

Book Review

David Grant, Cynthia Hardy, Cliff Oswick and Linda Putnam, eds.
The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Discourse.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004.

by

Howard A. Doughty

This book is tremendous. I mean that unequivocally, enthusiastically, unapologetically and in two quite different senses of the term.

Tremendous derives from gerundive of the Latin verb *tremere* (to tremble). An adjective, it can mean, among other things, either astonishing by reason of excellence, or being such as may excite terror or dread. This “handbook” qualifies in both categories.

Let me explain. Over the past decade or two, I have published well over a hundred book reviews as well as a handful of music, film and television reviews. In none of them, I think, have I given over to hyperbole. So, when I say that *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Discourse* is tremendous, I hope it will at least be acknowledged that it had an unusual effect on me and not suspected that I commonly use exaggerated language to describe the merely competent, much less the mediocre.

The matter turns on the word “discourse.”

In the decades since the infamous “sixties,” there we have witnessed growing confidence in the practitioners and theorists of corporate capitalism. As the second wealthiest man in America has engagingly put it: “of course there is class warfare and my side is winning.”

Those who attend to the meagre intellectual needs of the ruling class seem to have had little to worry about. Business schools and schools of public administration have come together in their concerns for efficiency and fiscal responsibility. The private and public managerial class equally practices the political economy of restraint. As an example, a former member of Bob Rae’s putatively social democratic government, who has recently been appointed to the governing board of a major public institution, was asked to consider a new policy that would severely restrict the workplace freedom of employees and grotesquely violate their ability to challenge the new policy through normal labour relations procedures. Apparently oblivious to the merits of the arguments on either side, she simply exclaimed: “We must support management!”

While both the language and the practice of institutional leadership have grown leaner and meaner, those who have been attentive to scholarly meanderings over the past forty years or so

will have noticed that many critical academics have taken what is known as the “linguistic turn.” Distressed with the calumnies of official Marxist states — notably the USSR and China, but also nations from North Korea to Albania — many sought a way to remain critical of capitalism while not endorsing the equal or greater brutalities of its opposite number. Many others simply lost faith in the purported historical role of the proletariat. No matter how obvious it was to leftist intellectuals that the industrial working class was being shamelessly exploited, the actual members of the industrial working class seemed indifferent to their fate, preferring minimal comforts masquerading as *embourgeoisement* to revolutionary praxis, or even robust trade unionism. Embarrassed by the dictatorship of the proletariat in the East and frustrated with the passive proletariat in the West, radical intellectuals abandoned practical politics, forsook the prospect of an impending revolution, and began to consider what was to be done in a post-Marxist world.

Like new mammalian species explosively evolving after the destruction of the dinosaurs, new theories took full advantage of the *lebensraum* opened up by the intellectual atrophy of the “traditional” left. Some cherry-picked from old heroes like Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci (whose concept of “hegemony” became all the rage). Others, following Ferdinand de Saussure, abandoned class conflict and examined the phenomenon of domination through language. Semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism and a host of minor variants on these and related themes attracted the best and the brightest in the humanities and social sciences.

Increasingly indifferent to class conflict, they began to study popular culture, to explore *la différence*, to deconstruct texts, to dabble in new forms of psychoanalysis and to wage war on scientific objectivity, grand narratives, teleology, patriarchy, imperialism and anyone who might have the reactionary effrontery to assume that two could be added to two with the result confidently expected to be four. The post-Marxist world became socially constructed, relentlessly relativistic and excessively theorized. And atop (or quite near the top of) the pyramid of the often obscure analyses of domination was placed the name of “discourse.”

Research topics changed dramatically. British literary critic Terry Eagleton (2004, pp.2-3) sized up the worst of it when he described the “new thinking” as an exercise in self-indulgence and triviality. It allowed adventuresome young thinkers to pretend that creating “a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life” permitted “culture critics” to write their dissertations on “the comparative flavour of malt whiskeys or the phenomenology of lying in bed all day.” In the process, “the politics of masturbation [exerted] far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism ... lost out to sado-masochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. Quietly-spoken middle-class students,” he lamented, huddle diligently in libraries at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye-gouging, cyborgs and porno movies.”

