the human condition, led to the ruination of indigenous cultures around the world. To help cultures repel the injustices of modern ambition, some reformulate Kant's modernism as **modernization**—belief in the value of copying Western scientific progress in order to gain its material advantages while resisting its ideology.

Adopting the modern perspective today most often means seeking ways to diagnose and solve organizational problems so as to create competitive advantage and profitability. This perspective recommends that organizations balance internal and external pressures, develop core competencies, and adapt to change, all while optimizing to achieve efficiency in order to minimize the use of scarce resources. Three ideas will offer you a taste of the appeal the modern perspective holds: general systems theory, socio-technical systems, and contingency.

General systems theory

In the 1950s, Austrian born biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy examined the possibility of theoretical unity among all the sciences. Called **general systems theory**, his ideas were based on the observation that societies contain groups, groups contain individuals, individuals are comprised of organs, organs of cells, cells of molecules, molecules of atoms, and so on. Von Bertalanffy considered each of these phenomena, which have their own dedicated science, to be a **system**, and he sought the laws and principles generic to all of them. One of his followers, American economist Kenneth Boulding, articulated the **hierarchy of systems** you see in Table 2.1, in which he included a transcendental level rising above the social.¹¹

Boulding's framework posed a question that has vexed modernist organization theorists ever since: **what is the proper level of analysis for studying organizations?** To find the level at which you should analyze any phenomenon of interest, you define your phenomenon as the focal system, then treat the level above it as the **supersystem**, and the interacting entities that constitute the level below as its **subsystems**. To study an organization as a whole, the organization would be your level of analysis, its units or departments become subsystems, and the environment plays the role of supersystem. If you define a department as your focal system, then groups and/or individual members of the department form its subsystems, and the organization becomes the supersystem.

In theory, systems analysis permits you to isolate what is unique about the level where your system resides, which provides the terms of comparison with other systems occupying the

Table 2.1 Boulding's hierarchy of systems

Level	Characteristics	Examples
1. Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • labels and terminology • classification systems 	anatomies, geographies lists, indexes, catalogs
2. Clockwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cyclical events • simple with regular (or regulated) motions • equilibria or states of balance 	solar system simple machines (clock or pulley) equilibrium system of economics
3. Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-control • feedback • transmission of information 	thermostat homeostasis auto pilot
4. Open (living)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-maintenance • throughput of material • energy input • reproduction 	cell river flame
5. Genetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • division of labor (cells) • differentiated and mutually dependent parts • growth follows 'blue-print' 	plant
6. Animal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mobility • self-awareness • specialized sensory receptors • highly developed nervous system • knowledge structures (images) 	dog cat elephant whale or dolphin
7. Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-consciousness • capacity to produce, absorb, and interpret symbols • sense of passing time 	you me
8. Social organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • value system • meaning 	businesses governments
9. Transcendental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'inescapable unknowables' 	metaphysics aesthetics

Source: Based on Boulding (1956).

same level. But be wary of the confusion you will create if you shift your focus from one level to another in the middle of an analysis. To see the importance of confronting systems at their own level, consider an automobile. No matter how much you know about each automotive subsystem (e.g., electrical wiring, fuel pump, engine), **unless you understand how all the parts relate to each other, it will be difficult to assemble a car in a workable way, or fix one that breaks down.**

Systems theory implies that you cannot define a system solely by explaining its subsystems as expressed in the cliché ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.’ But neither can you ignore the supersystem—the terrain on which an automobile will be driven or local laws governing how it may be driven, for example—even though knowing its context will not tell you what makes a particular automobile unique. Economists and sociologists, for example, both have a tendency to make a black box out of organizations by their attempts to predict organizational outcomes on the basis of a supersystem of historical or societal patterns and trends alone. From their societal level vantage point they cannot see the subsystems that operate inside a particular organization or appreciate its uniqueness relative to other organizations, thus their ability to inform the managers of one organization is limited to knowledge that applies equally to their competitors.

Be aware, too, that explaining social organization implies transcending the limits of human understanding. To address organizations at the level of social organization demands learning to think like an organization. This is something the modern perspective on organization theory promises to deliver, but that its critics regard as impossible. Thus one startling implication of systems theory is that humans will never be smart enough to find solutions to problems that stretch so far over their heads! Meanwhile, the alternative of addressing global problems piecemeal from lower levels of analysis will always fail by being incomplete. So far these critical readings of systems theory have not dissuaded modernists from trying to solve problems defined at levels above the human.

Socio-technical systems theory

In the 1960s, concern for the interaction between two organizational subsystems—social structure and technology—led to the development of socio-technical systems theory. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK theorized that any change in technology affects social relationships, attitudes, and feelings about work, which in turn affect the use and use of the technology. Consequently, Tavistock researchers surprisingly recommended finding the best combination of technical and social systems to serve a particular goal, even if it means compromising the optimality of one or both subsystems.

Socio-technical systems theory evolved from the work of Tavistock researchers Eric Trist and Ken Bamforth, who examined the impact of technology on worker productivity, motivation, morale, and stress in a British coalmine in the early 1950s.¹² In the then dominant long-wall method of coal mining, all miners worked independently at stations situated along a conveyor belt that ran the length of the coal face. Miners working in this dangerous and monotonous environment had little influence over their work or the work of others because there was minimal personal contact. Trist and Bamforth noted a number of shortcomings with this method including high stress, absenteeism, labor turnover, low productivity, and constantly laying blame for poor performance on other workers, particularly those working different shifts.

One Durham mine had adopted a short-wall method in which multi-skilled work groups were responsible for the whole cycle of coal mining on their shift. Work groups controlled their own task assignments and managed their productivity. Trist and Bamforth found that although the methods developed by these **autonomous work groups** were technically not as efficient as those designed by engineers, more work was accomplished and workers were

much more satisfied with their jobs. In other words, the suboptimization of the technical and social systems they observed paradoxically optimized the performance of the two systems combined, and they believed that this result would generalize to other work settings.

Fred Emery, another Tavistock researcher, mapped the impact of the technical and social systems on the psychological needs of individuals to suggest that **production systems be redesigned to allow for teamwork, multi-skilling, and self-management.**¹³ He stated that organizational performance depends upon each subsystem (or group) being able to adapt to problems and integrate with every other subsystem, and with the whole. Many of Emery's ideas feed the theory of self-organizing systems and complexity theory.

