Organization Studies

Book Review: Ash Amin and Joanne Roberts (eds.) Community, Economic Creativity, and Organization Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 322pp. ISBN: 978 0-19 954550 6. £19.99 (pb) Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin (eds.) Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives London: Routledge, 2007. 183pp. ISBN: 978 0-415 36474 4. £28.99 (pb)

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these refreshing moments is for instance Seidl's framing of the quandary of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, described by Glynn (2000), as an organization that is stuck in an inability to choose between different self-descriptions and thus keeps oscillating. This is just one of the examples where Seidl shows a new perspective on now classical cases in the literature on organizational identity.

As the theory discussed by Seidl is relatively new, of course some questions arise. At first, it seems somewhat paradoxical that after a crisp and clear-cut definition of an organization at a clearly organizational level, we still find occasionally the phrasing that such a system can get 'irritated'. Even though metaphorically it is clear what is intended, the phrasing may appear somewhat counter-intuitive – it is easily imaginable how humans get irritated, but more difficult to imagine how non-human systems are subject to irritation. The answer to this question and others like it, may pave the way for further fruitful implementation of this promising work. Provided the reader is willing to set aside the assumptions we all too familiar with, and to accept the idea that a Luhmannian system may take on its own dynamics reaching beyond the phenomenological world of the humans that populate it, the reading of David Seidl's book provides us with a truly enriching perspective on organizations and their identity.

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Ash Amin and Joanne Roberts (eds.)
Community, Economic Creativity, and Organization
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 322pp. ISBN: 978–0-19–954550–6. £19.99 (pb)

Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin (eds.)
Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives

London: Routledge, 2007. 183pp. ISBN: 978–0-415–36474–4. £28.99 (pb)

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Community of practice is one of those topics eliciting sharp divisions in management circles. When brought up, people tend to fall neatly into two categories: those who think of it as another managerial fad whose days are numbered and those who believe it is a powerful idea that organizations can leverage for effective knowledge management. This clear demarcation – between skeptics and

enthusiasts – is likely due to the fact that, after a few good studies which ush-ered in the topic, the theme of communities of practice has been quickly colo-nized (some would say hijacked) by the practitioner-oriented literature and by consultancies, which have turned it into a somewhat context-invariant tool for managing knowledge in organizations. I believe that neither position is produc-tive and that to allow the concept of communities of practice to fully express its potential we need to do a better job of unpacking it via a more comprehensive theory, supported by solid empirical evidence.

Two recent books, *Community, Economic Creativity, and Organization*, edited by Ash Amin and Joanne Roberts, and *Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin, provide a positive thrust in this direction. Although they focus more on the theoretical side (especially the former), they bring up several issues with the extant con-ceptualization of community of practice and related topics (such as legitimate peripheral participation) that are timely and worthwhile, and help us put more theoretical substance on a concept that badly needs it. In particular, they are both critical of a view of communities as unproblematic *locales* where members are reduced to unqualified agents who, if provided with the necessary resources (including time), will help each other out and relinquish their expertise for the sake of the community and of the organization at large. Instead, these two books point out that there is an inherent tension in any community, and that issues of resistance, inequality, division, conflict, struggle, and more in general of power need to be included in the theoretical framework, since they will determine whether communities are indeed transformative and beneficial or, instead, con-straining and detrimental.

As a management scholar deeply interested in this topic, I found higher vari-ance in the contributions to the Ash Amin and Joanne Roberts' book. Probably due to the diverse background of the contributors, while a few chapters were really interesting to me, others were more difficult to understand, especially in terms of their connection with the stated goal of the book ('to debate the role of communities of practice and situated knowledge in general in driving innovation, competitive advantage, and regional development', p. viii). Another concerning issue is the approximation in the way the term 'community of practice' has been used by some of the authors: while I know that the construct is 'susceptible to constant change and redirection' (p.1) due to its situatedness, I also agree with Paul Duguid that it seems that '[not all the authors have] been talking about the same thing' (p.1). Various disciplines have historically construed it differently and this shows throughout the book. Finally, the strength of the book lies in its theoretical contributions rather than in its empirical work clarifying the idea of communities of practice. Two notable exceptions are Chapters 6 and 9. In Chapter 6, Harry Scarbrough and Jacky Swan use three mini-cases to aptly illus-trate the relationship between projects and communities of practice. By offering a practice-based view of project work, they convincingly argue that learning in projects is contingent on how 'project members interpret and enact the interplay between project activities and existing organizational practices' (p.172). Since projects exist within organizational contexts, they rely upon routines and prac-tices of various communities: therefore, whether or not learning within and

