



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

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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

instruments, methods, and distribution systems of scientific work. The third turn refers to the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon and addresses the general question of what experiences shape the perception of scientists in daily life, apart from scientific inquiry. Albrecht Fritzsche claims that these three turns have vast ramifications for management research, including sensemaking or place and space. These debates encourage access to new data sources, new methodologies of research or new ways of communicating science. All in all, this paper views the embeddedness of scientific research in human affairs as a valuable prerequisite for management theory reset, rather than a constraining factor.

In “The local paradox in grand policy schemes. Lessons from Newfoundland and Labrador”, [Kristof Van Assche, Robert Greenwood, and Monica Gruezmacher \(2022\)](#) make a case for the necessity to not ignore but rather fully embrace the local context when working towards a great reset of management. Suggesting to also innovate semantics, the authors work with the notion of the local paradox. It describes a two-sided phenomenon. On the one side, an entity may well benefit from localizing the solution. This helps tap into local talent pools as well as special context-specific insights. There are motivational gains, too. On the other side, local governance systems may well be reluctant to implement such an empowerment move despite the numerous advantages. Political camps could be interested in retaining power even if this derails from achieving greater and collective goals. Learning about this paradox can help understand and anticipate barriers to change and alert the reader of the skills needed to nonetheless improve the situation. The authors take the reader through an in-depth review of relevant theories to place the local paradox into context and connect it to ongoing theoretical debates. The academic fields of governance and strategy in particular offer possibilities to connect the local paradox conceptually. In turn, Canada’s Newfoundland and Labrador province serves as the empirical context for the authors to substantiate their claim empirically. They outline how local thinking, in addition to convergence on a vision, strategy, and coordination mechanisms, may have a catalysing effect or not. Their contribution to this special issue emphasizes that solutions must be built and cannot merely be taken off the shelf. A better understanding of the underlying dynamics can support better solutions and faster progress toward the great reset as an aspirational as much-needed next step.

In his article “Employment protection regimes and dismissal of members in worker cooperatives”, [Ermanno C. Tortia \(2022\)](#) connects to the crisis-as-an-opportunity paradigm, as ongoing crises suggest not only the need for discussions on system changes, but also foster a sense of urgency that the time for much-needed change is now. Aspiring a “new normal”, the author not only points to flaws in the economic system but constructively presents a solution. Detailing both the theoretical factors at stake as well as providing empirical substantiation in the form of short case studies, a case is made for the crucial role of different employment protection regimes. More specifically, worker cooperatives can offer an interesting way forward to more humanized organizations. They offer the benefits of procedural fairness during layoffs, organizational stability, empathy and effectively addressing the human need for stability, retention of knowledge, and more engagement due to a strong shared sense of ownership. Downsides may well emerge in the form of inflated organizational costs, delayed implementation of needed change, or distractions due to politics. There are also still open questions regarding the best modes of decision-making, for example, when laying off colleagues. Should there be cross-unit or even cross-organizational principles that should apply, such as last-in-first-out? Or should all be up for on-the-spot discussions of both the preferred values, processes, and actual decisions on what to do? The proverb “The devil is in the details”, often attributed to the German American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, surely applies in the context as pursuing more fairness when working towards more humanized workplaces may well be easier said than done. Collective action and new social technologies force involved stakeholders to take tough

decisions. Ermanno C. Tortia compelling case study provides concrete illustrations and encourages the development of one’s own situational solutions.

While [Klaus Brønd Laursen, Lars Esbjerg, and Nikolaj Kure \(2023\)](#) seem convinced that a Great Reset is necessary not only of management and organisation theories and practices, but also on a broader social scale to address grand challenges and wicked problems such as climate change, their article “Ctrl Alt Delete in the name of COVID 19. When a reset leads to misrecognition” is laudably based on the assumption that not everyone shares their opinion. The authors combine Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory and Axel Honneth’s recognition theory to analyse the case of the Danish mink industry, whose complete “reset” was deemed necessary by the detection in summer 2020 of a coronavirus variant in some breeding facilities in the Northern part of the country. The governmental decision to systematically cull all 17 million minks was experienced as top-down and disastrous by the members of the former industry. Laursen, Esbjerg, and Kure take the resulting sentiment of misrecognition among the human industry members for an example of how resets may fail to produce desired outcomes if they are “pushed through by a small elite” and thus experienced as forms of discrimination. Against this backdrop, the authors insist that stakeholder theory must more systematically address the issues of stakeholder salience and intersubjectivity if the heralded transition from shareholder to stakeholder capitalism is to lead to its desired environmental and social sustainability outcomes.

