

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

[Review] *Organizing Words: A Critical Thesaurus for Social and Organization Studies* by Yiannis Gabriel, 2008

## Journal Item

### How to cite:

Bristow, Alexandra (2009). [Review] *Organizing Words: A Critical Thesaurus for Social and Organization Studies* by Yiannis Gabriel, 2008. *Management Learning*, 40(5) pp. 617–621.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/13505076090400050803>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

***ORGANIZING WORDS: A CRITICAL THESAURUS FOR SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES***, Yiannis Gabriel, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-921322-1 (hbk.), ISBN 978-0-19-921321-4 (pbk.)

Author copy of the book review published in *Management Learning*, Nov 2009, pp. 617-621.

Alexandra Bristow  
The Open University Business School  
Milton Keynes, UK

[alexandra.bristow@open.ac.uk](mailto:alexandra.bristow@open.ac.uk)

From an expert in organizational storytelling comes this engaging and stimulating collection of stories about 227 keywords relevant to organization and social studies. The reversal of the latter part of the book's title here is intentional, as the entries have a definite organizational emphasis. The 'social' in the title should be read as a way of positioning Gabriel's view of organization studies as located firmly within the context of the social studies, and as a way of defining the book's audience. The word 'critical' is, of course, another big giveaway of the book's intellectual orientation, although for some a greater epistemological and ontological diversity might have been required to justify such a description. As it is, 'critical' is clearly interpreted through a social constructivist lens – words (including the 227 keywords) are said to 'not merely describe social realities but constitute them' (Introduction: xiv), to '*work for us*' (emphasis in original) and to 'organize our experiences, our thoughts and even our feelings' (hence the 'organizing words' of the title; *ibid*). Such 'emphasis on how language constructs reality', as one of the entries in the book suggests, is a particular feature of post-structuralism (Post-structuralism: 229). The keyword collection is also expressive of this emphasis – through the proliferation of entries widely associated with post-structuralism and social construction (eg. aesthetics, bricolage, culture, deconstruction, discourse, fantasy, grand narratives, language, metaphors, myth, narratives and narrative knowledge, the other and othering, postmodernism, spectacle, symbols and symbolism, etc.) and through the subtle privileging of certain elements of binary pairs over others as keywords. For example, the book contains an entry on 'subject and subjectivity' but not 'object and objectivity' (the

latter is subsumed in the contents of the former), on ‘epistemology’ but not ‘ontology’ (although both ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’ have their own entries), on ‘post-structuralism’ (and ‘structuralism’) but not ‘critical realism’ (the latter gets a brief mention under ‘reality’). As a post-structuralist myself, I found most of the entries fascinating, relevant and useful, but I can see that others may consider Gabriel’s choices of keywords to be more problematic.

Of course, the book does not aim or claim to be all things to all people, and Gabriel emphasises that it ‘is neither an encyclopedia nor a dictionary but a *thesaurus*’ (Introduction: xiv; emphasis in original) – originally a ‘treasure trove’, which ‘does not contain every important gem in the world, nor even a specimen of every important type of gem, but it does contain a variety of fascinating, valuable, original gems (and maybe some fakes too)’ (ibid). He acknowledges that ‘some readers may be puzzled at the absence of certain terms’ – such as ‘empowerment’, ‘burn-out’, ‘Total Quality Management’ and ‘Business Process Re-engineering’, which do not have entries of their own. I must add to this list the personally disappointing absence of ‘history’ and/or ‘historiography’, which do not even make it to the index. This is a surprising lack, given the persistent calls for a ‘historic turn’ in organisation studies (eg. Zald 1993, Kieser 1994, Burrell 1997, Clark & Rowlinson 2004, Jacques 2006) and given the significance of historical deconstruction in the projects of postmodernism and post-structuralism, which, by the book’s own acknowledgement, inform Critical Management Studies (Critical theory and Critical Management Studies: 62-63). Gabriel also recognises that some other keywords may appear idiosyncratic – such as ‘death’ and ‘othering’ (one could also add to this list ‘crowds’, ‘cynicism’, ‘genocide’, ‘love’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘unmanaged and unmanageable’ – all uncommon and thought-provoking entries). Gabriel’s defence of his collection of keywords is that it has been compiled with a focus on words ‘full of possibilities and tensions (culture, identity), words that become battlefields of heated debates (diversity), words that are currently unleashing their potential (information, spectacle), or words that have become too ‘comfortable’ and seem to call for some probing (motivation)’ (Introduction: xv). ‘Inevitably, the words I chose reflect my own interests’, he concedes (ibid). Inevitably indeed, but this leads one to wonder why a book of this character – a ‘treasure trove’ of ‘organizing words’, which