The work of the Tavistock researchers focused attention on a number of humanistic issues: organizations as social systems, the social and psychological consequences of work design, the importance of the work group compared to the individual, and the need for a division of labor that considers increasing rather than decreasing the variety of work skills and tasks. They also suggested that self-managed teams should be the building blocks of organizational design, and that this could reduce the need for hierarchical forms of organizing.

As you can see, the **proposals of socio-technical theory were contrary to many of the principles of scientific management, but like Taylor, their proponents intended to offer the means to overcome the disempowering, socially conflicted tendencies Marx identified with capitalism.** Tavistock researchers took their work into many organizations around the world including calico mills in India, shipbuilding and fertilizer plants in Norway, an American mining company, and oil refining plants in the UK and Canada. Socio-technical systems theory also underpins newer forms of organization such as matrix structures and networks, and lends support to Follett's ideas about workplace democracy and Durkheim's about informal organization.

Contingency theory

Until around the 1960s normative interests **urged organization theorists to use science to discover the best way to organize for optimal performance.** But the science was not working, and ambiguous answers regarding the one best way to design an organization caused some to realize that what **works best is contingent upon factors like the environment, goals, technology, and people involved.** Their approach came to be known as **contingency theory**, which extended the work of both general systems and socio-technical systems theorists.¹⁴ For contingency theorists, **effective organizations are those in which multiple subsystems are aligned to maximize performance in a particular situation.**

Contingency theorists identify the key contingencies in each situation and try to determine the best fit between them. You can usually identify a contingency approach by the general phrase **'If this situation exists . . . then that should be done.'** For example, *if* a manufacturing organization exists in a highly competitive environment and has to produce a dependable number of widgets each day to precise quality standards—*then* the production process should be highly standardized, there should be clear output goals, formalized standards and operating procedures, and close supervisory control.

Today contingency theory holds a dominant position in the modern perspective, although the complexity introduced by the specification of more and more contingencies

makes it increasingly unwieldy. One reason contingency theories have remained so popular over the years is because they seductively offer recipes for success. But note that contingency theory is typically assessed on criteria of technical rationality and efficiency, which implies a constrained way of thinking compared with those encouraged by other perspectives.

Enter the symbolic perspective

In spite of the fact that the founders of the field held more encompassing perspectives, by the time the modern perspective was established as mainstream within organization theory, most had forgotten that this was not the only way to think about organizations and organizing. But while organization theorists were hard at work exploring the modern perspective and developing its applications, other fields—particularly interpretive sociology, social psychology, and cultural anthropology—began developing an alternative based in subjectivity and interpretation.

In 1928, American sociologist William Isaac Thomas offered an idea that would prove inspirational for the new approach: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.'¹⁵ Similarly, the symbolic perspective suggests that, if subjective beliefs affect behavior just as objective reality does, then 'social facts' are just as real, ontologically speaking, as objective facts. American poet Wallace Stevens vividly illustrated the difference between modern and symbolic perspectives with these lines from his 1937 poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar*:

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'¹⁶

From the symbolic perspective, interpretation, like the blue guitar in the poem, changes reality. This view of reality appealed to organization theorists who had become dissatisfied with the objective boundaries set around notions of organization and organizing. They felt that interpretively nuanced understanding complemented positivistic explanation by bringing different aspects of organization and organizing into view, particularly phenomena involving symbols and meaning that are fraught with interpretation. Social construction, enactment, institutionalization, and culture were among the phenomena they pursued using methods involving ethnographic thick description, narrative, and reflexive theorizing.

Social construction theory

In a small 1966 book entitled *The Social Construction of Reality*, German sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann presented the big idea that the social world is negotiated, organized, and constructed by our interpretations of objects, words, actions, and events,

all of which are communicated through symbols. The authors claimed that within **socially constructed reality** symbolism—not structure—creates and maintains social order.

Berger and Luckmann proposed that interpretations are based on implicit understandings formed intersubjectively. **Intersubjectivity** is that realm of subjective experience occurring between people that produces a sense of shared history and culture. Locating the process of social construction in intersubjectivity makes this theory of reality a *social* theory; which contrasts with modernist definitions of objective reality as independent of human experience.

According to Berger and Luckmann, social construction operates through three mechanisms: externalization, objectification, and internalization. Learning to use **symbols**—meaning-laden objects, actions, and words—allows humans to externalize meanings. **Externalization** occurs when meaning is carried by and communicated through symbols because in this way meaning travels outside the strictly private realm of one's personal self. Such intersubjectively produced understandings appear to be objectively real but instead are objectifications. **Objectification** involves treating as an object that which is nonobjective. In **internalization** one unquestioningly accepts the intersubjectively externalized and objectified understandings of a social group as reality. Over time, ongoing externalization, objectification, and internalization processes sustain shared social constructions of reality and transfer them to succeeding generations.

You will become aware of social construction processes whenever you are socialized into a new organization. In the first days of **socialization** you are likely to come home exhausted even though you have done nothing that you would normally consider tiring. This is evidence of the intersubjective work you do to internalize the externalized and objectified socially constructed reality of others. Eventually you will find your place, as established ways of doing things in the organization become second nature to you. Ironically, even if you resist being socialized, your identity as a misfit will depend on your acceptance of the socially constructed ways of defining inclusion and exclusion within this particular group.

As you might imagine, socially constructed reality can be complicated to study. It is a local phenomenon that goes on in all directions starting from everywhere and extending both backward and forward in time. This implies that your participation only grants access to a portion of any given socially constructed reality. What you perceive through objectification and externalization appears as reality, but socially constructed reality only exists in interaction with the others with whom you engage. Thus the processes that socially construct reality are distributed amongst its enactors who all the while undergo continuous change.

Change in socially constructed reality occurs when something new is externalized (e.g., by borrowing a symbol from another group or inventing one), objectified through acknowledgment and use, *and* internalized. All of this occurs within the same ongoing social construction processes that produce stability. Stability and change intertwine over time as new symbols become linked to old meanings, and old symbols take on new meanings.

Enactment theory

Following cognitive psychology in defining reality as the product of mental representation, American social psychologist Karl Weick was among the first to treat organization as a cognitive process. He claimed that organizations exist only in the minds of organization

members where they appear as cognitive maps of socially constructed reality.¹⁷ Weick used the metaphor of cartography to suggest that humans create mental maps to help them find their way around what they presume exists. He called organizations 'convenient fictions' talked into existence by their members, and argued that organizing should replace organization as the phenomenon of interest to organization theorists. Verbs, not nouns, inspire his theorizing.

