



From organised scepticism to research mission management? Introduction to the Great Reset of management and organization theory

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ABSTRACT

This introduces the reader to the Great Reset of management and organization theory. Concepts are discussed and six cases are presented, provoking thought, debate, and dialogue for or against a Great Reset of management and organization theory. We conclude that management and organisation theorists might rather study than advocate or co-perform resets great or small that aim at privileging this development goal or that minority over others.

Introduction

This changes everything

Still a wishful thought and claim rather than a certainty, the title of Naomi Klein's (2015) report on the battle between capitalism and the climate blends well into observations of the repeatedly declared 2020 war against the coronavirus and its tremendous impact on what is already being described as our "old-normal" lives. Many agree now that the coronavirus has exposed the weaknesses of neoliberal institutional designs, financial austerity policies, and a global economic system optimized for efficiency rather than sustainability and resilience. Some note with satisfaction that lockdowns and travel restrictions have cleared skies and covered ecological footprints.

It is against this backdrop that the World Economic Forum (WEF) launched its *Great Reset* initiative in mid-2020. Borrowed from an eponymous book (Florida, 2010) written in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the WEF's reset refers to ambitious institutional re-designs by which governments and corporations should adapt to the situation during and after the coronavirus crisis. The key message here is that prospects are not all bleak if we realize that "there is a golden opportunity to seize something good from this crisis" (HRH the Prince of Wales on the occasion of the initiative's launch event, 03 June 2020). To take this historic opportunity, however, decision-makers must realize that "our systems need a reset" as there can be neither serious desire nor feasible ways back to the unequitable and unsustainable "old normal" world. Rather, this reset would imply the implementation of new institutional arrangements, namely large-scale public-private partnerships, that steer markets towards fairer outcomes, incentivize investments towards shared goals, build and sustain greener infrastructures, and harness the momentum of the fourth industrial revolution for the resolution of pressing social, health, and environmental challenges, including climate change (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). The

paradigmatic core of this reset is a shift from neoliberalism to an interventionist approach, which is complemented, on the theoretical level, by advocacy of a radical and irrevocable shift from shareholder to stakeholder management, and by the development and promotion of alternative environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics on the methodological level. The belief that prior practices become evidently unsustainable underpins this shift, and its various manifestations.

As with other exercises of its "discreet power" (Garsten & Sörbom, 2018), it is idle to muse as to whether the WEF acts as initiator or aggregator of the agendas set by its new initiative. In fact, many of the theories and tools promoted by the WEF are not precisely new to scholars familiar with fields and concepts such as corporate governance, sustainability accounting, corporate social responsibility, or business ethics, and stakeholder theory is not precisely unpopular in management and organization research either. Many scholars would agree "that leadership needs to be re-framed and based on a sustainability paradigm; and (...) that this 're-framing' is narrated, mobilised, and organised by all stakeholders starting with the actors and decision-makers who can influence corporate behaviour. Such actors may include—but are not limited to—organisations such as the World Economic Forum, university business schools, and the Institute for Directors (to name but a few) and indeed all associated with leadership and its development." (Howieson et al., 2019, 690). The Great Reset may therefore appear as an almost self-evident and "alternativeless" attempt at stabilizing a window of opportunity for the overdue pursuit of proven strategies for the achievement of universally shared goals such as the minimization of health risks or the prevention of socioecological catastrophes (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2018). In this case, the actual change management challenge would consist only in the scale, scope, and imminence of the issues at stake.

On the other hand, many of the means and ends suggested by the WEF and similar-minded agenda setters for the coronavirus crisis management may appear as debatable. Joint medical and military operations

for pandemic interventions both domestic and abroad; contact-tracing wearables such as smart wristbands that help track who had been near to whom at care homes and elsewhere; coronavirus awareness messages by which governments replace caller tunes on personal smartphones; COVID-19 health passports including mandatory carbon offsetting for flight passengers; the list goes on. It is against this backdrop that, at the 2020 WEF Annual Meeting in Davos, Yuval Harari warned that a “major danger we face is the rise of digital dictatorships, that will monitor everyone all the time”. This apprehension might not be far-fetched if approaches like corporate social scoring systems are boosted by increasing computer power and applied to the individual level, thus leading not only to social credits systems as debated with reference to China, but probably also to networked health scoring and monitoring systems of which individuals grow existentially dependent. “Eventually, we may reach a point when it will be impossible to disconnect from this all-knowing network even for a moment. Disconnection will mean death.” (Harari, 2017, 349). On the global scale, scholars have recently problematized environmental change management programmes as attempts at planetary biopolitics (Cavanagh, 2018).

The discourses on the management of the current crisis as well as on the general need for stakeholder management for healthier individuals, institutions, and ecosystems appear highly theory-driven. Yet, the question remains whether management and organization theories themselves are sufficiently up to date to be up to the tasks as there is more concern than ever that our fund of theories is at risk of “becoming a compendium of dead ideas” (The Economist, 2016). The ambition of this special issue is, therefore, to discuss and explore how management and organization theories may or must be designed if they are to match the above grand challenges (Czakon, 2019; George et al., 2016).