In their article on “Cooperative governance under increasing member diversity: Towards a new theoretical framework”, [Constantine Iliopoulos and Vladislav Valentinov \(2022\)](#) tackle the challenge of stakeholder heterogeneity and its governance implications for cooperatives. They depart from the observation that the “golden rule of proportionality”, pervasive in cooperative governance research and practice, may not be effective in handling important driving forces in cooperatives, such as absencing. The authors emphasize that the proportionality rule may pertain only to symptoms of cooperative member preference heterogeneity problems. They propose to refocus on the driving forces underlying member heterogeneity problems. Constantine Iliopoulos and Vladislav Valentinov suggest that the key issue in cooperative governance is in differentiating between core and boundary activities carried out by the cooperative. Core activities refer to those business strategies that correspond to common interests of members in an unambiguous way. By contrast, such consensus is missing for peripheral activities. Accordingly, the authors indicate active adjustment of the boundary between these two types of activities as the main task of governance. More specifically, they suggest that the inflation of peripheral activities carried out by cooperative’s members challenges the common interests of all members, and thus contributes to intensifying the member preference heterogeneity problem. This paper transcends established views of agricultural cooperatives as institutions of mutual-self-help so as to offer a theoretically more comprehensive and empirically valid concept of cooperatives as organisations that hold a considerable conflict potential related to individual member preferences. True to the authors, this conflict should, and can be, effectively addressed by governance. Based on these assumptions, the paper offers a set of five testable hypotheses which link heterogeneous member preferences (independent variable) with: conflict, boundaries between core and peripheral activities, and cooperative’s longevity as dependent variables. The paper offers an overview of studies featuring and empirically validating these hypotheses. Thus, Constantine Iliopoulos and Vladislav Valentinov open up avenues not only for further theoretical framework for agricultural cooperatives development, but also for the advancement of stakeholder theory, which must address the issue of stakeholder heterogeneity if it is to make its hoped-for contribution to an anticipated great reset of management and organization theory and practice.

Whereas the majority of contributions to this special issue are positively disposed towards a great reset of management and organization

theory, Nicolai J. Foss, Peter G. Klein, and Samuele Murtinu (2022) make a strong case that “The economy doesn’t need a reset, and neither does management theory”. The authors argue that the increasing prominence of “reset thinking” aimed at a supposedly “sustainable” redesign of the global economy abets extensive state interventionism and cronyism capitalism, and therefore reject the idea of a need for “a fundamental rethink of existing management theory”. To support their argument, the authors show that free market capitalism has been more successful in tackling ecological and other grand challenges than “non-capitalist countries behind the Iron Curtain” or “capitalist economies characterized by a substantial degree of government intervention” (p. 3). Whereas in free market societies, scarce resources are used for the highest valued ends, in a crony capitalist society the value of ends is determined not by impersonal market forces, but rather by the personal preferences of a small elite of policy makers and those who can influence them. Thus, cronyism leads to distorted resource allocation which results in, inter alia, negative effects on infrastructure development, health outcomes, and the protection of nature. As the authors develop their argument, they are successful in pinpointing the paradox that the “Great Reset” agenda advocated by the WEF is ostensibly motivated by criticism of such side-effects of cronyism, while the implementation of this agenda would lead to even more cronyism. This fundamental performative contradiction suggests that the WEF’s Great Reset initiative boils down to a self-defeating strategy aimed at solving problems of cronyism by more of what caused them. The question then remains why many management theorists, and particularly those self-identifying as “progressive”, support such and similar self-defeating forms of “reset thinking”.