Weick combined Berger and Luckmann's externalization and objectification into the cognitive process of **reification** (meaning to make something real). He claimed that by mistaking a cognitive map for the territory, humans reify organization and order their interactions accordingly. Of course human interaction implies a certain amount of cooperation in the mapping process and one of the most compelling implications of Weick's theory is that organizations are products of a collective search for meaning by which experience is ordered. This ordering occurs through the **enactment** of beliefs about what is real. Thus **sensemaking** is not about discovering the truth, but creating it by organizing experience in ways that produce (make) understanding (sense). All of this leaves behind a cognitive perception that can be reified as an organization.

Weick stated in *The Social Psychology of Organizing* that he carefully selected the term 'enactment' to emphasize that managers construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many "objective" features of their surroundings . . . When people act they unrandomize variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and literally create their own constraints.¹⁸ Weick and others used enactment theory to understand phenomena like the bandwagon effect in stock trading, years before the global financial crisis of 2008 provided convincing evidence of the power of enactment to transform environments.

According to Weick, a rumor that a trader has a good record for finding hot stocks leads others to mimic the trader's buying behavior. This in turn increases exchange activity around certain stocks, which often raises their value (i.e., making them hot), thus supporting the trader's reputation. Confirmation of belief in the trader encourages further mimicry, attracting more buyers and further enhancing certain stock prices, at least for a time. As Weick stated: 'The fact that a bandwagon effect drove up share prices, and not the quality of the stock, suggests a powerful pathway for enactment in the investment community.'¹⁹ It also shows how enactment, sensemaking, and social construction combine to explain behavior that is inexplicable from the purely objective and rational perspective of modern organization theory.

Institutions and institutionalization

In 1949 American sociologist Philip Selznick wrote about the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The US government funded the TVA to build dams to produce electricity and control flooding in the Tennessee River Valley, an important agricultural region. Additionally the project promised to protect forests, develop recreational areas, and aid local farmers.

Selznick's *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* described how the TVA, promoted as a grass roots project conducted to benefit society, had been co-opted by various interests including land grant colleges, county extension agents, politicians, and business leaders. He claimed that **co-optation** had transformed the organization from an efficient distributor of resources and coordinator of tasks into a distinctive American institution. In becoming institutionalized, however, it had ceased serving the purposes for which it had been created.

In his 1957 *Leadership in Administration* Selznick explained the paradox of institutional legitimacy he had witnessed at the TVA by distinguishing organization and institution on the basis of their values. For Selznick, an organization is a rational tool for achieving economic efficiency, such that, if another organization offers greater efficiency, it will replace the first one. Organizations therefore should be dispensable. What then explains the perpetuity of non-rational organizations like the TVA? Selznick offered the concept of institutionalization as his answer, claiming that institutions make themselves appear indispensable by asserting their value to society, something the TVA did in the US by linking itself to the idea of grass-roots democracy, in spite of the fact that its behavior diverged significantly from the expectations set by this claim to legitimacy.

As American sociologists John Meyer and Brian Rowan later explained, **institutionalization** presents a myth that hides an organization's behavior from public view and allows co-optation of resources to go undetected for long periods of time. Some regard the claim by big banks of being 'too big to fail' as the most recent example of the power of an institutional myth to protect inefficient or even malfeasant organizational behavior.

The idea of invoking myths and values to create institutional legitimacy created interest in the role culture plays in organizations.²⁰ After all, myths and values are the stuff of culture. But most organizational theorists who were inspired by the symbolic aspects of Selznick's institutionalism were less interested in institutionalization as the co-optation of societal values than they were in phenomena like organizational cultures. Thus some turned from Selznick to cultural anthropology for their inspiration.

Culture

The American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined **culture** by invoking none other than Max Weber, the German sociologist many modernists turned to for their own legitimacy. In the opening pages of his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Culture* Geertz famously aligned himself with Weber:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.²¹

Having co-opted Weber, Geertz firmly staked his claims within the symbolic perspective and his approach to culture attracted a host of young organizational scholars looking for alternatives to the modern perspective. Geertz's method of thick description introduced them to ethnography, or at least to his symbolic variant of it.

Thick description exposes symbolic meaning lurking beneath the surface of everyday events to show how culture works. A passage from one of Geertz's ethnographies will give you a feel for his method. Listen as Geertz explains how he and his wife, recently arrived in Bali to conduct ethnographic research, gained acceptance by the normally aloof Balinese, who typically treat strangers as invisible. The Geertz's were no exception, until:

ten days or so after our arrival, a large cockfight was held in the public square to raise money for a new school. . . . Of course, like drinking during Prohibition or, today, smoking marihuana, cockfights, being a part of 'The Balinese Way of Life,' nonetheless go on happening, and wit

extraordinary frequency. And, as with Prohibition or marihuana, from time to time the police (who, in 1958 at least, were almost all not Balinese but Javanese) feel called upon to make a raid, confiscate the cocks and spurs, fine a few people, and even now and then expose some of them in the tropical sun for a day as object lessons which never, somehow, get learned, even though occasionally, quite occasionally, the object dies.

As a result, the fights are usually held in a secluded corner of a village in semisecrecy, a fact which tends to slow the action a little—not very much, but the Balinese do not care to have it slowed at all. In this case, however, perhaps because they were raising money for a school that the government was unable to give them, perhaps because raids had been few recently, perhaps, as I gathered from subsequent discussion, there was a notion that the necessary bribes had been paid, they thought they could take a chance on the central square and draw a larger and more enthusiastic crowd without attracting the attention of the law.

They were wrong. In the midst of the third match, with hundreds of people, including, still transparent, myself and my wife, fused into a single body around the ring, a superorganism in the literal sense, a truck full of policemen armed with machine guns roared up. Amid great screeching cries of 'pulis! pulisi!' from the crowd, the policemen jumped out, and springing into the center of the ring, began to swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture, though not going so far as actually to fire them. The superorganism came instantly apart as its components scattered in all directions. People raced down the road, disappeared headfirst over walls, scrambled under platforms, folded themselves behind wicker screens, scuttled up coconut trees. Cocks armed with steel spurs sharp enough to cut off a finger or run a hole through a foot were running wildly around. Everything was dust and panic.

