

“Is Post-modernism to Blame for Our Post-truth World?” Some answers, with particular reference to management scholarship.

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Abstract

The question was the title of an event organised by the Forum for European Philosophy, 2nd October 2017. The panel comprised four speakers: among them three prominent academics. A question posed in the accompanying blurb was: ‘Did Derrida make us do it?’ This paper proposes to answer both questions by tackling issues around postmodernism and post-truth primarily through Derrida’s writings, and applying them to mainstream management scholarship.

Three main criticisms of postmodernism raised at that event are central to negative commentaries generally regarding postmodernism. The first is postmodernism’s condemnation of objective truth. Alison Gibbons, Reader in Contemporary Stylistics at Sheffield Hallam University, expressed the view that because postmodernists did not believe in objective truth the consequence was that we had to turn to our own emotions and subjectivity. Professor James Ladyman, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bristol and probably the best known of the panellists, stated that a repudiation of objective fact meant a repudiation of knowledge of right and wrong, which played to the forces of darkness. Postmodernism was to blame for the cultural climate regarding truth and knowledge, and entailed a disrespect for epistemic authority. It denied scientific knowledge, but according to him there is no such thing as ‘post-science’. We are all utterly dependent on science and the increase in scientific knowledge was irrefutable.

The claim that scientific knowledge is wholly about truth, reason and objective fact has been contested in various ways by historians of science, for example Kuhn (1970), Hanson (1972) and Feyerabend. (1993). On the other hand, some philosophers like Popper and Wittgenstein have argued that truth, reason and objectivity are not the only types of knowledge that are valid (Magee 1998). Social theorists have pointed to the existence of different sociological paradigms with concomitant different ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies (Burrell & Morgan 1979), and thus different truths.

Habermas, in discussing positivism as a purveyor of objective truth, pointed out that because positivist thinking precluded any epistemological approaches other than the methodological analysis of scientific procedures, and because a knowing subject was no longer the point of reference, this meant that epistemology was ‘flattened out to methodology’, thereby losing sight of questions to do with the framing of research and the meaning of knowledge:

by making a dogma of the sciences’ belief in themselves, positivism assumes the prohibitive function of protecting scientific inquiry from epistemological self-reflection (Habermas 1972:67).

Bourdieu (1990) condemned the validation of objectivist scholarship at the expense of subjectivist approaches. Such divisions were invalid and dangerous. Neither approach could provide a sufficient explanation on its own, and these separate types of scholarship led to ‘mutilations’ in sociological analysis. Bourdieu called the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism the ‘most ruinous’ of all oppositions artificially dividing social science.

The second criticism, raised by Ladyman, is the popular one that in postmodernism ‘anything goes’. This is the conclusion many have arrived at from postmodern theorists’ rejections of objective truth. In Ladyman’s words, in postmodernist thinking all knowledge was equal, leading to no discrimination between different types of knowledge. This led to a denial of scientific knowledge, and the encouragement for people not to be concerned about ignorance as all opinions were valid. It will be argued, that at least for Derrida, this is patently not the case: discourse had to meet rigorous criteria. Many of Derrida’s significant works contain extensively argued analyses of other theorists’ writings including Husserl, Hegel and Nietzsche. In order to meet difficulties of interpretation Derrida has been described as favouring a “patient and minutely philological *explication de texte*”, as shown in his detailed and painstaking critique of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (Hillis Miller cited in Culler 1982:23). Moreover, through his writings on deconstruction Derrida provided the tools for others to engage in careful and critical analyses of texts. Some of these will be used in an analysis of objectivist scholarship in management texts.

Ladyman’s third and perhaps strongest criticism is one laid justifiably at the door of many postmodern thinkers: their opposition to meta-narratives. He saw postmodern rejection of meta-narrative as undermining issues of religion, class, race and gender, and rather than being a liberating force, enabled conservatism and worse. Ladyman then equated the importance of some meta-narratives, notably the increase in scientific knowledge, with the recognition and protection of human rights. Perhaps somewhat in contradiction to his above remarks, Ladyman then claimed that it was not science’s job to provide a moral or political lead or provide an eman-

cupatory ideology, although he acknowledged that science itself had been used, at times, in order to justify racist theories.

One of Derrida's strong criticisms of meta-narratives centred on western philosophy. In his eyes western philosophy promoted the meta-narrative of bipolar thinking – of looking at concepts and issues in terms of irreconcilable opposites instead of seeing them as interdependent and subject to each other's influence. Derrida's method of deconstruction criticised the centrality of these binary oppositions which he termed 'violent' hierarchies. He recommended that these oppositions be overturned in order to bring 'low what was high', disorganise the inherited order and arrive at a new concept to the point where "opposition itself – the very ground of dialectical reason – gives way to a process where opposites merge in a constant *undecidable* exchange of attributes" (Norris 1987:134).

Because of these bipolar oppositions, the importance, the existence, let alone the influence and roles of those on the 'wrong' or weak side of these binary divides have not been acknowledged (Derrida 2002). Derrida's critique has been regarded as serving an ethico-political purpose through acknowledging those on both sides of the binary divide (Smith 2005). This attention to alterity, in conjunction with careful analyses of texts, has highlighted the absence of recognition of the roles and importance of 'the other' in society. Bhaskar (1998) saw this as emancipatory – contrary to what many critics of postmodernism including Ladyman have argued.

One defender of postmodernism on the panel, Mark Currie, Professor of Contemporary Literature at Queen Mary, University of London, made the point that postmodernism had been misrepresented and was much more in the business of exposing rather than espousing post-truth. This notion will be developed in this paper in relation to management scholarship. Derrida's ideas on deconstruction, rather than abolishing truth, are highly relevant to a critique of what has been regarded as the validity of mainstream objectivist approaches in the management field.

Questions are raised about the justification for objectivist, positivist management scholarship to lay claim, as it has, to having the sole right to the truth. Such approaches are evaluated in terms of their 'objects of inquiry' (Bourdieu 1990); what counts as knowledge and the type and range of methodologies used. Their claims to objectivity are tested in terms of the choices that have to be made by researchers regarding the subjects investigated, their methodologies and their selection of respondents for their data – the roles and status of these respondents, and crucially the extent of their knowledge about their organisations. A comparison is made with other ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches in the field of management studies.

Derrida's concerns about binary opposites are played out in management studies in terms of the dialectic constructed in much mainstream theory between formal and informal groups and processes, with formal structures generally foregrounded in the orthodox management canon at the expense of informal systems. The knowledge thereby produced is investigated in terms of its coverage and its absences (Bhaskar 1998). Comparisons are made with alternative research approaches and their findings regarding management strategies and their implementation. The question about human rights raised by Ladyman is discussed here in terms of emancipatory versus de-emancipatory scholarship with comparisons made between positivist scholarship and other sociological paradigms.

As well as raising questions about the epistemological legitimacy and therefore truth of objectivist, positivist research, this scholarship is compared with other approaches in terms of their practical relevance and usefulness in organisations, not least for managers and other professional practitioners. This can also be linked to the facilitation or otherwise of emancipatory outcomes and begs the question as to where responsibility lies regarding post-truth and its variants, such as alternative truth, selective or partial truth.

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