In the English-speaking world, Eagleton did the best job of introducing what was largely the product of European and, more specifically, French postmodern thought. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), he presented the exotic new fare with a flourish; in *After Theory* (2004), he

cleaned the table, washed the dishes and left us all satisfied that we had experienced a nutritious meal that would do us all some good, albeit that some parts of it would subsequently be evacuated. As I have said elsewhere (Doughty, 2005, p. 52), despite the opacity of much of its rhetoric, cultural studies have profoundly affected contemporary scholarship: “The pertinent effect of theory was to alter permanently our reading and understanding of symbolic representations, whether in formal texts or in fast food advertisements. Theory changed the university’s ideas about what counts and what does not count as culture. It ‘empowered’ audiences and displaced actors. There is no going back.”

What I did not understand until I read *Organizational Discourse* was how far this broad and sweeping movement had progressed, into what unexpected domains it has ventured, and to how much good effect. Just as I was becoming annoyed with students who were gleefully exchanging the study of French philosophy for the analysis of French kissing, I came upon this anthology. Albeit moving in the wake, but impressively heading in the same direction, organizational analysts whose focus is on the success of major institutions have brought the language of postmodern criticism into their conceptual and descriptive terminology. It is a development that is fascinating and, to me at least, endlessly refreshing.

Organizational Discourse contains a thorough and rigorous exploration of an entire field into which the methods and concerns of culture theory have insinuated themselves to the probable betterment of both. This book treats dense subject matter with an explanatory and elucidatory skill that makes the entire conceptual apparatus transparent and immediately practical. It admits the intelligent laity into what has elsewhere been a sort of secular cloister. Methodological and epistemological issues are handled deftly and explained with sensitivity and precision. No extensive reading of the likes of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and other luminaries is a prerequisite; upon completing the introductory material, however, that same reader is fully equipped to go on. The contributors, it is plain, not only understand what they are talking about, but (unlike many of their colleagues in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences) they make what they are talking about understandable.

In seventeen well-organized and often eloquent chapters, we are invited to see how the analysis of discourse — of conversations, narratives, memoranda and reports, policy papers, transcripts and documents from 911 emergency calls to annual corporate reports — can yield a far more powerful understanding of the way in which organizations really work than any number of traditional case studies that focus on such chimera as leadership, entrepreneurship and measures of employee compliance with innovation.

Each of the articles is of extraordinarily high quality — whether addressing organizational language, power and ideology, technology and workplace studies, a “practical perspective” on the new communications media, or the elusive concept of globalization in fact and theory. Lucid, pointed and wholly engaged with emerging business practices, these essays meet and exceed the highest standards of well-crafted research and expository writing. They bring the best insights of a difficult intellectual movement to bear on corporate entities — both public and private — and

illuminate them brilliantly. This, I believe, is tremendous.

It is also apt to precipitate trembling. The authors of these exceptional essays are not woolly-headed English professors exchanging *bon mots* with their colleagues over sherry in a senior common room. Much less are they *artistes engagées* revising their understanding of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class in the pages of peer-reviewed journals that are read by a few hundred of the most securely tenured academics in captivity. Quite the contrary, they are professors of course, but they are mainly teachers of business administration, management communication, marketing and organizational behaviour. They work at M.I.T.'s Sloan School of Management, the School of Economics and Commercial Law at Sweden's Gothenburg University, the School of Management at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, Cardiff University's Business School in Wales, and so on. They are women and men of high calibre and expertise in the definitively unfuzzy world of administration and commerce.

If these people are at all representative of the possible synthesis of critical social theory and corporate control, some will have to give. Whether it is traditional right-wing ideologues of business and administration or the enduring culture of complaint of the left-wing enthusiasts of social justice who will be more thoroughly shaken remains uncertain.

References:

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About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Applied Arts & Health Sciences at Seneca College in King City, Ontario. He is a graduate of Glendon College and holds postgraduate degrees in Political Science from the University of Hawaii and York University as well as in History and Philosophy from the University of Toronto. He has been Book Review Editor of *The Innovation Journal* since 1998, and was the editor of *Bridges: Explorations in Science, Technology and Society* (1986-1991) and *The College Quarterly* (1992-1997), where he continues as Book Review editor as well.