On the established anthropological principle, 'When in Rome', my wife and I decided, only slightly less instantaneously than everyone else, that the thing to do was run too. We ran down the main village street, northward, away from where we were living, for we were on that side of the ring. About halfway down another fugitive ducked suddenly into a compound—his own, it turned out—and we, seeing nothing ahead of us but rice fields, open country, and a very high volcano, followed him. As the three of us came tumbling into the courtyard, his wife, who had apparently been through this sort of thing before, whipped out a table, a tablecloth, three chairs, and three cups of tea, and we all, without any explicit communication whatsoever, sat down, commenced to sip tea, and sought to compose ourselves.

A few moments later, one of the policemen marched importantly into the yard, looking for the village chief. (The chief had not only been at the fight, he had arranged it. When the truck drove up he ran to the river, stripped off his sarong, and plunged in so he could say, when at length they found him sitting there pouring water over his head, that he had been away bathing when the whole affair had occurred and was ignorant of it. They did not believe him and fined him three hundred rupiah, which the village raised collectively.) Seeing me and my wife, 'White Men', there in the yard, the policeman performed a classic double take. When he found his voice again he asked, approximately, what in the devil did we think we were doing there. Our host of five minutes leaped instantly to our defense, producing an impassioned description of who and what we were, so detailed and so accurate that it was my turn, having barely communicated with a living human being save my landlord and the village chief for more than a week, to be astonished. We had a perfect right to be there, he said, looking the Javanese upstart in the eye. We were American professors; the government had cleared us; we were there to study culture; we were going to write a book to tell Americans about Bali. And we had been there drinking tea and talking about cultural matters all afternoon and did not know anything about any cockfight. Moreover, we had not seen the village chief all day; he must have gone to town. The policemen retreated in rather total

disarray. And, after a decent interval, bewildered but relieved to have survived and stayed out of jail, so did we.

The next morning the village was a completely different world for us. Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of all attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and most especially, amusement. Everyone in the village knew we had fled like everyone else. They asked us about it again and again (I must have told the story, small detail by small detail, fifty times by the end of the day), gently, affectionately, but quite insistently teasing us: 'Why didn't you just stand there and tell the police who you were?' 'Why didn't you just say you were only watching and not betting?' 'Were you really afraid of those little guns?' As always, kinesthetically minded and even when fleeing for their lives (or, as happened eight years later, surrendering them), the world's most poised people, they gleefully mimicked, also over and over again, our graceless style of running and what they claimed were our panic-stricken facial expressions. But above all, everyone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply 'pulled out our papers' (they knew about those too) and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our covillagers. (What we had actually demonstrated was our cowardice, but there is fellowship in that too.) Even the Brahmana priest, an old, grave, halfway-to-heaven type who because of its associations with the underworld would never be involved, even distantly, in a cockfight, and was difficult to approach even to other Balinese, had us called into his courtyard to ask us about what had happened, chuckling happily at the sheer extraordinariness of it all.

In Bali, to be teased is to be accepted. It was the turning point so far as our relationship to the community was concerned, and we were quite literally 'in'. The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise (I might actually never have gotten to that priest, and our accidental host became one of my best informants), and certainly very much faster. Getting caught, or almost caught, in a vice raid is perhaps not a very generalizable recipe for achieving that mysterious necessity of anthropological field work, rapport, but for me it worked very well.²²

Geertz's text illustrates the basics of thick description: contextualizing, descriptive detail, documentation of how unexpected events and other surprises made him feel, sources quoted verbatim, presenting the interpretations provided by cultural members, and exposing the contrasts between outsiders' assumptions and beliefs and those of cultural members. But in addition to exemplifying his method and providing legitimacy to the symbolic perspective, Geertz also showed social scientists how much *fun storytelling* could be.

Narrative and reflexivity

Geertz's facility with language and his personal touch, one of the hallmarks of his use of subjective epistemology, attracted attention to **narrative** in writing by offering a sharp contrast between the lively style of his prose and the drier one that the objectivism of the modern perspective mandates. The contrast called attention to the ways researchers write, and one of the first to write about writing in organization theory was American sociologist John Van Maanen. In his 1988 Book *Tales of the Field* Van Maanen suggested that all social science writing is storytelling. According to him storytelling comes in realist, confessional, and impressionist styles.

Realist tales, typical of those who adopt the modern perspective, are written as objective reports of social facts that claim to know what really goes on in organizations. Calling them

'realist' encourages us to see how modernist researchers rhetorically construct subjective experience as objective fact, while hiding their identity as researcher/narrator by never mentioning themselves. Realist tales stand in stark contrast to **confessional tales**, in which the author is very much present as she or he confesses prejudices and mistakes made along the way. **Impressionist tales** offer an even more extreme departure from realist tales. These highly personal accounts put readers in the context of the events being related, thereby allowing them to vicariously appreciate the teller's experiences, as Geertz did with his Balinese cockfight story that contains confessional elements as well.

American anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus moved the discussion of writing closer to postmodernism in their 1986 book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. They claimed that all research accounts are partial fictions because they are products of the situated perspectives of their authors. **Situated perspective** means that the interpretive community in which a researcher claims membership has particular interests and ways of talking that influence what they describe and how they interpret phenomena. For example, you may study an organization using ideas found in this book, but organizational members may not share your theories or use your vocabulary.

So who is right? Whenever someone imposes their worldview on others, which postmodern critics accuse modernists of doing, you have the conditions for hegemony and totalitarianism. **Reflexivity** comes to the rescue; being reflexive in a research context means asking questions such as: What assumptions underlie my choices of what to study and my research methodology? How do these assumptions influence how I define phenomena and carry out my research? What impact does this have on the knowledge claims I make and on those I study? A reflexive researcher or manager recognizes that socially constructed realities are incomplete and negotiated accounts open to multiple interpretations and meanings.

Using ideas grounded in reflexive appreciation for the tenuous state of 'reality' the post-modern perspective took flight.

Postmodern influences

After legitimating themselves for decades with modernist claims of bringing progress to primitive peoples, colonial governments around the world faced growing demands from the colonized for self-determination. Anthropologists, whose government grants had allowed them to study the colonies, found themselves in the line of fire. They stood accused of serving their benefactors rather than the colonized. In the early 1980s, when colonialism collapsed, it nearly took cultural anthropology down with it.

