Book Review

Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott
Making Sense of Management: A Critical Introduction
London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1996

Reviewed by Eleanor Glor

Making Sense of Management by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott is a useful book for innovators. Innovators, like critical thinkers, have always faced a problem–how to see and become aware of the things they do not see–the dark matter of thinking and observation.

Alvesson and Wilmott present a framework for understanding sociological phenomena, as developed by G. Burrell and G. Morgan in *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* (London: Heinemann, 1979). Sociological phenomena include management, of course. The analysis is based on two dimensions–the subjective-objective and the sociology of radical change-the sociology of regulation. Burrell and Morgan place the current predominant approaches to thinking about sociology within that framework. To my personal interest, Burrell and Morgan classify social system theory, objectivism and social action theory in the same quadrant, named Functionalist Sociology. I used systems theory in *Is Innovation a Question of Will or Circumstance*? (Ottawa: The Innovation Journal, 2000) as a counterpoint to the current and dominant rationalist modes of thinking in management, which I would call a type of objectivism.

Likewise, social action theory and social action approaches are considered by some in government as another method to allow more open thinking, a more complete understanding of issues and therefore greater effectiveness. The ways of thinking about social phenomena that Burrell and Morgan see as being fundamentally different, and therefore classify as being in other quadrants, are Interpretive Sociology, including phenomenology, solipsism and hermeneutics; Radical Structuralism, that includes Mediterranean Marxism and Russian societal and social theory; and Radical Humanism, including solipsism, French existentialism, and anarchic individualism. Critical theory fits in this latter category. The major concerns, priorities and blinds of each approach are clarified, and their consequences delineated. Alvesson and Wilcott note in particular that Burrell and Morgan did not include either feminism or poststructuralists in their framework. This alone is a major contribution to the understanding of management and innovation. But this book makes important additional contributions.

Making Sense of Management offers a critique of societal and management approaches from a radical critical theory *and* an incremental critical theory perspective. In terms of Burrell and Morgan's framework, these might be considered functionalist and radical humanist approaches. From a radical critical theory perspective, Alvesson and Wilmott deal with the power of science and the science of power; the technocratic approach to management; and the dangers of metaphors, organization theory, marketing, strategic management, accounting, information systems and operational research. They describe the distortions in thinking, life and management

that arise from these frameworks. In the process, they describe critical theory, born in the Frankfurt School, and deal with the major critiques of critical theory. The incremental critical perspective, on the other hand, encourages theorists and practitioners to look not only for opportunities for major changes the allocation of power and resources, but also for all and any opportunities to increase individual emancipation, especially in the workplace. Thus, unlike most promoters of change in the predominant ways of thinking, they look for and respect not only transformational change but also incremental changes as well.

As well, Alvesson and Wilmott offer different goals for the workplace. Instead of employers concerning themselves solely with profit, efficiency and effectiveness–end points, according to critical thinking they should also make the means or the way things are done and the goal of human emancipation principal concerns. Such an approach would create greater autonomy, responsibility (and health) on the part of employees, and greater social responsibility on the part of companies and government employers. The spin-offs for society as a whole would be enormous: an opportunity to move away from the hierarchical, power-based institutions and systems that are predominant today to bottom-up, emancipatory institutions and systems that support individuals, families and communities.

The major benefit of Alvesson and Wilcott's thinking for innovation lies in the potential it creates for opening minds and institutions to a wider range of options. Critical thinking represents a methodology for creating a willingness to consider not only linear problems and solutions, bounded by pre-defined, power-based perimeters, but also a wider problem-seeking, open-minded approach to life, production, work, relationships and society.

Alvesson and Willmott point out that radical humanist approaches to progressive social change, like critical thinking, are not in conflict with creating more positive, productive, efficient workplaces. What is necessary is a different set of values driving action. Instead of instrumental rationality propelling workplaces, and its harmful consequences in damaging ego and encouraging pacivity, conformity, wastefulness and pollution, incremental critical theory encourages emancipatory micro-decisions and actions in everyday working life based on dialogue. Planning is regarded as attention-sharing (communication), not principally as a means to an end (instrumental action) and a form of domination. Communicative distortions are reduced through norms of comprehensibility, legitimacy and truth (page 191) The implications for current performance measurement and ethics efforts in the public and private sectors are important.

Only one element of this interesting book seems incomplete. Apparently, the prime value in critical theory is human emancipation, yet the discussion of emancipation is very limited. Individualism is not particularly valued, but then neither are socially unnecessary dependencies. Democracy is seen as a condition and consequence of autonomy and responsibility, not a sense of mutual dependence and cooperation. The intent of Critical theory is to "foster a rational, democratic development of modern institutions in which self-reflective, autonomous and responsible citizens become progressively less dependent upon received understandings of their needs, and are less entranced by the apparent naturalness or inevitability of the prevailing politico-economic order. To this end, CT encourages the questioning of ends ... as well as their preferred means..." (Page 17)

Still, I wondered whether the single value of emancipation could and should predominate in this way. Humanistic ethics typically focus on two major values, individual liberty *and* collective well-being. The value of social emancipation did not seem to be adequately addressed. As a consequence, it was not clear how individual liberty was seen as relating to social equality. How far do Alvesson and Willmott see the value of emancipation extending? How is human emancipation as they see it different, for example, from libertarianism? Some further discussion of the value they are promoting would have been appreciated.

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