

Book Review:

Organization Theory: Challenges and Perspective

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Book Information

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BOOK REVIEW

McAuley et al's book offers an in-depth exploration of long-standing questions related to different approaches in organisation theory. Particularly pertinent for both undergraduate and postgraduate students who study organisational theory or analysis, this work goes a step beyond the traditional managerialist perspectives of organisation theory, to situate different perspectives within scholarly debates on modernism and postmodernism. In this context the book explores approaches to organisation theory from its origins through the most recent debates to examine the breadth and complexity of this challenging subject. It shows how different traditions are at times intertwined and at others divided in understanding contemporary organisational dilemmas.

The book begins by outlining the nature of organisation theory in the social sciences. The main objective here is to explore the diversity of perspectives encountered when studying organisation theory. This discussion leads the way to the philosophical disputes and debates that underlie the creation of this diverse range of theories. Here the role of epistemological and ontological assumptions is carefully discussed to provide an insight into different ways of researching, analysing and understanding organisations. This is supported by the use of insightful examples to illustrate the different components of theory, a style which is adopted throughout the book.

The following chapters provide a detailed exploration of the different schools of thought in organisational theory. These include perspectives from modernist, neo modernist and post-modernist thinkers. The relationships between these different approaches are carefully examined to illustrate the ways in which different schools of thought perceive the context of organisational reality. Chapter 2 introduces modernist approaches to organisational theory which suggest the development of systems and bureaucracies as the best way of ordering and organising. In chapter 3 neo modernist accounts are explored which highlight the central role of people in organisations. In so doing the role of the human relations school as a pervasive example of the neo-organisation tradition is explored.

Having paved the way on neo modernist approaches the next chapter neatly introduces new wave theory and outlines its origins in relation to debates about control. It then discusses different theoretical explanations of the apparent spread of cultural management in contemporary organisations. Chapters 5 and 6 outline the concept of postmodernism and contrast two different approaches; the first as a period of time characterised by increased dynamism and diversity in the environment and the second as a philosophy with implications on how organisations are understood. The following two chapters provide an advanced introduction to alternative ways in studying and understanding organisations, including phenomenology, critical theory and psychoanalysis. These perspectives offer a challenging way in understanding organisations and in particular how individuals and groups construct their organisational identities and the relationship between the organisation and society. In chapter 9 a historical account of the origins and evolution of both managers as a significant organisational group and of management as a separate, hierarchical function in organisations is explored. This sets the scene for the emergence of what is termed the managerialist thesis and the implications of the different theoretical interpretations of this organisational development including the diffusion of new managerialism. Finally, the concluding chapter revisits the perspectives discussed in each chapter and applies each briefly, to a case study. It then moves on to discussing contemporary challenges in organisational theory including the debate concerning paradigms and outlines emerging trends and directions for organisational theory.

As a textbook, this book is accessible to a wide range of audiences from a variety of disciplines including Business Studies, Sociology of Organisations and Educational Studies. The book is clear, engaging and highly readable. Each chapter is structured around a series of 'distinctive features' including among others case studies, summaries, further reading and questions for discussion. Moreover, the use of practical examples makes it easy for the reader to relate theory to practice. It is hard to identify weaknesses, both in terms of structure and content. Overall, this book more than adequately responds to the aims that it sets out to achieve. It provides a well informed coverage of a range of theories in the field of organisation theory and sociology. A welcome edition to any student bookshelf or university library.