Anthropology's **crisis of representation** provoked by the collapse of colonialism centered on the contested belief that anthropological methods accurately represent culture.²³ The most vocal critics insisted that the 'native' view had been misrepresented and they wanted to know by what right anthropologists could claim greater authority than that of the natives themselves.²⁴ A famous photograph illustrates the controversy; it shows a group of natives lined up outside a tent. Inside, Malinowski, one of cultural anthropology's founders, sits at a small table intently typing his field notes. Absorbed by the task of recording his observations, he fails to observe his subjects observing him! The photograph ironically subverts the modernist view of anthropology by reversing the relationship between observer and observed.

Although difficult to find points of agreement among postmodernists, they all in various ways like to subvert modernist definitions of reality like Malinowski's photograph does. This explains why many people experience postmodernism as critical, though as the photo shows, it can also be playful and creative in the artistry and imagination it licenses. Overturning the foundational assumptions of modernism often leads to charges of nihilism, though the intent most often claimed is to emancipate humankind from totalizing mindsets and hegemonic practices. Ironically postmodernism displays its own brand of hegemony when it invents new rules for conduct that superimpose postmodern morality on its modern targets.

Those who adopt the postmodernist perspective, like those who favor the symbolic, do not believe in objectively definable reality. Epistemologically speaking, for them knowing is at best a tenuous affair, undergoing incessant revision. At worst it is impossible, a chimera, or an outright con. Based on ideas borrowed from poststructural philosophy and literary theory, postmodernists believe that, since language cannot fix meaning, which is always and everywhere adrift, we should stop searching for truth and be suspicious of all knowledge claims. These ideas converged with those promoted by the Frankfurt School critical philosophers Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse in post-World War II Germany. Ideas from these quite divergent strands were loosely woven into the postmodern perspective of organization theory. Some of them are outlined here, beginning with the most critical.

The Enlightenment Project, the Progress Myth, and Grand Narrative

Postmodernists ironically refer to modernist ambitions to replace superstition with reason as the **Enlightenment Project**. Their irony points to the use of Enlightenment values and ideals to legitimize the imposition of Western ideology on the rest of the world (its project). Following the lead of vocal critics of these practices, the idea of progress became a popular target.

By 1932 English physician Montague David Eder had already demonstrated his resistance to modern faith in continuous human improvement by referring to progress as a myth.²⁵ According to postmodernists, who refer to his idea as the **Progress Myth**, belief in progress justifies abuses of power, such as those that took place under colonial rule. Calling progress a myth is meant to reveal its character as dogma sustained by propaganda, rather than the product of scientific truth validated by objective evidence, as modernists claim. Postmodern methods deny the possibility of neutrality asserted by modernists to be the hallmark of objective explanation. Instead they call on all who make knowledge claims to reflect on the context of their knowledge-making efforts and on the role played in unleashing and directing the power that knowledge conveys.

Taking the critical view further, in *The Postmodern Condition* French philosopher and literary theorist Jean Francoise Lyotard accused the Enlightenment Project and the Progress Myth of supporting a **Grand Narrative**, one that is intellectually and politically totalitarian because it provides the storyline modernists use to justify devotion to reason on the grounds that it brings progress, creates wealth, makes us free, and reveals Truth. Be sure to take note of the capital letters postmodernists employ to emphasize the self-asserted power of the modernist ideas they point to.

In Lyotard's view, knowledge and society are closely linked because institutions such as education, business, and government are created on the basis of expert knowledge, which in

turn legitimates particular ways of thinking and acting. For example, universities expound particular forms of knowledge (notably scientific), and businesses embrace prevailing norms of management (most often to do with maximizing profit), to which students and employees are expected to conform. Thus the Grand Narrative of modernism masks the ambition to create knowledge and institutions that promote the interests of some over those of unsuspecting others.

Language and language games

The modernist view of language, in evidence still today, contends that language mirrors reality; words carry their particular meanings because of some essential link between words, meanings, and things. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure overturned this view with his revolutionary theory of language.²⁶

In Saussure's theory, there is no natural or necessary connection between words (as **signifiers**) and the concepts of the things to which they refer (that which is **signified**), their relationship is arbitrary. For example, consider the many words in use that signify a feathered flying creature. English uses *bird*, Danish offers *fugl*, French *oiseau*, and so on. According to Saussure, the meaning of a word is given by its position relative to other words within the structure of language. This assumption implies that a word's meaning will shift whenever it meets a new word.

Coupling the arbitrariness of language with the ever-shifting meaning of words, implies that the structure supporting language is unstable, an idea that requires moving one's orientation from the pole of stability to that of change. This idea affected other disciplines than linguistics and literary theory due to structuralism in the social sciences having emerged in part from the idea that social structures follow the same laws that govern language. Saussure's theory raised mind-altering questions: Can there be a structure of language, or of anything else for that matter, in light of the instability of language? Denying structure has the power to stabilize society ushered poststructuralism into literary theory and combined Saussure's theory with ideas brewing in postmodernism.

Saussure's idea that the structure of language (langue, in French) varies with the flow of relationships between words in use (parole), inspired German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphor of **language games**.²⁷ Just as soccer and chess have rules of play that guide behavior, the rules of language vary by the communities that employ them. The way you use language and how you respond to the statements of others differs depending on the language game you engage. For example, adopting the modern, symbolic, or postmodern perspective in organization theory places you in a different language game that promotes different ideas and ways of theorizing organizations, not to mention determines the journals in which you will find various ideas being discussed and the universities that employ their proponents. Adhering to one language game can make it difficult to communicate with those from another community, and unreflectively switching between language games can create considerable confusion.

In important respects, one opportunity you face in studying organization theory is to learn several different language games at once. Learning how language games work and how to move comfortably between them will serve you well when working in cross-functional teams; or across boundaries created by other communities you join or encounter. But you

should be aware of the politics that arise among different communities and the effects of power implicit in them.

Truth claims, power/knowledge, and giving voice

Following Wittgenstein's notion of language games, Lyotard reinterpreted scientific facts as agreements within communities of scientists to regard certain claims as true. He concluded that there can be no truth, only **truth claims**. Those given the right to decide which truth claims will be honored have the ability to dominate a community and its language game. However, Lyotard suggested that truth claims collapse when other, more widely accepted claims arise, or when a different community is engaged. In this view, no truth can last for long. If the current distribution of power in a community determines the body of knowledge it holds as truth, when the distribution of power changes, truth shifts.²⁸ Seen in this light, resistance to change by the currently powerful can be understood in terms of desire to maintain the truth value of one's own claims.

