

# THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ORGANIZATION THEORY

By G5

Organization theory has taken a depressing turn, states Mary Jo Hatch with considerable regret. She is Professor Emerita at University of Virginia and has a long affiliation with the Department of Organization at CBS. As the American author of a textbook on organization theory that sells around the world, she feels particularly disappointed in seeing leading US schools abandon the subject. Might Europe soon follow suit?

Why is this happening? And is there a future for organization theory?

Mary Jo suggests that there are several ways to explain why Organization Theory has been disappearing from US business schools. For one thing, there is a tendency to prefer thinking either individually or sociologically, rather than organizationally. Today in the US other courses in the business curriculum have more or less split up the spoils of abandoned OT courses. Both organizational behavior and strategy teach structure and culture, while the IT and operations teachers deal with technology. The focus in these courses is on the individual agent and teamwork in the context of an organization and its culture, or on the larger context of organizations – the institutional environment with its formative nature. The OB approach, however, is overly psychologized and too often positions leadership as heroic, while strategy tends to be under-humanized.



Another trend traces to Europe, especially to the UK where critical management scholars have gained a stronghold. With their critical approach, these scholars have deflated many practice-based notions of organizations and management without putting anything substantial in their place. While it can be good to be reflexive about the limitations of management and organization, and wary of the harm power and domination in organizational settings can do, there must be something positive to share with our students if we are to regain our place in the business school curriculum. While applications of positive psychology to organization studies may not be the answer, it at least brightens the classroom a bit.

One challenge that has always confronted those who teach OT is that it the subject matter is harder to teach than either organizational behavior or strategy. OB has loads of funny, personally meaningful exercises, and strategy makes students feel they are sitting in the drivers' seat. In contrast to these subjects, OT is complex and demands loads of abstractions that make hard work for students. Can we make OT more fun? If not, could it be at least more obviously relevant?

Mary Jo tells of former students who found OT relevant only after they gained practical experience. As they climbed higher in their organizations, they came to value organization theory for the insights it offers into the complexities real life in organizations presents. In addition she reports having much greater success teaching OT when the students are executives, as in the executive doctoral courses she has taught in the US and the UK. But even in these contexts, getting students to give OT a try is not

easy. In struggling to design her first executive PhD class she finally decided to let them discover for themselves what the subject was good for by having them apply every concept and theory to their own organization – a painful way to go, but it worked – mostly because they felt so much pressure not to look foolish or stupid in front of their peers! As the class developed over its first week-long session, one by one the students presented chapter after chapter of the book, placing the concepts and theories in the context of understanding their own organization. Of course each of them began at once to try to think how the ideas presented would look in their own organization, and by Chapters 4 and 5 they had caught on that the pieces all fit together like a puzzle. Well, sort of. At least by the time they reached the end of the book they all had gained respect for this difficult subject and what it could contribute to their management practices. All without having to be told what to do, each had figured out their own way of taking the ideas “back to the office”.

One of the students in that first executive PhD class later jokingly accused Hatch of teaching OT “by stealth”. Mary Jo was so taken by this idea that she, with Majken Schultz, eventually developed courses, articles and a book on the premise of sneaking OT into more popular topics such as corporate branding and brand management. Teaching OT by stealth means using theory to explain why certain practices work, often without mentioning the words organization or theory! Literally putting a little theory into practice to explain the whys along with the hows seems to be at least one promising path to regaining space for OT in the business school curriculum. But it may mean developing applications on a much narrower base than one would when teaching an entire course on organization theory. It also means crossing into territory “owned” by other fields, such as marketing, communication, or operations research, not to mention the obvious organizational behavior and strategy courses. The way forward for me prior to my retirement was to join in teaching an integrated curricula where OT is just one of many fields represented on a business school faculty team.

So, what role can IOA play? Mary Jo is optimistic that IOA could be the place to start reinvigorating organization theory and making it more relevant to students. IOA has always been good at developing and teaching practice-based, democratic, egalitarian understandings of organization. What is more, topics and themes that have long been cultivated at IOA such as sustainability and CSR, health care management, and cultural industries, could prove excellent vehicles for teaching OT by stealth. Though these topics have in one sense fragmented IOA in recent years, refocusing on the practical applications where OT can make a real difference by complementing practice with theory, might bring a new sense of shared purpose and direction. Sneak OT into teaching could be a point of reintegration not just for our students, but also for our research activities.