aims to become an authoritative starting point for essay-writing and research development (ibid: xvi-xvii) in ‘social and organization studies’ – has been compiled by mainly one, however authoritative, individual. Inviting any others to contribute to the thesaurus was, it seems, an afterthought: ‘As I was working on the book, [...] it occurred to me that it would be interesting to broaden the horizon by inviting some of my scholarly friends to make a contribution. I therefore invited some forty colleagues to contribute a single entry each to the project, a gift plant to my garden, so to speak’ (ibid: xv). As well as evoking images of an invisible college, the above statement raises (other) questions of methodology. Why invite forty and not fifty, eighty, a hundred or twenty contributions? If the forty ‘outsourced’ entries ‘give the work greater variety and depth than [Gabriel] could have managed on [his] own’ (ibid), why has there not been more systematic and extensive outsourcing, perhaps turning the thesaurus into an edited work? Would this not have made for a richer, more varied treasure trove? If the thesaurus is meant to inform the organization studies community as to their key organizing words, would it not have been more appropriate to conceptualise the book as a communal – not Gabriel’s – garden?

Undoubtedly, the above questions relate to what, according to the thesaurus, constitutes one of the main divergences of opinion in Critical Management Studies – namely the issue of ‘who has the right to speak for another person’, as speaking inevitably ‘constructs reality’ on behalf of that person (Critical theory and Critical Management Studies: 63). In a way, especially approached from a social constructivist/post-structuralist direction, the very project of creating a thesaurus for organization studies can be seen as problematic. Although Gabriel insists on differentiating the book from a dictionary and is adamant that it does not set out to establish ‘correct’ uses of words or to be canonical or doctrinaire (Introduction: xvi-xvii), ‘thesaurus’ and ‘dictionary’ can be viewed as synonymous (Oxford English Dictionary) and Gabriel’s disclaimers can do little to change the way his book consists of a collection of circumscribed, finite descriptions. These limited entries, however open they aim to be, cannot avoid a degree of *definition* – etymologically, the bringing to an end (ibid). This bringing to an end must then be placed in the context of an academic field widely recognised as a ‘historically contested terrain’ long characterised by a ‘cacophony of querulous voices’ (Reed 1996: 32), a place where there is not only ‘debate about various positions’, but also ‘people

taking different positions on the taking of positions' and, 'even then, contradictions between positions that are taken on the taking of positions' (Watson 2006: 380). As the fight over labels is at the heart of the field's contestation (ibid), attempting a definition of its key terms is a highly politically-charged and precarious activity, the legitimacy – and even the desirability – of which is bound to be subject to questioning. Yet there is no acknowledgement of these issues in the thesaurus and no effort made to defend Gabriel's right (or that of his forty academic friends) to speak on behalf of the querulous others in fragmented organisation studies – a striking lapse of reflexivity in this 'critical' book. This lapse creates the impression that that the personal and institutional reputations of Gabriel and others, aided perhaps by the status of Oxford University Press as the leading reference works publisher, have been deemed sufficient to generate the necessary degree of legitimacy and authority.