Once you accept the proposition that power is involved in knowledge creation, you can easily understand Lyotard's concern about the uses of power to silence or eliminate someone from a community. He regarded the silencing of opposition as an act of totalitarianism pointing out that this also occurs whenever a community has no procedures for presenting or engaging with whatever is different. He claimed that if different views and ideas are silenced, there can be no new ways for a community to think or act; therefore, **giving voice to silence** is an antidote to totalitarianism.

The belief that free speech repels totalitarianism is one reason why so many critical theorists and some postmodernists support democracy and advocate for pluralism.²⁹ Yet many postmodernists argue that, in forming a shared ambition to overturn totalitarian tendencies, you are in danger of creating an alternative Grand Narrative that only privileges a different group rather than overthrowing privilege itself. Consequently they call for the creation of multiple texts and toleration of all differing interpretations of them as a path to liberation.

Discourse and discursive practices

Lyotard's notions about silencing opposition echo through the work of French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault who examined the effects of power exercised through **normativity**. Foucault argued that approved knowledge is a primary tool for the exercise of power because deciding who can speak and what can be said determines what is regarded as normal behavior.³⁰ Those who do not conform are considered abnormal, deviant troublemakers who must be excluded, disciplined, or institutionalized.

Foucault studied the history of psychiatric hospitals and prisons to investigate how psychiatry and social work established conceptual categories of insanity and delinquency into which people were sorted for institutional treatment. He claimed that by making insanity and delinquency into problems that society needed to address, psychiatrists and social workers established their own powerful social positions from which they could incarcerate or otherwise control certain people in order to protect society from them. Foucault went on to similarly interrogate the histories of literary criticism, psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology,

anthropology, criminology, political science, and economics. He concluded from these studies that modern Western societies have delegated to the human sciences the authority to determine social norms.³¹

In the process of raising and answering questions about what is normal, Foucault argued, the human sciences forged a link between power and knowledge. Because the knowledge academic disciplines produce is used to categorize, control, and in some cases incarcerate the least powerful members of society, knowledge and power are really the same; we should not think of them as two things, but as one.

Power/knowledge is exercised through practices that arise in discourse to regulate what will be perceived as normal. According to Foucault, **discursive practices** derive from language such as that found in academic jargon or in the technical terminology used in industry or the many branches of government. They are closely related to Wittgenstein's language games, though they imply a stronger normative position because, as Foucault and others point out, without knowledge of discursive practices, the powerless cannot defend themselves.

The concept of **discourse** emerged from poststructuralist linguistics. It is a mindset, a cultural worldview, and/or an institutionalized logic that provides the, always partial, perspective of a particular group.³² For Foucault discourses were constructed historically according to the relationships of power existing within a society at a particular point in time. Those who exercised power allowed some things to be said, written, and thought, but not others and these controlled practices gave rise to the discourse that guides meaning making within its boundaries.

One implication of discourse theory is that, when people engage a discourse, their identity adapts to its discursive formations. In other words, your identity is an effect of your community's use of language. To illustrate, you make self-references when you speak ('I did this or that'), and these, coupled with what others say about you ('you are lazy') and about others ('she is brilliant'), give you the idea that you exist by forging your identity, even though the impressions these practices leave on you and others are only referential effects of language.

By this reasoning Foucault arrived at his contentious idea that individuality only appeared in modern times by our becoming self-reflexive, and will disappear again 'like a face drawn in the sand' if ever we stop talking about ourselves.³³ Thus Foucault presented a highly personalized corollary to German philosopher Martin Heidegger's proposition: 'It is in the saying it comes to pass that the world is made to appear.' According to Foucault, by not referring to ourselves, 'man' will disappear from the discourses defining reality, just as suddenly as he appeared in an earlier time.

To give you an organizational sense of the **disappearance of man**, consider the importance attached to the customer within the mainstream management discourse.³⁴ Where once employees were encouraged to attend to the wishes of their managers, a new corporate discourse encourages them to attend to customers, thereby repositioning or **decentering** the manager within their linguistically and discursively forged reality. Could this linguistic move account for recent delayering of management with the legions of managerial redundancies it brought about in corporations?

Similarly, in the field of public administration, citizens have recently taken center stage away from administrators who traditionally avoided responding to citizen needs by using bureaucratic rules and processes as reasons why something could not be done. In theory at least, moving citizens to the discursive center renders concerns over administrative procedures less

powerful and allows the discussion to shift from why something cannot be done to how to do it. According to this post-bureaucratic perspective, the once dominant identity of administrator will soon disappear from governance conversations, and administrative power will be effectively decentered.³⁵

Focusing on the repressed or hidden elements of a discourse changes existing discursive practices and thereby alters the construction and maintenance of established mindsets. For example, modern discursive practices in the field of history dismiss the use of novels, myths, and diaries as filled with fiction, superstition, and subjective bias. New historians, however, believe that because they are embedded in the times in which they were written, fiction, myth, and autobiography give important historical evidence.³⁶ The work of the new historians alters the discursive practices of history when it forges links between its discourse and that of literature thereby altering the power relations between these two fields and shifting their trajectories.

Deconstruction, *différance*

Algerian born, French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida became fascinated by the poststructuralist idea that language has no fixed meaning.³⁷ As Saussure demonstrated, the meaning of a particular set of words depends upon the context of other words to which it is related in a particular discourse. On this basis Derrida claimed that, if contexts are interchangeable, then no context can claim to be more appropriate than another; therefore one meaning cannot possibly be correct, and you need only wait for a new context to form in order for another meaning to appear. An important implication of Derrida's theory is that, by changing the context surrounding a text (a set of symbols) you can change its meaning. This idea underlies Derrida's practice of deconstruction.

Deconstruction is a way of reading and then rereading texts in the contexts of different discourses in order to expose their potential for multiple interpretations and thereby destabilize and undermine their authority to indicate or make particular meanings. Derrida concluded from deconstruction that meaning forever eludes us because texts are always situated within ever changing historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts. Most consequentially for postmodernism, Derrida argued that truth and knowledge are as unstable as any other linguistic and discursive constructions. The purpose of deconstructing a text lies not in finding ultimate or essential meaning, but is to reveal a text's assumptions, contradictions, and exclusions in order to show that no text can mean what it says, a profoundly reorienting assertion that captures the non-essentialism of the postmodern perspective.