Reset and “forification”

The idea that the “COVID-19 crisis has shown us that our old systems are not fit any more for the 21st century” and that, therefore, “we need a great reset” (Klaus Schwab in Pomeroy, 2020) has fallen on fertile soil in a world ridden with endless series of financial, climate, geopolitical, and other crises. Perceptions of permanent states of crisis prepare the ground for requests for states of exceptions in which decision-making may transcend established legal rules. Sovereign is hence who decides on the crisis of the day, and thus “he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt, 2005/1934).

Once a crisis, or “triple crisis” (of capitalism) (Mazzucato, 2020), is defined as life-threatening, and even on a global scale, there clearly is no reason why “we” should not do *everything* necessary to face and overcome it; and there clearly is no reason either why not *everyone* should be doing everything for the higher purpose and common goal. “Everyone has a role to play”. This WEF mantra clearly does not stop at individual persons, but also includes organisations of all kinds that are confronted with increasing pressure to align their operations with an increasing number of social or environmental goals.

Management and organisation research scholars and departments clearly have their share in justifying and increasing this pressure. Among us, “(c)learly, the will to build a better society does exist” (Schwab, 2020).

Take the EGOS Colloquium 2023 in Cagliari, for example, whose motto is “Organization for the Good Life” as “(o)rganizational scholars (...) have increasingly investigated such themes as work life balance, positive organizational scholarship, the link between organizing and employees’ emotional wellbeing, CSR, and the conceptualization of organizations as purpose-driven institutions. Good life also emerges as a collective construct that encompasses community resilience and progress, social equality and inclusion, climate change and preservation of biodiversity.”

Quite similarly, the motto of the EURAM Conference 2023 in Dublin reads “Transforming Business for Good”, yet in this case, we do not have to read between the lines for the strong normative message: “As

researchers, educators and thought leaders, business school academics cannot only play a huge role in helping to ‘Transform Business for Good’ but have a moral duty to do so”.

True, the idea that researchers should not only do research on purpose-driven transformations, but also actively participate in them, is not new at all. And yet, the idea that such forms of activist action research should become the gold standard of our profession appears less commonsensical if we just slightly change the EURAM 2023 conference motto to “Transforming Business for God”. In fact, this small transformation of the transformative claim does not only demonstrate that the fashionable repurposing or “forification” of business organisations or entire economies might lead us on rather conservative, almost medieval paths (Roth, 2021, 2023), but also that such *forifications* seem desirable only as long as the higher “Good” remains largely undefined. As soon as we imagine an explicit discourse drift or even political coercion to godly business conduct, however, we find that there ultimately are no scientific reasons why claims for “Business for God” would be less contestable than claims for “Business for Warfare” or “Business for Environment”, particularly as growing numbers of advocates of an environmental forification of business and economy draw on the concept of war economy as metaphor or blue print of the shape of the things that ought to come.

If management and organisation researchers nonetheless concur with the idea that the economy must not be an end in itself, then the same must be true for other systems such as education, art, and not least science. True, “science for society” or “science the planet” are claims not unheard of today, and yet it is more than obvious that a similarly radical forification of science would come with a considerable risk of an instrumentalisation of science for extra-scientific, and most typically political, purposes. Not all cases of such instrumentalisations lead to ideologized science. Still, it has been precisely the very coronavirus crisis that seems suggest science-driven resets of our economic systems that has demonstrated that an insufficient distance between science and politics might be unhelpful with identifying proportionate measures for the management of an international health crisis. If “science” is increasingly performed as politically influenced contract research for this or that noble ideal or common good, then the question of whether the outcomes of this “research” are results of scientific inquiry or returns of favours remains unanswered. Political decision-makers then do not know whether they buy true advice or pseudo-scientific caricatures of their own biases.

Six cases for or against a Great Reset of management and organization theory

The present special issue of the Scandinavian Journal of Management on the Great Reset of management and organisation theory includes six articles that draw inspiration from a diverse set of theories or worldviews—such as recognition theory, social systems theory, stakeholder theory, or liberalism—and disciplines—such as philosophy, sociology, political science, economics, and management and organisation studies.

Albrecht Fritzsche’s (2022) article on “The pragmatic roots of scientific insight: a culturalist approach to management theory in the view of grand challenges” positions grand challenges as societal problems that cannot be tackled effectively at the level of management theory, particularly in its current form. Instead, a cultural effort is needed, the author claims. This paper departs from the grand challenge impulse in mathematics which, following Hilbert’s program announced in 1902, has nurtured relevant research directions and sparked a substantial wave of theory development. Similarly, such theory development can be achieved in management research by adopting a new epistemic approach to theory development. The culturalist perspective on theory offers a generative nexus of three turns: linguistic, pragmatist, and culturalist. The first turn refers to how scientists learn to put their experience into words. The second turn is related to viewing scientific statements as speech acts and refers to the boundaries created by

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