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Organization studies: An international multidisciplinary journal devoted to the study of organization, organizing, and the organized in and between societies

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Helen Brown: Women Organising

1991, London: Routledge. 211 pages.

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It is a rare pleasure to stumble upon a book that one would have liked to have written. As many colleagues find, the process of writing helps us to clarify what we have learned from experience. During the course of my work in the past years with people seeking to create new forms of organization and interaction in a variety of settings and countries, I have wished for the time to analyze my observations and experiences through writing. Helen Brown's book *Women Organising* provided me with the multiple theoretical lenses through which to make sense of the practical work with which I have been involved as a researcher, consultant, and participant in organizations.

The book is a solid and dense piece of work drawing on, and extending, theories of organization, leadership and negotiation. The author notes several deficits in organization theories to date: most of the research focuses exclusively on managerial work, neglecting the contributions of non-managers to organizing activities, and it sheds little light on lateral, cooperative linkages within hierarchies (p. 1). Furthermore, studies of non-hierarchical organizations have rarely explored the dynamics of internal processes by which non-hierarchical organization is produced; more or less explicitly assuming that it is a natural or spontaneous phenomenon (p. 2). Brown shares the critical view expressed by Pettigrew that much organizational analysis is 'ahistorical, acontextual and aprocessual' (Pettigrew 1985: 3).

These concerns might appear peripheral to modern management if it were not for the increasingly frequent calls for new, flexible, cooperative and fluid forms of organization in such mainstream structures as multinational corporations and public authorities (Ashridge Management College 1988; Barham and Rassam 1989; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989). Since no simple models exist for the new forms of management sought, people are faced with the challenge of 'actively creating a vision of what an alternative form of organisation looks like and working towards bringing this vision into being' (p. 34). Therefore, there is an urgent need for fresh insights into organization theory and for individuals engaged in experimenting in practice with alternative forms of organization.

Brown has looked outside the 'mainstream' to find such insights. She explores processes within organizations which are explicitly seeking to achieve non-hierarchical modes of working consonant with their collectivist and egalitarian values: women's centres. How do the participants in these centres fulfill the needs faced in every organization, i.e., the 'need to manage relationships between individuals and the group, and between the group and other actors; to create and maintain commitment, and to enhance the competence of participants, and thereby to ensure the survival of the social order'? (p. 31).

Brown surmounts one of the weaknesses of organization theory by distinguishing between the concept of organization, as a noun, and organizing activity as a process in which members of the group participate in different ways and with varying levels of intensity over time. The case-study material leads Brown to define organizing activity 'as a series of agreements to cooperate in purposive groups around issues which are perceived to require attention' (p. 79). A cornerstone to Brown's analysis is the connection between individuals, processes, and contexts that maintains the importance of human agency by focusing on '*joint actions*, that is . . . the form and content of relationships' (p. 79, italics in original).

Brown seeks to overcome the limitations of many studies on leadership in organizations by differentiating between leaders, in the sense of the status of individuals, and leadership behaviour, with an eye to highlighting the importance of the development and exercise of specific skills

to achieve successful organization (p. 5). She disagrees with those feminist authors and anarchist or collectivist scholars who reject all forms of leadership. Instead, she argues that 'while leadership in the focused sense may be redundant, or more accurately *unacceptable* in non-hierarchical settings . . . leadership must still be accomplished by some means if successful organisation is to be achieved' (italics in original, p. 38). The detailed analysis of the data shows that although the skills of organizing 'are often seen as attributes of leaders . . . it is more accurate to conceptualise them as "leadership acts" which must be accomplished by some means, whether by one, a few, or many participants, depending on the values which inform the social order in question' (p. 164). Brown illustrates clearly how the members of the women's centres work on achieving the goal of 'distributed leadership' by trying to develop skills and share responsibilities. This study, as well as others Brown cites, document how extremely difficult this goal is to reach.

Brown draws on negotiated-order theory to analyze the processes observed and to do justice to their dynamic and political nature, both within the group, and between the group and other actors in the environment. The purpose of negotiation is 'to create shared meaning and joint action' (p. 170). The longitudinal methodology (three years) chosen by Brown enables her to observe a shifting arena of negotiation 'as different aspects of the social order come under scrutiny, such as the conflicts between different interpretations of core values and the differences in the ways in which values are connected to actions by different participants and at different times' (p. 83). A key finding in this research that coincides with a growing number of studies (e.g. Berthoin Antal 1992; Jelinek and Schoonhoven 1990) is the importance of networking as 'a means of handling the core problems of organising . . . working out what is going on and why, deciding what to do about it and translating those understandings into action' (pp. 70-71). The danger in many organizations, and most particularly in those that differentiate themselves emphatically from others in their environment, is that they focus on internal processes to the exclusion of external relations. Research on organizational learning shows how, through contacts with a wide variety of external stakeholders, members of the organization identify factors in the sociopolitical environment and clarify whether they represent opportunities or threats. In the light of this information flow, members of the organization are in a better position to match their capacities to the task and to manage the constant balancing act of developing the appropriate social order to pursue their goals and maintain their values.

The interpretation of information and ideas is identified by Brown as the primary source of legitimacy in non-hierarchical systems. It is neither status nor technical expertise but 'the capacity to demonstrate that meanings and definitions are consonant with the social order in question and have salience for all participants' (p. 172) that is at the heart of leadership skills. The case study illustrates how this source of influence is built up by members of the organization, and how it shifts over time, so that no

one member or subgroup maintains an exclusive position indefinitely. The implications are clear for other kinds of mainstream organizations seeking flatter and more flexible structures, on condition that there is meaning and shared values around which activities can be oriented.

Since the importance of vision and commitment are common themes in management literature today, the themes of values and meaning in this book are bound to fall on fertile ground in management circles. However, the demands on consistently high levels of commitment and identification with organizational goals and values found in this literature are scary, and, in the event, simply unrealistic. This is an issue that women's centres have had to deal with, because their expectations of dedication and identification have often proven overwhelming for the individual and in the long run counterproductive for the organization. The case study provides valuable insights on how differences in commitment levels and varying degrees of shared values can be managed in a group over time.

Helen Brown's book is intense and demands an attentive reader. The theoretical introductory chapters contain valuable practical illustrations of organizational and management issues. Some readers may be tempted to skip the chapters on the case study because it takes some energy and imagination to translate these findings back into the reality of the organizational settings in which most managers work today. The conclusions are well worked out in the closing chapters, but the reader who has not taken the time and effort to read the case study will probably find them too dense. For researchers, the lucid discussion about the methodology will be useful.

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