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A processual account of social reality and its application to a corporate change case study

Volume 1 of 2

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A processual account of social reality and its application to a corporate change case study

Volume 1 of 2

Submitted by Robert James Sharp, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management Studies, April 2009.

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Abstract

This research project started as an inquiry into the relationship between organisations and the ideas they assimilate. How do ideas get noticed, developed and implemented? Why do certain ideas appear and then disappear without lasting impact? The project was based on a conception of organisations and ideas that was ecological: organisations provide an environment in which ideas can grow, compete, achieve dominance, find a niche or simply fade away. This ecological metaphor began to surface critical problems that questioned its viability. After reviewing the notion of ideas, from Plato through Descartes, Locke, Lovejoy and Whitehead to Rogers, Czarniawska and Latour, the concept of ideas-as-things is seen as problematic, and a better way is proposed, conceiving of ideas as processes: as human-material interactions.

This hypothesis repositions the inquiry towards conceiving of organisations as idea- and therefore process-complexes. If ideas are processes and organisations are processes then the distinction between the two becomes difficult to make. If the concept of ideas retains meaning it is as a perspective for interpreting process-complexes that focuses on the way processes develop from the imaginary towards the material.

This leads to exploring the nature of the world-as-process. Our conception of reality appears to be framed within a substantive, as opposed to processual, world-view whereby the processes of perception, recognition and verbalisation constitute the means by which the underlying continuum of experience is translated into the discrete components of the world-of-things. It seems that we cannot intellectualise process without simultaneously alienating ourselves from it. How can we conceive of the world-as-process without obscuring it behind the world-of-things?

Contemporary process theories can be divided into two broad groups: those that deal with process as specific phenomena within a substantive organisation (exogenous); and those that treat organisation-as-process (endogenous). Those theories in the former group avoid the problems of process altogether while those in the latter largely focus on discursive and intellectual processes, leaving the world of materiality as a secondary phenomenon. There is one field of study, however, where materiality is treated as a primary part of social processes: in Actor Network Theory. Here, however, materiality is granted equal status to human actors, de-centring the importance of human-material interactions.

This thesis attempts to develop a novel position on process that centres on human-material interactions. It starts with a simple scheme that envisages social processes to be autonomous from but dependent upon biological processes, that are themselves autonomous from but

dependent on underlying physical processes. By considering how each of these processes emerged from its predecessor it proposes a model of process genesis. This model is used to develop a speculative account of how social processes emerged from the biological, identifying the critical role of technology as autocatalytic and durable, and of language in providing variety to enable the social processes to develop autonomously from the biological. The resulting model is of a complex-conjugate process that integrates materiality with intellection. This model incorporates elements of existing process theories: processes of sensemaking and communication entwined around material processes involving technologies. Both technology and intellection provide potentiality that is actualised through the human body, creating further potentiality. Technology stores and mobilising potentiality while intellection provides creativity.

Methodology remains problematic for processual research. It is intellectually-intensive and therefore constrained by the substantive nature of all description. A processual approach can limit the "thickness" of this descriptive layer and stay as close to the processual as possible. The author proposes a tool box of process-sympathetic methods, drawing on the discipline of archaeology for inspiration. Archaeologists place a primacy in materiality, being the only remaining component of the social processes they study. The processual archaeologist pieces together extinct processes from this materiality. This improvised methodology is explored through the medium of a case study concerning the fate and fortune of one particular idea within one particular organisations. The idea was Value Based Management and the organisation; a large international company in the late 1990's.

This research project provides a tentative proposal for a processual model that could be useful in studying organisation. It suggests that whilst most "process studies" are carried out from a largely substantive world-view, and others are largely concerned with intellectual or discursive processes, there may be an approach that integrates the importance of the technological with the intellectual while remaining focused on central role of the human body. It is very much an unfinished project that requires development in many directions before its own potentiality can be properly tested.

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Appendix C	Sharp, R.J., De Cock, C., (2005), P is for Process *in* Jones, C., O'Doherty, D. (*eds*.), *Manifestos for the Business School of Tomorrow*, Åbo:Dvalin Books
Annex D	A Short Essay on a Process Ontology
Annex E	An Essay on Reality and Process
Annex F	An Essay on the Longer History of Money