

# Postmodernism's Challenge to Organization Science: Self-Refuting, Self-Indulgent, or Good Medicine? An Editorial Essay

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It is customary for the accepting editor of a *Crossroads* article to write a brief essay commenting on the piece. However, because Richard Weiss's paper and Stanley Deetz's rebuttal constitute distinct opinions—and because I accepted both articles, yet make no pretense of impartiality regarding my jaundiced stance on postmodernism—I invited a colleague, Rose-May Guignard, who is a staunch advocate of postmodernism, to engage in an informal debate on the merits of Weiss's versus Deetz's positions. Of course, the views I express in this essay are mine, not Rich's, and Rose-May's are hers, not Stan's.

Carroll Stephens

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Rose-May Guignard (R-MG)—Carroll, I don't know what surprises me the most—that Rich Weiss wrote this article, or that *Organization Science* is the journal that is publishing it. As a proud member of what Rich calls the resentment school, who finds that mainstream organization-theory perspectives consistently shut out alternative viewpoints, my reaction to Rich's paper is visceral: He demeans and negates all that I find valuable in the social sciences. Normal science doesn't offer the means to bring to the table most elements of my reality, but postmodernism definitely does. I've really admired Rich's previous work, in which he's taken a critical view on ideology and domination. And isn't *Organization Science* supposed to be a journal that encourages, not suppresses, the expression of multiple voices? What's going on here? It sounds as if Rich, and *Organization Science*, are arguing for a reestablishment of positivist hegemony—a return to the views of Jeff

(*Organization Science; Postmodernism; Deconstruction*)

Pfeffer and Lex Donaldson. Stan is absolutely right to oppose Rich's dismissal of postmodernism.

Carroll Stephens (CS)—You're posing a Manichean antinomy that we *have* heard before (Jeff Pfeffer vs. Al Cannella and Regina Paetzold in *AMR*, Lex Donaldson vs. Graham Astley and Ray Zammuto in *Organization Science*): If you're not a postmodernist, you're a positivist, and possibly a right-wing ideologue as well. But I see this dichotomy as erroneous—it misses the richness and variety of metatheoretical traditions in the social sciences. Rich is not making a positivist argument, as Jeff and Lex did; he's coming from a materialist position. Granted, materialism does have some epistemological overlap with positivism, but also some ethical overlap with claims that are often made for postmodernism. So really, the views aren't as antithetical as they might initially seem. Both Rich and Stan agree on the falsity of identifying postmodernism with any given political stance: Rich shows that postmodernism has historically been used towards some repressive ends; Stan states that postmodernist scholars have no

particular political agenda or common ideals. As for *Organization Science's* current position in the paradigm debates, remember back in 1990 when Arie Lewin and Dick Daft stated that part of the mission of the then-new journal was to break out of the normal-science straitjacket and publish heretical research? In my opinion, postmodernism may be the new sacred cow, so Rich's attack on it is quite consistent with *Organization Science's* goal of opening up debate.

R-MG—I don't agree with you at all. True, Stan does say that postmodernism isn't associated with any particular political agenda, but he also says that postmodernists are radicals. And, of course, a central tenet of postmodernism is to bring in marginalized voices—which is itself an emancipatory process. Rich wants to shut that process down, and to reprivilege "scientific" knowledge. Isn't that a return to the normal-science straitjacket and a move away from emancipation? Rich says he doesn't want politics to invade science, but since I consider science, inevitably, to contain a political component, isn't Rich really saying that he wants to perpetuate the hidden political advantage of the elites by removing the voices of the marginalized?

CS—No, I don't believe so. You're construing postmodernism as inherently emancipatory, so any repudiation of it must be construed as repressive. But Rich's position is that postmodernism is *not* necessarily emancipatory: First, it's been identified with both ends of the political spectrum; and second, Stan concurs that postmodernism hasn't been much concerned with pragmatic consequences, such as emancipation. Like Stan, I think it's important for those of us who do organization science to have some conception of both the good and the true. And like Rich, I think that postmodernism treats the notion of truth cavalierly. What's worse, I fear that postmodernist epistemology, by its eschewal of the possibility of knowing truth, leads to a breakdown of ethics: If any truth is as true as any other truth, then any good is as good as any other good—which amounts to the ultimate form of individualist value freedom, a contemporary repackaging of Sidgwick's modernist utilitarianism in trendy, pomo guise. No relativist philosophy can privilege any given value, so how can postmoderns claim that liberatory social structures are superior to oppressive ones? It's a self-refuting logical impossibility if you accept the fundamental propositions underlying postmodernism—which Rich and I don't.