between projects takes place depends on the (rigidity of the) existing communities and divisions of practices. Furthermore, since projects can become catalysts for change by introducing new practices and changing the divisions among them, rather than seeing projects as simply subordinate to communities of practice we need to see them in a co-evolving relationship, where one has the potential to shape the other. In Chapter 9, Patrick Cohendet and Laurent Simon use the case of Montreal to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between knowledge-intensive firms and creative cities. Via their detailed exploration of what happens in the city, they show how communities of practices that cut across knowledge-intensive firms and fertile local avant-gardes allow these firms to maintain a slack of creative resources without structuring them within their organizational boundaries, which extend their absorptive capacity and represent sources of creative ideas thus enhancing their competitiveness. I found this to be a particularly powerful example of how communities of practice can be a true alternative to hierarchy or markets in coordinating economic activity and in providing a source of competitive advantage. Among the other ideas that I found particularly interesting in the book are the role of improvisation for situated learning (see the Prologue, by Paul Duguid), the call for more focus on the context in which communities are enacted (see Ch.1, by Ash Amin and Joanne Roberts), the discussion of what type of knowledge can be learned via communities (see Ch.3, by Paul Duguid), the distinction between the type of learning that happens within (exploitation) and between (exploration) communities, in conjunction with the role played by cognitive distance and boundary spanners (see Ch.5, by Bart Nooteboom, also echoed in Ch.6 and Ch.9), the idea that communities can be simultaneously enabling and constraining (see Ch.7, by Aurelie Delemarle and Philippe Laredo), and the primacy of relational proximity over geographic proximity when it comes to social exchanges (see Ch.8, by Meric Gertler).

I approached the second book, by Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin, more tentatively. The fact that the title (*Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives*) contained the word 'critical' made me a little wary, because the practical implications of 'critical' contributions are often underwhelming. However, this was not the case here. Many chapters were pertinent, interesting, and helpful by either strengthening extant critiques or suggesting new ways in which the literature on communities of practice can be advanced. The structure of the book, with the first half devoted to theory and the second half to empirical studies, also suited my initial call for the need of better theory *and* more data. In terms of quality, I was more impressed with the theoretical chapters than with the empirical ones. While this may be a reflection of the fact that collecting data on communities of practice is hard, it can also be related to the somewhat unfulfilled promise of the empirical section. While all these chapters are based on fine-grained data, not all of them are equally good in connecting it back to the topic at hand. In those chapters where authors provide little more than an illustration of what happened within a certain context, I believe the authors missed a good opportunity to make the data speak louder about its implication for constructs such as situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice. A great example is Matthew Brannan's ethnography of a British call center (Ch.10). While this is the type of work that has the

potential to shine a bright light on what communities of practice really are (and I would specifically emphasize the word *practice*, here; more on this later), it left me wanting in terms of what else it could have said by connecting back more explicitly and centrally such rich data to issues of legitimate peripheral participation and situated practice. Among the empirical chapters, I found particularly interesting Lorna Unwin's detailed description of apprenticeship in Britain (Ch. 9), and how it deviates from the same construct celebrated by Lave and Wenger's (1991) foundational text. I have the feeling that, given the accelerated pace of the global economic environment and the institutional terrain characterizing many nations, Britain is not the only example where training has become separated from employment and where apprentices have been subjugated to the sheer economics of short-term profit maximization. If this is the case, is apprenticeship still viable as a space for situated learning? Has it simply mutated into something different (e.g., in terms of the time and the space in which one is an apprentice) or is it gone forever? If apprentices are exploited and not provided with the social situations for learning, what are the consequences for legitimate peripheral participation and situated learning? Nalita James' work on the shifting identities of old timers (Ch.11) was also interesting due to its implications in terms of how learning happens in communities of practice. If central, legitimated players have their own learning trajectories, too, then learning does not only happen via legitimate peripheral participation, as it has been repeatedly argued in the literature: given that learning is social and situated, it makes sense that it happens for everybody, both newcomers and old-hands (and everybody in-between). She also discusses the role of external institutional forces and how they can change the practices and dominant discourses in organizations and, therefore, in their communities of practices; obviously, this highlights the critical need to account for the role of context in the theoretical framework of communities of practice and situated learning. Finally, Nick Jewson's work on the implication of a new workscape for communities of practice (Ch.13) does justice to changes in the workplace (such as the collective office, working from home, and working on the road) by incorporating them in the debate about the feasibility of virtual communities of practice. However, this contribution would have been even more compelling if, in addition to a 'main effect' (i.e., the impact of new spatial developments on communities), he had spelled out more clearly an 'interaction effect' (i.e., the implications that these new developments in spatial location have for the obstacles to the emergence of virtual communities traditionally highlighted in the literature).

