Global politics, academic dispositions and the tilting of ‘organizational communication’; a provocation to a debate

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There is no question that the US has dominated world politics and economics since WWII. The effect has been that no matter where we are located, and no matter what we do, we are more or less required to engage with US positions in economic, political and cultural spheres. Of course the particular kind of engagement that people practice around the globe varies considerably. One response is to salute and consume, emulate and diffuse US doctrines and artifacts. Such a response affirms a position as consumer, supporter or junior partner in a US-led world order.

In the academic world the US has operated as a significant producer of academic knowledge partly by being a significant importer and accumulator of academic labour. For those unable or unwilling to sell their academic labour in this way the US is often the centre of gravity of their discipline or field (particularly business related fields). One effect of this gravitational tug is an assumption that the demonstration of linkages with US colleagues, US
journals and US universities represents relevance, credibility and the ‘international’ character of one’s work. What such assumptions don’t recognize are the more subtle features of such linkages - the dominant-subordinate character of some of these relations\(^1\).

Yet US pre-eminence in economic and political spheres appears to be on the wane. Economically the current contractionary/restructuring economic phase appears to favour China, India and the expanded European block. And politically the US has lost significant legitimacy as it continues along a route that celebrates military adventurism, economic protectionism and religious fundamentalism\(^2\).

So what happens when the economic and political ground shifts? What happens to the role of junior partner, consumer and emulator of US policy and agendas in US dominated fields? If we take academic fields as an example we might conclude that such shifts have little or no impact. Academic work is only loosely coupled to economic and political changes and on a global scale this coupling seems even less significant (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1995).

\(^1\) At the same time some US academics ex-patriots/’refugees’ have found homes in universities elsewhere and to varying degrees these travelers became promoters, supporters and confirmers of US academic knowledge and disciplinary practices (Clegg et al, 2000).

\(^2\) Of course this not to say that the current US regime doesn’t have its supporters elsewhere. There are those who both celebrate current US foreign policy and who have had some degree of political success by mimicking the US regime’s catch cries and agendas.
My claim is that such changes are more tightly inter-related than might be assumed. At the locale the discursive practices that constitute meanings (that is symbolic or interpretive processes) are also practices that articulate political and economic processes. Changes in the meanings that we ascribe to things bear on and are themselves shaped by political and economic relations. In other words, at the level of what it is possible to say (at the level of ‘discourse’ if you like), relatively small shifts in political and economic circumstances provide conditions for and possibilities of non-US networks, priorities and projects. Let me illustrate.

Not long ago I attended a small conference in Sydney, Australia, that addressed resistance in organizations (a very apt topic for my illustration you might think). The event was run under the auspices of the Centre for Organizational Discourse based at the University of Melbourne. Flown in especially for the event were three prominent US organizational communication scholars whose credentials for such a meeting were impeccable. Karen Ashcraft, Dennis Mumby and Linda Putnam each presented engaging work (subsequently published in this journal e.g. Mumby, 2005). However at the event there was a sense of distance between these speakers and the audience. There was a sense that the speakers’ assumptions, and the positions they took up, were not those that the audience effortlessly affirmed, emulated or would readily circulate. Of course this sense of dis-association in no way affected the strength of personal companionship, friendship and warmth between the US visitors and other conference goers. We can I hope separate our professional positionings from our feelings for
one another as people. Yet it seemed that these professional differences evoked a sense of moving *past each other* – a sense that we were on different roads with different futures. Of course everyone – perhaps in some strange way because of our focus on organizational resistance - was well mannered and considerate. We spent two full and intense days together and there were no clear moments where this lack of resonance bubbled to form something more manifest. But this again suggested, to me, a divergence. Of course what I'm talking about here are small gradations of divergence within what is admittedly a pretty tight ‘club’. If communication scholars from outside the English speaking nexus of the US-Australia-Canada-NZ-UK-Europe had been present (scholars from Africa, Asian or South American for example) then this sense of distance might have been undetectable. However it was there and in what follows I want to explore this further as something that is indicative of where ‘organizational communication’ is going.