R-MG—You're making an old mistake, reducing the intersubjective sense of shared meaning that is central to postmodernism—and which constitutes its emancipatory power—to subjectivist solipsism. Just because I deny positivist claims to "purity" of scientific truth does not imply that I live in a make-believe world. You won't see that idea anywhere in Stan's article, either. He's talking about building community—a necessarily intersubjective process, far removed from solipsism.

CS—Rose-May, I have to agree with you there. Although you and I are nominally taking opposing sides in this debate, I admit that I concur with some of what Stan has to say, and my guess is that Rich might too—and vice versa. Stan does *not* abjure reason or science, and he argues against subjectivism. He is anti-functional, but so is Rich. What's interesting to me about this particular debate about postmodernism is that it's a new, edgy juxtaposition: There are clear areas of concurrence as well as vituperative, perhaps irreconcilable, differences. The grounds for concurrence are that the antinomy isn't between the positivists and the pomos, but among a group that subscribes to radical-Weberian/crit theory/Frankfurt School views, yet still differs on its evaluation of postmodernism. As Stan rightly notes, postmodernism isn't monolithic; it comes in several variants. The one that Stan's advancing in his paper is what might be called weak-form postmodernism, a version that is quite close to crit theory. Virtually all social scientists accept the arguments posed by Mannheim and Kuhn that science always contains an element of social constructivism. No quibbles there. My concern is with the *reductio ad absurdum*, the conclusions regarding the essential friability of truth, reason, justice, and good which inhere in strong-form postmodernism. Peter Berger and Richard Rorty, both prominent proponents of intersubjectivism and social construction of reality, rail against the "Who knows? Anything goes" quality of strong-form postmodernism—in part because it leads to the logical (if I may invoke such a modernist term) conclusion, "So what?" I think it's the "So what?" element that Rich is reacting to most strongly. Does postmodernism help our understanding of organizations, and does it aid us in getting where we want to go? Or is it just a language game for academics, a grown-up sort of play? Lex Donaldson posed the latter argument in *Organization Science*, when he retorted to Graham Astley and Ray Zammuto's Wittgenstein-based article that yes,

damn it, there *is* some reality beyond linguistic constructions, and there *are* some material consequences of organizational action. Dismiss Lex as a positivist if you like, but recognize that arguments strikingly similar in structure to his have come from social activists and crit theorists. Michael Moore wrote in *The Nation* that postmodernists appear to care more about increasingly transgressive and impenetrable conversations with each other than about the real effects of global capitalism on workers, families, and communities. And the postmodernist emphasis on "play" has always reminded me of Marcuse's trenchant notion of repressive desublimation: Allow the perception of limitless, self-indulgent frolic, and you effectively defuse forces for consequential socioeconomic and organizational change.

R-MG—You've given me so much ammunition here that I hardly know where to start. I'll take your points in turn. First, postmodernism isn't monolithic, you say? Rich treats it as if it were, and tars the entire philosophy based on shallow extrapolation from a few articles written in English and published in the United States. But the postmodernist tradition is much better developed in France and the United Kingdom, so it seems as if Rich is taking easy shots. His article might better be titled "How Postmodernism Is Consumed in U.S. Management Journals." Since the inclusion of non-U.S. voices in social-science discourse is so crucial to postmodernist philosophy, Rich's virtual exclusion of them is especially telling, both methodologically and substantively. Second, you seem to think that Rich is opposed to postmodernism because it isn't effective enough at attaining shared emancipatory goals. But it looks to me like Rich opposes postmodernism because it *is* emancipatory, and thereby conflates the right and the true—an admixture that's anathema to positivists. A radical critique of truth, reason, justice, and good, as well as the production and consumption of organizational knowledge, is good medicine for the "science" of organization. Truth is rooted in material (I will grant some "reality") and ideal (language of culture, politics) worlds, and our approximations of it are mediated by available technologies. Why then hold on to these truths as if they are immutable? Why is instrumental/technological rationality (direct heir of Cartesian logic) the only "reason" we permit to govern organizational action? To do justice to the ideals of justice and goodness, don't we need to reexamine our definition of them and our involvement with them? Next, what's the basis of

your aversion to play? Shouldn't liberatory work contain an element of joy, and didn't the Frankfurt School embody that idea as much as it did Marcuse's idea of repressive desublimation? Finally—most importantly—you're arguing against in-group language games but seem to be conducting one here. What practical result other than publications for elite academics in *Organization Science* follows from reframing the debate from one between positivists and pomos into one between crits and pomos? As Michael Moore said, "So what?"

