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Higher Education Review, 22, (1990), p82-85.

Images of Organization, by Gareth Morgan, Sage, £39.95
(paperback £14.95)

I have only once seen an academic audience spontaneously rise to its feet and applaud an academic speaker. The speaker was Gareth Morgan and the speech he gave was a potted version of this book's 383 pages. It appears that it was not only this audience which showed such enthusiasm: I know of no similar book which went into its third printing within a year of publication.

Morgan did some research in the North East of England. When he had finished, he realised that the data were compatible with a number of different theories. He didn't think that was the way things ought to be. He'd been taught that observations should discriminate between theories. He set about formalising those theories in an attempt to identify points of difference which would make it possible to make observations which would discriminate between them. He couldn't find any. In a further attempt to do so, he convened a meeting of the main proponents of the theories. The result took him by surprise. The speakers simply listened politely to each other, and then said 'Yes, that's interesting, it's a different way of looking at things from my way of looking at them; but I still find my way of looking them *more* useful'.

He first convinces us that organisations are machines, disclosing in passing that the machine image was invented by Frederick the Great, who so liked clockwork toys that he set about modelling his army on their workings. Obviously organisations work best when they have a clear structure, well defined relationships between the parts, when people know what they should be doing, and when there are adequate control mechanisms.

But really! How could we be taken in by this? Organisations have lives of their own and changes which occur in one part affect the others. Clearly they are organisms! They have needs. They evolve. They have niches in the environment. Some prosper in one environment and others in another. Survival is a process of continuous adaptation to a changing environment rather than a benefit which follows from having a clear structure to perform defined functions.

No! organisations are brains. They learn. They can think. It is not necessary to have specific targets, goals, etc. All that is necessary is that those concerned understand the business they are in. They can then work out what to do for themselves. The parts have numerous cross-connections: What fools we were to think in terms of hierarchical structures. Every individual can, in a sense, know everything known to the whole.

Nuts! They are political systems. They are not unitary. They have warring factions, the members of which build coalitions. They are designed for simultaneous collaboration and

competition. Departments have autonomous power and defend it. The parts are only loosely coupled. Those who advocate employee rights are not introducing political issues; they are arguing for a different approach to a situation which is already political. The 'team' metaphor is an attempt to impose a particular definition in order to define reality in a way which advantages one group over another. When there is talk of rational and efficient organisation, one has to ask 'Rational and efficient for whom?'

Ah, at last we understand. Don't believe it! Organisations defend us from our unconscious fears: their aim is to avoid their own disintegration, disorder and death. They are a means of enabling us to avoid too acute an awareness of the fragility of our hold on life and of the temporary nature of our own existence. They provide a mechanism whereby we can prolong our existence and our own impact on the world. That is why we defend them so steadfastly.

Actually, its even more 'psychological' than that. The 'environment' in which organisations operate is primarily a projection of their own organisation onto the world. An 'internal' change changes the world. The truth is that 'the environment' is *part of* the organisation. Organisations are not open systems with numerous interdependencies with their environments. The 'environment' is *in* the organisation. Whoops, our understanding of causality is up for grabs. A does not *cause* B etc. Rather everything causes everything else. To influence things, what one needs to do is to plot the positive and negative feedback loops and identify those which will amplify the effects of one's own actions. But ... these feedback loops embody the seeds of their own destruction.

Ah! Ah! Despite the feeling of climax and exhaustion, one is dragged relentlessly onward and downward. Organisations are instruments of domination and exploitation. Nowadays, most of us now work for bureaucracies. Our position in those bureaucracies has not only absolved us from responsibility for torturing and maiming in ways which we would never entertain – and which would not be tolerated – at home or in the community, it has also enabled us to rape the environment, the poor and the third world without remorse. As Michels and Weber feared, the TNCs and their Frankensteins – the World Bank and the IMF – encircle and dominate the globe and all that lies therein.

Having created an acute sense of anxiety, dependence, and dread, Morgan, like all good orators, offers a route to salvation: awareness of our own organisational metaphors – and the ability to switch those metaphors – will enable us to escape our allotted fate.

Morgan writes powerfully. We are led to accept each image in turn. But that is not all: In each case we are led to understand the key exponents of the metaphor *meant* as we never did before. At last we can use our Weber, our Marx and our Bergson. At last we can see those TNCs as they really are. At last we have a clear vision of the future which is in store for us. But at last we can analyse the workings of the organisations which entrap us – including our society as an organisation. In this way we can control our destinies and avoid our allotted fate.

Morgan has got to be one of our finest academics. He now teaches in Canada.

John Raven