Firstly it is important to stress that all of the attendees at the resistance workshop had a direct research and teaching interest in communication practices in organizations. At the same time, there are institutional and disciplinary differences. Almost all those in the audience work in business schools. As such most have little sense of ‘communication’ as a discipline, or of the place of organizational communication within this framework. Some have links with, or are products of, European academic training and its peculiarities and differences with US academic apprenticeship.
Also, when discussing their research and teaching the audience preferred the term ‘organizational discourse’ ahead of ‘organizational communication’. As readers of this journal are no doubt well aware small semantic differences carry a good deal of weight in academic conversations. Such terms carry meanings that link them to particular networks and geo-academic locations. It is no secret that ‘organizational communication’ is a US product. One only has to scan the affiliations of authors in the communication yearbook series, in communication journals, and in the handbooks of organizational communication to get a feel for this. Likewise, as many are aware, ‘organizational discourse’ is a largely non-US product. The term is associated with a group of originally UK-based or trained academics whose biennial conference draws together business school-based scholars from highly diverse disciplinary backgrounds. While members of this network might not see themselves as such, ‘organizational discourse’ can be regarded as a kind of ‘home’ for academic refugees. Their institutional location - in the business school – has pushed them beyond the pale in discipline terms. But rather than nurse the wounds of isolation from some ‘home’ discipline, this displacement (and the problems that produces – see Fairclough, 2005) has seen them engage their abilities as institutional entrepreneurs. In the last ten or so years they have constructed a field of research and teaching that draws its economic sustenance from business schools and its intellectual resources from a range of traditions located customarily in the humanities and social sciences. Of course there is no question that intellectually this group shares much with US based organizational communication scholars, and the invitation to Mumby, Ashcraft and Putnam speaks to this point. But this
network’s particular conditions of possibility, their ‘refugee’ status, the relative bounty of their institutional location, their direct engagement in executive and management education, and the lack of any outward pretension toward the formation of a discipline as the preferred framework of reproduction creates, as compared with that articulated by their US colleagues, a different project which is articulated through a different disposition. Speaking in Bourdieuan terms we might say the non-US scholars share a different habitus, a different ‘embodied history’ (Krais, 1993:169). It is this different disposition that, in my view, produced the lack of resonance, the sense of disassociation and divergence I identified above.

So what’s my point? My point is that organizational communication, internationally speaking is, to use Deleuze’s phrase (1992), ‘in the archive’. It is not what we, if I can use that pronoun loosely for the moment, are becoming. These differences of disposition identified above, coupled with the rise of the business school, the relative demise of the academic discipline as the dominant means of organizing academic labour, all set in the context of the relative decline of US economic power and political legitimacy, means that ‘organizational communication’ has lost its footing as a means of organizing academic work in our field.

So what are we becoming? This isn’t clear. The present is chaotic. It is only really possible to identify what we are becoming with the benefit of hindsight (once we have become it!) or once the present has move away from us.
If you’re with me thus far, let me just identify some of the implications of this shift. Academically it seems to me that our work is taking a tighter ‘institutional turn’ (Jessop, 2001). This involves closer alignment with or contribution to theories of organization, the firm or institutions. Kuhn and Ashcraft’s recent use of Taylor’s work (2003) is perhaps indicative of such a direction, as is Cloud’s piece (2005) in a different way. These pieces are indicators. They suggest, alongside the dispositional dissonance noted above, a kind of ‘tilting’ of the field. Such a move is away from ‘communication’ and toward, not simply ‘organization studies’, but toward something else - toward a new field perhaps. How we might articulate this field is not clear. Perhaps a new agenda will emerge. But perhaps a new agenda is already there, and now has some space to assert itself. Just what label might apply to such work is not clear. Perhaps ‘organizational discourse’ has the right feel? But perhaps ‘organizational discourse’ is but a staging post.

What might be the consequences of this ‘tilt’? As for careers, one consequence might be that for those who have yet to fully ‘mature’ in a career sense (and I put myself firmly in this camp) may be drawn into different institutional spaces. For some this might be the business school. This has occurred in some locales, but it might be quite impossible in others. What we are looking at here are broad contours, not the particular nooks and crannies.

What might be the personal consequences of this? At a more personal level this tilting might be both a painful and an engaging shift. For instance some of those valued relationships developed in our formative academic training may
not have the continuity that we might have hoped. More generally though this ‘tilting’ might see us pitched into locales where we don’t easily fit: Locations where the disciplinary template that has underwritten our professional identities is missing or where the culture, economic and political formations that have supported it are alien. It may require us to take up a position as an outsider or ‘refugee’: To experience ourselves in contexts where the familiar is foreign, where our sense of custom and practice is undermined and where we cannot go on with what we have gone on with before. The outsider/refugee is a tough position to occupy. The outsider/refugee is potentially an entrepreneur whose lack of commitment to the given practices of a particular locale provides an edge that may produce innovative solutions to the problems that confront these locales. At the same time the outsider/refugee also deals with the pain of loss (or challenge to) of what they regard as valuable parts of themselves. Either way refugees don’t make flying visits. They often are unable to bring their intellectual furniture. Sometimes all they bring is a bit of luggage. Sometimes, but perhaps only in retrospect, is this blessing.

Postscript

The above has suggested that ‘organizational communication’ as a field of research and teaching is being replaced as a consequence of a range of forces and processes including the shifting distribution of global economic and political power. It has suggested that these changes bring to light new conditions and arrangements for academic work. The discussion is a provocation to debate the direction of ‘organizational communication’ and the reconstruction of the field.
References