Fortunately, such judgement would belie the high quality of the book's writing and its genuinely informative character. Gabriel says that he hopes 'that every reader of [the thesaurus] will discover something interesting, something original, and something helpful in every page' (Introduction: xv). I have to humbly admit that, in my case at least, his hope has been justified. I have found the entries that I consider within my particular areas of expertise (actor network theory (ANT), critical theory and Critical Management Studies, criticism and critique, epistemology, knowledge, language, legitimacy, organizational theories, paradigms and perspectives, postmodernism, post-structuralism, reflexivity, science, social construction of reality, subject and subjectivity) to be helpful summaries that I can see being of great value to students as concise introductions to their subject matter. The entry on criticism and critique in particular deserves to be given as a handout to all students at the beginning of critical management studies courses as a way of introducing critical thinking. (It concludes with an especially poignant point that criticism must be viewed as 'a powerful attitude' that 'should be itself subject to criticism' (Criticism and critique: 64) – an argument all too often forgotten in 'critical' teaching.) The above praise does not mean that I necessarily found myself agreeing with the way every one of my 'familiar' entries was summarised, in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of certain points and the prioritisation of some over others. For example, in the Actor network theory (ANT) entry, the very spelling of the entry title is disputable, which

actually reflects on the character of ANT, yet the alternative spelling of ‘Actor-Network Theory’ is not mentioned and the significance of the disappearing hyphen is not explained. Consequently, the importance of the interchangeable character of ‘actors’ and ‘networks’ in ANT is sidelined in the entry. Another example is ‘Critical theory and Critical Management Studies’, where the aforementioned divergence over the question of who has the right to speak for whom is allocated a paragraph, whereas little is made of the heterogeneous epistemological and ontological disagreements in the field. That said, it would have been impossible to satisfy everyone’s gripes with the entries (which points, once again, to the precariousness of producing a thesaurus for a field as contested as organisation studies), and they do not greatly detract from the usefulness of the summaries provided. As a non-expert, I found fewer problems with the less familiar keywords, and there was plenty of ‘something interesting, something original and something helpful’ there. In terms of research, I can see myself coming back to this book in the future, whenever new thoughts take me into less known territory, to glean the general ideas behind concepts and any useful pointers to further reading that the thesaurus can provide. Of course, this will need to be done *critically*. Yet, for all the flaws and problematics of its project (or perhaps partially because of them), there is very little else currently available in organization studies that would afford a similarly quick reference, and the book thus does occupy an important niche that will undoubtedly be much visited. Who knows, may be in becoming an important reference point of passage, the thesaurus, despite Gabriel’s best intentions (or perhaps in fulfilment of his very secret hopes?), will actually contribute to the sorting out of labels in the field.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- Burrell, Gibson (1997): *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organizational Theory*, London: Sage;
- Clark, Peter & Rowlinson, Michael (2004): ‘The Treatment of History in Organisation Studies: Towards an ‘Historic Turn’?’ *Business History*, 46, 3: 331-352;
- Jacques, Roy Stager (2006): ‘History, Historiography and Organization Studies: The Challenge and the Potential’, *Management and Organizational History*, 1, 1: 31 – 49;
- Kieser, Alfred (1994): ‘Why Organization Theory Needs Historical Analyses – and How This Should Be Performed’, *Organization Science*, 5: 608 – 620;
- Reed, Michael (1996): ‘Organizational Theorizing: a Historically Contested Terrain’, Chapter 1.1 in Clegg, Steward, Hardy, Cynthia & Nord, Walter R., eds, (1996): *Handbook of Organization Studies*, London: Sage;

Watson, Tony J. (2006): 'Review Essay: The Organization and Disorganization of Organization Studies', *Journal of Management Studies*, 43, 2: 367 – 382;

Zald, Mayer N. (1993): 'Organization Studies as a Scientific and Humanistic Enterprise: Toward a Reconceptualization of the Foundation of the Field', *Organization Science*, 4, 4: 513 – 528;