CS—I agree that Rich is treating postmodernism as a single entity. But while there is no construct definition that encompasses postmodernism as a whole—even to pose one would be acceding to positivist epistemology—Stan asserts that pomo does have certain features that distinguish it from earlier relativist philosophies. Rich seems to think so, too, and it's these features that Rich is opposing and Stan is supporting. And you're also right that Rich indeed cites a number of U.S. authors—for instance, David Boje, Marty Kilduff, and Stan himself. But Mats Alvesson, of course, is quite prominent in European postmodernist circles; also, Rich critiques the basic philosophies underlying pomo, none of which originated in the United States. On the value-freedom issue, Rich is *not* making the positivist contention that the good and the true are, or ought to be, totally distinct. Echoing Weber, Rich argues that determination of values is the proper province of ethics, not of science, and that pursuit of truth should not be subordinated to a predetermined conception of the "good"—which could be very bad. Weber developed this view within the sociopolitical context of early twentieth century Germany; his prescient fear that politically determined values would constrain science was amply evidenced soon after his death, when the Nazi value of racial purity led to the scientific falsity of eugenics. A contemporary analogue is the sort of "science," decried by leftists, that emerges when corporations with a particular agenda fund research and thus shape findings—for instance, the exoneration of cigarette-smoking from causing lung cancer that emerged from research paid for by the Tobacco Institute. Surely, such control of research is not emancipatory. Next point: Yes, work should be joyful, because it is meaningful. That notion inheres in even the dourest reading of Calvin's Protestant ethic. But sheer play engaged in with no consideration of social or organizational consequences, especially when we academics are the ones

romping in our word games, strikes me as callous, irresponsible, and self-indulgent. Which brings me to your last point—that this debate itself is of little practical value, and therefore is just another example of the detached word games that Rich criticizes. I agree with you that the average working person doesn't care whether the debate about the future of organizations takes place between the positivists and the pomos, or between the crits and the pomos, or however we org scientists want to frame it. But I do think that, by reframing the debate, both Rich and Stan are doing two things that you and other postmodernists would approve of: first, allowing for a potentially extremely contentious dispute about ideas within the organization-science community, and second, advocating some form of praxis. Rich is contending, essentially, that postmodernism is nothing but hot air that doesn't lead us to understanding or action—an even stronger claim than Paul Thompson's judgment that pomo may be a "fatal distraction." Stan is saying that postmodernism, if not wantonly interpreted and divorced altogether from truth claims, brings about emancipatory action via greater understanding. Rich and Stan seem to concur on the desirability of terminal goals of (a) unfettered understanding, and (b) the consequentiality of ideas. Will pomo help us towards either terminal goal? Rich says no, Stan says yes.

R-MG—If the science of organizations is to be concerned with and solely driven by the lifestudy of private corporations, or, in other words, focus on efficient processes to facilitate the accumulation of capital, I agree, pomo is a fatal distraction. However, if the science of organization is about the relations between the organization and its environment, the place of organizations in the polity, and if organizations are construed not only as instruments to

achieve particular goals, but also as settings and actors in the reproduction of social, cultural, and economic landscapes, then pomo offers rigorous avenues to explore these multiple knowledge claims. On the topic of value and consequences, I am puzzled as to why you assume that pomo does not consider the consequences of work. Postmodernism is used for serious emancipatory purposes. As for myself, my preference for postmodernism comes from my own commitment to justice and goodness for all past, present, and future living beings. I want to be a vigilante of sorts whose role is to identify and publicize those areas where, through "scientific" or other types of discourse, violence is done to these ideals of goodness and justice—as Foucault said, to create windows where there are walls; to identify processes by which, as a community, we can temporarily agree on the merits of some truths versus others. The key in Rich's story is the denouement. How does it all end? Does our "hero" get his hands dirty and yield to the capitalist pressure or does he resist? And most importantly, how does he arrive at his decision? Therein lies the postmodern challenge. If the Weiss versus Deetz debate helps us in the organization-science community hammer out issues of knowledge, truth, and accountability, then I'm all for it. If Rich, in his disdain for postmodernism, is trying to re-silence marginalized voices, I'm against it. But, Carroll, since you and I fundamentally agree on the importance of dialogue, and also on the significance of knowledge consumption as well as knowledge production, then we won't know how to evaluate this debate until we can judge its effects. Right?

#### **Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to thank Bill McKelvey for suggesting the title of this essay, Paul Adler for understanding both sides without being value relativist, and—of course—Rich Weiss and Stan Deetz for giving us the fodder for this essay.

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