WRITING, RATIONALITY AND ORGANIZATION:
AN INTRODUCTION

JANNIS KALLINIKOS

Department of Organization, Stockholm University Business School, Sweden

ROBERT COOPER

Centre for Social Theory and Technology, Keele University, U.K.

ORGANIZATION AS WRITING

Consider the following incident. On the Chinese shore the Frenchmen were staring at the drawing which the old native had drawn on the sand. The drawing, an elementary map of the foreign coast on which they were now standing, contained precisely the information they had been searching for. But the wind and the rising tide were going to erase the precious sketch and leave them only with the fragile impressions which memory retained. A pen and piece of paper would enable the drawing be detached from its temporary inscription in the sand. Once on paper, the copied information could be safeguarded against the vagaries of the elements and the vulnerability of memory, taken back to France and transformed into knowledge to be used for future operations.

The episode concerns the French sea captain Laperouse’s explorative journeys in the east Pacific and has been reconstructed from Latour (1986, p. 5). It exemplifies a vital factor in the history of human endeavour, namely the technique of representation through which the human actor transcends the limits of its own body and constructs an unfolding world of credible knowledge and mobile information. Humble, even mundane, as they may seem, techniques of representation constitute the informational base of our organized world.

The central role of techniques of representation as forms of inscription as well as other devices that catch, reconstitute and store knowledge and information has of course been recognized across the entire spectrum of the social sciences. Following the pioneering works of Mumford (1934, 1952), McLuhan (1962) and Havelock (1963, 1976), many social scientists have attempted to document the far-reaching effects of writing on the cultural and cognitive habits of modern man and the instrumental orientation of the contemporary world (e.g. Eisenstein, 1979; Goody, 1977, 1986; Latour, 1986; Ong 1982). The internalization of the procedures and operations that make up writing have been viewed as predisposing factors in the development of those cognitive attributes that are especially associated with modern rationality such as consistency, linearity, partition. In this way, what we call modern organization has gradually become “subjectivized”. Another tradition, notably that originated by Derrida (1976, 1978), made writing a central intellectual strategy for reflecting on the mode of being of modern man and on the basic preoccupations of Western societies. Derrida’s project has helped
place writing at the centre of much of the current intellectual debate on knowledge and institutions. His compelling assertion is that speech is not an unproblematic reflection of the outer or inner world — phonocentrism — nor is writing an unproblematic transcription of speech — logocentrism — force us to reconsider the ontological and cognitive status of writing and how, in its varied forms, it organizes and "regulates" our intellectual and practical lives.

Given this central place of writing in contemporary social theorizing, it is surprising that the constitutive role of writing in formal organization and, more generally, in economic conduct has received so little attention in organization theory, despite the latter's Weberian legacy. With a few exceptions (e.g. Cooper, 1989; Hoskin and Macve, 1986; Zuboff, 1988) writing can be said to be largely absent from the current agenda of organizational analysis. It seems as though an unproblematic logocentrism — here in the form of a metaphysical thingness of organization — has reigned supreme. True, a significant part of what is often referred to as behavioural accounting has problematized in various ways the relationship between accounting representations and human behaviour. Yet, in this tradition accounting has, by and large, not been viewed as writing, i.e. as a technology of inscription obeying the semiotic regularities intrinsic to writing, but rather as a body of representations with more or less problematic relationships to that which it is supposed to represent. Nor have other organizational phenomena such as financial or policy documents, advertisements or graphs been analysed as systems of writing whose various logics contribute to the social and technical constitution of organizations.

In one sense it might seem as though the category of writing is too general to be profitably applied to the instrumental preoccupations of formal organizations. Of course, we know that writing comes in a vast variety of forms and these are located in an even greater variety of work and life situations. Yet it would be a mistake to overlook the degree of common structure in the heterogeneity of these writing forms and their applications. As Cassirer (1955) observes, it is often in the background of the general that the specific encounters itself and recognizes its own limits. Perhaps the effects associated with each particular system of writing owe more to their written than to their systemic character. Recent work suggests that this is indeed the case.

