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Arendtian culture as critical virtuous practice

Abstract

Meaning and symbolism are at the center of cultural approaches to organizations, whether studied as collective, stable meaning systems or as local variants within contexts of multiple, complex, shifting and coexisting cultures, allowing individuals and groups to make use of a variety of cultural resources. (Alvesson, 2013, Weber & Dacin, 2011) Whether culture is conceptualized as “software of the mind” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), as the taken-for-granted or as repertoires for identity, cultural approaches tend to be oriented towards the non-appearing aspects of culture, searching for meanings behind or beneath appearances. Even in the case of strategic use of cultural artefacts, focus is on the symbolic meanings in use.

By shifting the focus on what is culturally shared – from meaning to world – I introduce an Arendtian world-oriented approach to culture that allows stressing the importance of surface, appearance and reification without falling into traps of superficiality, simplification or superstition. Arendt’s ontology of a world of appearances is chosen as a starting point for exploring her concept of culture and its relevance for understanding cultural aspects of organizing.

Her concept of culture is connected to care of world and company to keep and actualizes our potentials to resist natural or man-made automatic processes. As tending love it is related to politics as sharing-the-world-with-others and connected to common sense as phronesis, allowing uncoerced judgment, and knowing how to choose and keep company “among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past.” (Arendt, 2006: 222)

The contribution of the Arendtian approach is argued to be twofold. As a complementing contrast to anthropological and constructionist approaches to study organizational culture, some implications for empirical attentiveness are suggested.

It is also argued to contribute to critical management studies (CMS) as a project aiming at becoming affirmative and caring (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009).

As imperative for (critical) management studies for 'doing culture' as virtuous practice, it may inspire affirmative critique as judgment and care in making distinctions and telling stories, and remind us of our faculties of resistance in the face of superstitious process thinking and world-alienating future fetishism (Grey 2003) of contemporary management causing organizational miasma (Gabriel, 2012), offending the past as well as the present and thereby our faculty of judgment.

References

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