Outlook

Most contributions to this special issue agree on the tacit assumption that a reset of some kind is necessary to address issues of climate change or other smaller or grander challenges. Only Foss et al. (2022) are confident that the invisible hand of the market is also, if not more competent than even the most “benevolent planners” (p. 6) in bringing about the change required to address wicked problems or great challenges. Though this distribution may be indicative for and thus congruent with a larger discursive drift in management and organisation theory, the rapid growth of sympathies for deliberate attempts at planning pursued aims at resets and change not only at the level of individual persons or organisations, but of a society or planet “as a whole” is far from self-evident even against the backdrop of a series of perceived global crises. “Everything said is said by an observer” (Maturana, 1975, p. 315) and “(a)nything said is said to an observer” (von Foerster, 1979, p.1). Thus, whatever we tell each other about wicked problems and great challenges remains a construct of nested perspectives and angles, and the idea that a perceived majority of observers conforms with a certain construct is no argument for its validity. “Science is not a democracy. It would be difficult to overstress this point” (Lambdin, 2012) especially in the context of challenges that loom particularly grand and urgent, and thus seem to yell for typically political activism or intervention that favours this particular perspective or that vested interest. The question at stake is hence if not least those progressive management and organisation researchers who advocate rather than study “reset thinking” are just about to co-create a global health or “Climate Leviathan” (Mann & Wainwright, 2018) in ways that mirror rather than reflect upon the conservative momentum created by Thomas Hobbes early modern creature (Roth, 2023).

It is therefore particularly commendable that Laursen et al. (2023) abstract from their disclosed personal sympathy for “reset thinking” as they attempt at bringing in the perspective of those who do not believe in the utility of drastic reset policies, and probably do not even in the problems they are supposed to solve. Their call and case for intersubjectivity, therefore, acts as a reminder to bring us as researchers back into our fields, and namely as researchers.

In a bid to showcase our “solidarity” and do our bit to resolve what we take for the grandest, pressing, and existential problems of our time, we researchers, too, seem more and more to forget that science is not essentially a means for this geopolitical agenda or that planetary health outcome, but first and foremost an end in itself that may be defined as “organised scepticism” (Merton, 1973; May, 2011). And yet, there is hardly an attitude that is more defamed than (coronavirus, climate, ...) scepticism in the age of “trust the science”, that is, in an age where we are urged to conform with that fraction of science that is endorsed again by political stakeholders and decision makers.

If we challenge this urge to co-perform the above biases and rather proceed to study them, then we may find that “it is worth enquiring why so large a proportion of” management and organisation theorists “should be found in the front rank of the planners”, that is, the advocates for deliberative resets great and small.

“The explanation of this phenomenon is closely connected with an important fact which the critics of the planners should always keep in mind; that there is little question that almost everyone of the technical ideals of our experts could be realised within a comparatively short time if to achieve them were made the sole aim of humanity. There is an infinite number of good things, which we all agree are highly desirable as well as possible, but of which we cannot hope to achieve more than a few within our lifetime, or which we can hope to achieve only very imperfectly. It is the frustration of his ambitions in his own field which makes the specialist revolt against the existing order. We all find it difficult to bear to see things left undone which everybody must admit are both desirable and possible. That these things cannot all be done at the same time, that anyone of them can be achieved only at the sacrifice of others, can be seen only by taking into account factors which fall outside any specialism, which can be appreciated only by a painful intellectual effort-the more painful as it forces us to see against a wider background the objects to which most of our labours are directed, and to balance them against others which lie outside our immediate interest and for which, for that reason, we care less. (von Hayek, 1944, p. 55f).

“Everyone of the many things which, considered in isolation, it would be possible to achieve (...)” in a publicly-privately planned society, therefore, “creates enthusiasts for” resets “who feel confident that they will be able to instill into the directors of such a society their sense of the value of their particular objective” (id, p. 56).

The result of this constellation, however, is a multiplication of battles for privileges of this sustainable development goal or that vulnerable minority over the others. What remains wanting in this atmosphere of an increasing and increasingly competitive appetite for privilege, however, is a picture sufficiently big to match the greatness of the proposed resets and the magnitude their socio-structural implications. In want of this greater perspective, the question of why management, organisation, and other social theorists should not only study, but also actively take part in these battles, must remain unanswered.

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