On the theory side, I really liked Nick Jewson's chapter on how network analysis and network theory can help the analysis of communities of practice (Ch.6). He discusses how network analysis and theory can be useful for turning the three identifying features of a community of practice (mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire) from 'generalities … into specific measurable indexes' (p.80). He also details how specific network concepts such as network position, centralization, clusters, cliques, density and boundaries can all be useful to 'specify and analyse structural aspects [of communities] rather than simply describe them, and build greater complexity into our theories' (p.80). The other major theoretical contribution coming from this book is the re-evaluation

of the role of the individual in communities of practice and, more generally, in situated learning. In an attempt to move away from cognitive and behavioral views of learning, the literature on communities of practice has historically painted an over-socialized picture of learning and overlooked the role of the individual and of individual characteristics. Stephen Billet's contribution (Ch.5) reminds us that, instead, individual agency plays a role in situated learning. Given that individuals decide whether and how to engage in the social activities of a community depending upon their 'personal interests, focuses and energies' (p.56), it seems more appropriate to think of situated learning as emerging from the interaction of the situation (the social) and the individual. Using this view of situated learning also provides a good theoretical explanation for how practices change, since as individuals enact the practices, they engage 'in the process of remaking and, possibly, transforming culturally derived practices' (p.59). By engaging the social, individual action is not only affected but also affects social practices, which can be seen as the performative aspect of practices (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Finally, the book's editors do a masterful job in illustrating further developments and unresolved issues associated with the concept of communities of practice (Ch.14). In less than six pages, they summarize the main themes emerging from the book and add more of their own, providing inspiration for at least a dozen doctoral dissertations.

To conclude, I would like to point out a few critical directions for future research that have not been fully captured in these two books. First, we need to shift the focus back to practices. There is some reference to this in the Amin and Robert's book, but without further theoretical elaboration. Also, the Hughes et al. text has at least a couple of chapters with good data on practices, but the opportunity to delve into what they are and how they impact communities (and learning) is not capitalized upon. Certainly, obtaining rich data on practices is difficult, but this should not prevent us from calling for more insight on what practices are, how they emerge, change, constrain and enable learning in communities. This leads me directly to my second appeal, which is for richer, more nuanced studies on how communities function. After the first foundational ethnographic studies, there has been a dearth of good empirical research on this topic. More grounding in empirical data (preferably ethnographic or at least very rich and detailed) is needed to clarify and refine the theoretical aspects of this construct, as Jason Hughes highlights in Chapter 3 of his book. Third, we know very little about how people actually do (or do not) learn. What are the actual mechanisms through which situated knowledge is interiorized by some – and not by others? How does one progress from the periphery toward the center of the community? The two books detail some cases in which there is derailment in this journey from periphery to center, but we need to understand more about how learning happens (or not) in communities of practice. Finally, how do participants become legitimized? Throughout these books, I often had the impression that simply by becoming part of a team or organization one becomes a legitimate, even though peripheral, participant in the community. However, the tension and struggle present in real life communities entail that not all newcomers are automatically legitimated as participants, especially if they do not understand or agree with the current prevailing discourse. By the same token, some

long standing members may become de-legitimated and forced to leave the community (such as in James' contribution on academics moving to lateral, less prestigious communities). Therefore, we need to better understand the legitimatization process to fully capture the potential of legitimate peripheral participation as generative force for situated learning.

In summary, I have hopes for the concept of communities of practice, which is valuable and provides us with a way to explore the transfer of knowledge within and between organizations. Books like these show that, far from being a fad, there is much that can still be done by scholars who are interested in this topic.

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Alain de Botton
The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work
London: Hamish Hamilton, Penguin, 2009. 336pp. ISBN: 0241143535; 13 digit ISBN: 978-0241143537. £18.99 (hb)

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Alain de Botton is a literary phenomenon. At age 39, he has authored no fewer than eight best sellers, translated into more than 20 languages, on such diverse topics as architecture, status, travel, philosophy, literature, and love. In his most recent book, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work,* de Botton turns his attention to the working world. What can the readership of *Organisation Studies* learn from him?

In the first chapter, de Botton follows a cargo ship from Asia that reaches the Port of London. He provides a profusion of details about her technical profile and quayside aesthetics, and speculates about the psychological motives of cargo spotters. This profusion is not gratuitous. It is an attempt to show how contemporary workplaces unite machines, people, and processes as well as a way to introduce the book's somewhat grandiloquent purpose, namely 'to remind us of the place which work accords each of us within the human hive' (p.30) and produce 'a hymn to the intelligence, peculiarity, beauty and horror of the modern workplace, not least, its extraordinary claim to be able to provide us, alongside love, with the principal source of life's meaning' (idem). 'Hymn', a song of praise, is an important term to remember.

In Chapter two, the author details his fascination for the large-scale aesthetics and time-conscious organizing of food distribution. He does not get particularly close to the people working there but reflects instead that we are 'the only animals to have wrested ourselves from an anxious search for the source of the next