Deconstruction makes the central features of constructed reality visible and thereby liberates us from their influence on our ways of thinking and acting. Saussure suggested that language is structured by the use of words, which is ever shifting. Derrida elaborated this idea by claiming that binary or dichotomous thinking is a structural underpinning of the way modernists use language. This allowed him to deconstruct the central concepts of modernist discourse (e.g., monarch/subject, master/slave, boss/subordinate) to show how modernists linguistically and discursively construct centers and peripheries within societies and organizations by privileging one set of terms (monarch, master, boss) over others (subject, slave, subordinate). Thus our use of language creates categories, names centers, draws boundaries, expresses social power, and reproduces or changes reality.

Racism (white at the center, non-white on the periphery), for example, has been shown to lead to disparities in income, housing, health care, and education, with whites systematically enjoying more of these benefits than non-whites. Deconstructive analysis provides an explanation of these and other effects of racism by pointing out that whiteness has been made a focal center within discourse, but that its centrality depends upon maintaining the difference between white and non-white. Thus the meaning of whiteness provided by contrasts with non-whiteness determines the value of all other races by their proximity to the white center that, in turn, justifies racial inequality within any discursive community that employs this terminology.³⁸

While developing deconstruction, Derrida invoked the term *différance*—a play on the French verb *differer* that means both to differ and to defer.³⁹ Derrida argued that a word derives its meaning from differences with its opposite (e.g., truth/falsehood, good/bad, male/female), thus even when you use only one term in a binary, you invoke its opposite. The absent opposite defers to its present partner. So, for example, when modernist organization theorists talk about organization they implicitly draw meaning from the difference between organization and disorganization or chaos. This analysis reveals that at least part of the value modernists place on organizations and organizing derives from the ability of such meaning-laden concepts to keep disorganization at bay. You can see how such thinking would serve to justify modernist organization theory from within the discourse this perspective supports, and why modernists are so resistant to travelling outside their discourse.

In regard to *différance* Derrida further proposed that the meaning of any word points to other meanings because, as you try to explain the meaning of one word, you replace it with other words that defer to still other words, and so on. By speaking or writing, you move further and further away from the original concept you are addressing because the processes of differing and deferring continue. Thus the concept of *différance* shows how meaning becomes ever more diffuse and distant from its starting point as it travels across time and space. It also shows why postmodernists regard meaning as fluid.

Simulacra and hyperreality

In the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix* we see a world taken over by artificial intelligence, where machines breed and keep humans in pods as power sources for the computer that controls human thought and thereby produces images of realities that no longer exist. The humans think they live normal lives, but instead a computer program, *The Matrix*, simulates the world of the late twentieth century, a world that is now a nuclear wasteland.

The film's central character, symbolically named Neo, takes a pill that allows him to awaken from this computer-simulated dream. In order to survive and rescue others from the treachery of the machines, he has to move between the post-nuclear reality, where he and a small band of other awakened humans do battle with the machines, and the pre-nuclear simulation. In the simulation, Neo fights computer-enhanced images of superhuman bureaucrats using powers derived from his knowledge that the world is simulated; denying the power of the simulation to persuade him of its existence gives Neo the freedom and strength to resist the simulated bureaucrats and destroy the computer program behind it all.

The confusion of the real and the simulated portrayed in *The Matrix* is a central theme of French social philosopher Jean Baudrillard, an early advocate of postmodernism. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argued that the image has passed through a progression of successive phases that make it increasingly impossible to talk about what is real. These stages, according to Baudrillard, began with images that reflect reality, which turned into images that mask reality, then images that mask the absence of reality, ending in images bearing no relation to reality whatsoever. In Baudrillard's terms the image in postmodern times ceased even being a simulation of reality and became a **simulacrum**, that is, a totally imagined reality.⁴⁰

According to Baudrillard, in pre-modern times a simulation was assumed to represent reality, just as a map was assumed to represent the physical geography it described. However, the distinction between reality and the image began breaking down in modern times when mass production led to the proliferation of copies of originals ranging from reproductions of artwork to designer fashion knock-offs. People discovered that it was possible for images to mask reality or even to hide the absence of reality, and so the great con began. For example, in a bow to conceptual art, British painter David Hockney made artworks directly on a photocopy machine; his images looked like copies of original artworks but there were no originals, only copies!

The postmodern age is marked by endless simulations and contortions of meaning such as Hockney's 'original copies.' So-called reality TV similarly produces fabrications that have no relation to any reality but the show's own pretensions. Disneyland provides another instance where, as Baudrillard pointed out, real actors portray cartoon characters and guests take real riverboat rides down a fake Mississippi. In simulacra there is no deep meaning or underlying structure hidden beneath the surface on which such images play. Simulacra show that concepts like meaning and structure, reality and fabrication, copy and original, can be overthrown by postmodern thinking.

Baudrillard claimed that in postmodernism opposing poles, such as reality/image, fact/fantasy, subject/object, public/private, and so on, implode to create **hyperreality** where 'illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.'⁴¹ In the hyperreal we immerse in simulation, nostalgically trying to reproduce what we thought was real, but which was never anything but images. According to Baudrillard, simulacra, like reality TV, form the plural contexts of our lives.

Baudrillard claimed that Disneyland is the ideal simulacrum because it creates the architecture, community, and traditional family values of a Main Street America that never existed.⁴² Although we may think Disneyland is imaginary (just a performance) and the rest of the world is real, it is the rest of the world that is an ongoing performance through which we strive to live up to the images fed to us by Disneyland, the media, government, businesses, and other modern institutions. Just as *The Matrix* portrayed a simulation within which humans live, we create our lives using images to define ourselves to ourselves.

While Baudrillard's ideas might at first seem unrelated to organization theory, you get a sense of hyperreality when you consider how images floating around us every day are produced by the organizations they serve. For example, most consumer-oriented businesses count on our willingness to buy products based on images they project through seductive brands and advertising. Or consider how, for a time at least, Enron managed to hide billions

of dollars in debt and operating losses by creating fake partnerships (with names inspired by the film *Star Wars*), misleadingly complex accounting schemes, and nonexistent departments. When Wall Street analysts visited Enron in 1998 to assess its credit rating, 75 people relocated to an empty floor and a fake trading room where they pretended to buy and sell energy contracts. This simulacrum was staged with ringing phones and family photos on desks—a performance used unethically to support Enron’s falsely inflated stock price.⁴³ Although such sting operations have occurred throughout history, the difference now is that they are becoming the rule rather than the exception and this has the potential to push humanity across a new threshold.

