

Review of: *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*  
by Gibson Burrell

Reviewed by: Campbell Jones

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Over the last two decades Gibson Burrell has made a number of significant contributions towards the development of a radical organization theory. In *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis* (co-authored with Gareth Morgan in 1979) Burrell sketched a place for radical structuralist and humanist work that has provided legitimacy for perspectives critical of the managerialist orientation of most organization theory. But times change, and theoretical fashions change. *Pandemonium* is Burrell's latest effort to produce a radical organization theory, this time in the form of a 'retro-organization theory'. Burrell makes an effort to break conventions of both content and style of presentation.

One is immediately struck by the novel way in which the text is presented. After an introduction and the first chapter, each page is divided in two, so that the reader reads from left to right across the top of both pages and then upon reaching the back of the book, reads from right to left across the bottom of both pages. This is intended to give the effect of 'a divided highway in which the meridian or central reservation separates reading which is moving in one direction from reading which is moving in the other' (30). The reason for this layout echoes one of the themes that runs throughout the book. Burrell explains that *Pandemonium* 'is meant to escape from the normal conventions of textual presentation which pass for common sense within Western social science....the text is designed to be disruptive, randomizing and reliant upon the reader's creativity' (1-2).

This layout draws attention to textual practices that are usually taken for granted. It poses the question of textuality, which has been central to poststructuralist critiques of the transparency of language. *Pandemonium* invites us to reflect on textual practices, and to consider the way that internalised grammatical codes structure textual production. Such a move has the potential to initiate a critique of the norms of 'good writing' in organization theory, those standards that make a normative injunction in favour of certain forms of writing and marginalise other modes of presentation.

Although I had hopes of an important and timely critique of norms of presentation, I was rather disappointed with what I found in *Pandemonium*. Instead of providing a critique of the politics of textual practice in organization theory, Burrell chooses simply to parody and mock those varieties of 'mainstream organization theory' that rest on a rather naïve view of language as representation. In the place of serious commentary on the normalisation of a specific form of textual practice and an account of the interests that such a normalisation serves, Burrell reverts to slogans. He repeats a number of times, in bold letters: 'warning—linearity kills'.

Admitting my frustration with his lack of serious analysis of textual practice, I will leave it to others to judge what is achieved by modifying textual layout, and concentrate on the content of the book. In an ironic moment of clarity, Burrell explains what he means by retro-organization theory:

The characteristics of retro-organization theory are something like the following. This is a form of analysis which seeks to underplay the importance of developing an argument in a linear, logical way. There is a rejection of beginning at the beginning and claiming that the conclusion which falls at the end (of course) represent progress and enlightenment (27).

One could be excused for taking this to be one of the currently popular forms of 'postmodernism' that has become a substitute for critique amongst a number of previously progressive organization theorists. Burrell has written several essays on postmodernism, and there are remarkable similarities between retro-organization theory and what he earlier called 'postmodern organization theory' (see

Burrell 1988, 1994; Cooper and Burrell 1988). But Burrell insists that Pandemonium should be seen as pre-modern, hence the notion of a retro-organization theory. Thus, he delves back in history, focusing in particular on pre-industrial Europe. Burrell suggests that this period has been largely ignored in organization theory and that 'it is from deep within pre-modernity, where we will...find a good time with which to begin an innovative approach to the future of our discipline in terms both of what we look at and how we look at it' (24).

Burrell claims that retro-organization theory draws its key intellectual inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). Although there is scant mention of these authors or their ideas in the book (and also noting that it is not at all clear that either of these writers are 'premodern') Burrell follows these two in their emphasis on 'the visceral, the carnal, the bodily, the unclean' (47). Burrell suggests that '[w]e have to peer under the rim and look at what lies there, under the edge of an organizational reality which we are told is often clear, inviting and natural' (47). So Burrell raises a number of issues that are omitted in mainstream organization theory. In Pandemonium we find six 'exhibits' (what some might call 'chapters') which feature discussions of Death, Pain and Disease, Sex and Surveillance, in addition to sections taken from Burrell's earlier articles on sexuality and organization (Burrell 1984; Burrell & Hearn 1989), linearity (Burrell 1992), death, pain and torture (Burrell 1996) and the strictures of writing (Burrell 1993).

Although much of the material here is taken from these earlier essays, Pandemonium is not simply a collection of Burrell's previous work. Burrell does introduce a number of new ideas, many of which play on the notion of a pre-modern or retro-organization theory. For example, he raises the question of the place of 'peasants' in organization theory. He asks '[c]ould it not be that one hidden theoretical object which organization theory has not yet addressed as its explanandum is the "peasantry"?' (14). Retro-organization theory sets out to correct this omission.

Retro-organization theory seeks to reassert the role of the peasantry in contemporary life—across the globe. This will come as no surprise to rural sociologists or Third World specialists. Yet for organizational theory, I imagine it will be a surprise (57).

Burrell's discussion of the peasantry illustrates precisely the same problem that I identified in relation to Burrell's treatment of questions of textuality. Once again, he raises an important issue, but fails to provide any extended analysis of the peasantry, beyond some frivolous remarks about the idiocy of organization theorists. Burrell manages to avoid almost all of the existing work that has made an effort to theorise the status of peasants. He fails to connect with the foundational works in peasant studies by Redfield (1956) and Wolf (1966). He makes no mention of the Journal of Peasant Studies which was established in 1973, and offers nothing from the extensive work of the Subaltern Studies group (see Guha 1982-1992; Chatterjee & Pandey 1993; Arnold & Hardiman 1994; Amin & Dipesh 1997) or the efforts to develop a postcolonial theory (see, for example, Said 1978, Spivak 1996). In the place of empirical observation or informed theoretical discussion, Burrell prefers to offer us witty, playful conjecture.

The way that Burrell treats the notion of the 'peasantry' is indicative of the way that Burrell treats a number of the other concepts that he introduces here, which leads me to the central criticism that I have of his book. He introduces provocative and interesting new ideas, which have, as he suggests, been excluded from the purview of mainstream organization theory. But invariably the contribution ends there. Burrell fails to theorise these concerns, and fails to make connections with existing theoretical work in other fields or to provide the conceptual starting points for other theorists who might want to explore these ideas further. Rather than revert to 'argument', Burrell tends to rest largely on conjecture and insinuation. He feels willing to make broad claims about a number of issues, with little attention to what would conventionally count as 'evidence' or 'argumentation'.

Still, in defense of Burrell, one could say that my objections are excessively 'rationalistic' and 'linear', unacceptable assumptions in the postmodern world in which we live. Burrell makes such a case:

The seductive trap I would enjoin you to avoid, however, is that of seeing *Pandemonium* as representing an argument, or a thesis or a story. It is a ludibrium—a playful toying with ideas—more than anything else and contains hidden meanings of which I am not aware. You are invited not to treat it seriously but to look for enjoyment and pain where you can find it within the back streets of this imagination (28).

Interestingly, this form of rebuttal has recently appeared with increasing regularity. Specifically, this is a habit in ‘postmodern’ organization theory. After the usual tirade against rationalistic ‘modernist’ organizational analysis we hear the call for a complete break with all things modern. In *Pandemonium* this involves the collapse of almost all standards of ‘reason’, to the point that all discourses are logically and normatively equal in value. In short, Burrell verges on a form of relativism that holds that ‘anything goes’, and any objections to this are condemned as being ‘rationalistic’.

Of course, Burrell does not consistently hold that anything goes. As Richard Rorty has famously stated, no-one holds such a position (Rorty, 1982: 166). Burrell moves between a kind of playful relativism and the ‘totalising’ logic that he so fervently hates. When rubbishing the claims of others he reverts to a claim about the relativity of positions, but when he wants to establish his own position he strategically deploys the tropes of ‘accuracy’ (107) in defence of positions that he supports, and he takes himself to be in a position such that he can authoritatively state that ‘[t]o understand today we must engage in retro-organization theorizing’ (98, emphasis added). For me, this form of opportunistic relativism was a continual source of frustration.

Despite all of these problems, I am glad that Burrell wrote this book. I am glad because of the way that it may open up space for new paths to be taken that are currently excluded by certain currents in organization theory. Burrell may have indicated the possibility a number of lines of flight that others may take up and explore in greater depth, although hopefully they will do this with more rigour. Even if Burrell’s analyses of many of the issues that he raises are somewhat inadequate, I would be surprised if readers find nothing of interest in *Pandemonium*.

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