Summary

Academic contributors to the prehistory of the field came from different disciplines, primarily political science, economics, and sociology, while other contributors were engineers, executives, or consultants to the new industrial organizations appearing at the time organization theory was founded and each of its perspectives introduced. Their ideas combined to forge a starting point and they continue to serve by echoing through the perspectives of organization theory, presented here as a brief history.

The normative ambitions of organization theory were present in its infancy and remain strong today in concerns to find practical applications of theory from all perspectives, though each perspective encourages different normative responses. The modern perspective provides explanations that afford the analytical frameworks, predictive models, and principles for organizing that managers use to diagnose problems and design organizations. Those who adopt the symbolic perspective prefer to study how we construct organizational realities via processes of interpretation, the applications of which lead managers to imagine their main responsibility as the management of symbols and meaning. Taking a postmodern perspective means giving up the structures and social constructions favored by modern explanation and symbolic understanding, to focus instead on flux and change as modeled by the structures of language in use, which reveal the power relations from which humans should seek liberation.

Several contrasts between the main concerns and mindsets offered by modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives are presented in Table 2.2.

The ideas you encountered as this brief history unfolded provide a basic vocabulary for tackling Part II of this book. You may want to come back to this material from time to time as you flesh out your knowledge with the ideas presented in the following chapters. Returning to these framing ideas will continue to challenge and develop your understanding of concepts, theories, and theoretical perspectives and thereby help you to remake organization theory to serve your own purposes, which I hope will in turn be challenged and developed by organization theory.

Table 2.2 Comparison of the three perspectives

	Modern	Symbolic	Postmodern
Reality is a	Pre-existing unity	Socially constructed diversity	Constantly shifting and fluid plurality
Reality is recognized via	Convergence	Coherence	Incoherence Fragmentation
Knowledge is	Universal	Particular	Provisional
Knowledge is developed through	Facts Information	Meaning Interpretation	Denial Deconstruction
Model for human relationships	Hierarchy	Community	Self-determination
Overarching goal	Prediction Control	Understanding Tolerance	Appreciation Liberation

Key terms

division of labor

differentiation

specialization

social structure

theory of capital

efficiency

social conflict

profitability

labor

commodification

exploitation

alienation

managerial control

hierarchy

interdependence

social structure

quantitative research methods

informal organization

formal organization

authority structure

traditional authority

charismatic authority

rational-legal authority

bureaucracy

rationality

formal

substantive

iron cage

scientific management

Taylorism

Fordism

rationalization

workplace democracy

nonhierarchical networks

administrative principles

span of control

routine

delegation

unity of command

esprit de corps

POSDCoRB

cooperative social systems

integration
 goals
 motivation
The modern perspective
 modernization
 general systems theory
 system
 subsystem
 supersystem
 hierarchy of systems
 level of analysis
 socio-technical systems theory
 contingency theory
The symbolic perspective
 socially constructed reality
 intersubjectivity
 externalization
 objectification
 internalization
 socialization
 reification
 enactment
 sensemaking
 co-optation
 institutionalization
 culture
 thick description
 storytelling

narrative tales
 realist tales
 confessional tales
 impressionist tales
 situated perspective
 reflexivity
The postmodern perspective
 crisis of representation
 critical postmodernism
 Enlightenment Project
 Progress Myth
 Grand Narrative
 poststructuralism
 signifier and signified
 language games
 truth claims
 giving voice to silence
 normativity
 power/knowledge
 discursive practices
 discourse
 disappearance of man
 decentering
 deconstruction
 différance
 simulacrum
 Hyperreality

Endnotes

1. For discussions of organization theory as the product of the tension between sociological theory and management practice, see Perrow (1973) and Barley and Kunda (1992).
2. C. S. George, Jr. (1968) observed that the division of labor and other managerial practices were in use from the time of the Egyptians. He speculates that they were probably a feature of prehistoric life as well.
3. From A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Vol. 1, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, W. B. Todd (textual edn.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 14–16.
4. For a review of Marx's influence on organization theory, see Adler (2009).

5. The tension between economic and humanistic interests in organization theory has been discussed by Wren (1987); Bernard (1988); Boje and Winsor (1993); Steingard (1993); O'Connor (1996).
6. Weber (1946: 228).
7. For a thorough discussion of Weber's contributions to the symbolic perspective, see Schroeder (1992).
8. It is uncertain where the term originated, but Aglietta used 'Fordism' in 1979 in *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* (London: Verso).
9. Cited in Graham (1995: 56).
10. Cited in Calinescu (1987: 15). The phrase 'on the shoulders of giants' was used as the title of an influential text by American sociologist Robert Merton (1965) that presented the case for integrating theory and practice.
11. Boulding (1956).
12. Trist and Bamforth (1951). See also Emery and Trist (1981).
13. For example, see Emery (1969).
14. See Donaldson (1985) for a review and defense of contingency theory.
15. Thomas and Thomas (1928: 572).
16. Stevens (1937), <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/blueguitar.html>
17. Weick (1995); Weick and Bougon (1986).
18. Weick (1979 [1969]: 243; 1995: 30–31).
19. Weick (2003); see also Mitch Abolafia and Martin Kilduff (1988), who described attempts to corner the silver market in the 1980s using enactment theory.
20. Gagliardi (2005).
21. Geertz (1973: 5).
22. Geertz (1973: 413–16). Used with permission of the author.
23. See Clifford and Marcus (1986).
24. Stocking (1983).
25. Eder, Montague David (1932) The myth of progress. *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*, Vol. XII: 1.
26. Saussure (1959).
27. Wittgenstein (1965).
28. Lyotard (1983).
29. For example, see Calas and Smircich (1991).
30. Foucault (1977).
31. Foucault (1973).
32. Moran (2002: 14).
33. Foucault (1970: xxiii), cited in Moran (2002: 135–36).
34. For examples, see articles about relationship marketing in business periodicals such as the *Harvard Business Review*.
35. King, Feltey, and Susel (1998).
36. Moran (2002: 136–37).
37. Derrida (1976).
38. See Dwyer and Jones (2002); Linstead (1993) and Kilduff (1993) on deconstructing organizations.
39. Derrida (1978).
40. Baudrillard (1994: 6).
41. Baudrillard (1994: 19).
42. Baudrillard (1994: 7).
43. *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2002. For videotaped insider accounts and related material, view the 2005 documentary, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. The film was based on a book by *Fortune* reporters Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, entitled *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron* (2003, New York: Penguin Group).

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