Zuboff (1988) addresses the role of writing in contemporary work contexts in precisely these generic terms. Briefly, Zuboff's central idea is that computerization transforms formal organizations into vast textual fields that mediate and regulate the spectrum of organizational relationships. Computerization is seen essentially as electronic writing, and the structures and rules embedded in computer software are viewed as the grammar and syntax of electronic writing (see also Kallinikos, 1992a,b). The effects of what Zuboff calls the textualization of the organizational field are indeed complex and defy easy summary. Let us simply note that electronic writing recounts, albeit in modified form, the story of the transition from oral to text-mediated forms of interaction. In Zuboff's account individual cognition and perception, task behaviour, organizational communication, hierarchy and control are all profoundly restructured by electronic writing and its intrinsic logic.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS: ISSUES AND VOICES

Such were the preoccupations that led us to think of convening a workshop that would address the question of the writing-organization relationship. The workshop was held at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management in Brussels on 21-22 March 1994 and nineteen papers were presented during its two days. The contributors were invited afterwards to submit
their papers, revised after critical discussion in the workshop, for a special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Nine authors responded and the six articles presented in this special issue survived the normal blind review process. While some of the articles address rather general aspects of writing, organization and instrumental action, others tackle more specific issues. Despite the substantive commonality of the papers, the perspectives they employ differ widely and so do their strategies for understanding writing and its organizational effects.

The article by Kallinikos on *Predictable Worlds: On Writing, Accountability and Other Things* attempts to depict some of the processes through which formal organizations are rendered predictable and manageable. Goal-oriented action coincides with the separation of action from intention and the subordination of the former to the latter. This is the meaning of the means-ends dichotomy so essential to the instrumental vision. Action is reduced to the subservient role of means and is subjugated (at least in theory) to the requirements imposed by the pre-existence of a set of institutionalized intentions that we usually refer to as goals. Such an ideal needs to be understood as a normative principle that constructs rather than reflects reality and truth. However, the realization of the instrumental vision necessarily requires the detailed charting of the tasks and responsibilities that lead to goal accomplishment. Without the methods and techniques that are capable of producing such a detailed blueprint, the separation and hierarchization of the representation-action (goals-means) relationship cannot by itself generate instrumental behaviour. Within this wider context, writing emerges as a basic medium that embodies the functional world-orientation of representation. The analytic proclivity of writing and its standardized procedures contribute definitively to the construction of an organizational visibility, which provides a permanent yardstick by which organizations are able to achieve an ongoing evaluation of their activities. The construction of predictable worlds makes imperative those techniques of representation that exhibit a minimum of syntactic and semantic distortion and drift. An attempt is made in the article to reveal differences in distortion and drift by distinguishing between numerical, verbal and pictorial forms of representation, and to connect these with the bureaucratic ideal of accountable and calculable behaviour. The control and accountability of behaviour are ultimately related to stability and recurrence and to knowledge that can be coded, transferred and recalled in identical ways. It is very hard, for instance, to make an exact copy of a painting by hand but it is very easy to reproduce a verbal text or a numerical representation. The dominance of numerical techniques of writing in contemporary systems of production and administration needs to be understood in this wider disciplinary context.

In the *Written Form of Planning*, Ioanna Tsivacou situates the formal and institutional character of planning and its connection with writing in early modernity. The diffusion of written forms as means for regulating socio-economic relationships coincides, she claims, with the decline of community and the communal values that safeguarded economic transactions and future commitments in earlier periods. The *pro-mise* of the predominantly oral world of the Greek *polis* as a form of social coordination is gradually displaced by the *legal contract* and the *written form*. Planning emerges as modernity introduces a new notion of linear time, extending indefinitely into the future, and elevates the subject as the ultimate source and unit of accountability. Under these conditions the major task of planning is to forecast the future thereby transforming the original *pro-mise* — i.e. to put in advance — into a *pro-gram* — i.e. a writing-in-advance. However, these early modern relationships are currently under mutation as the normative foundations of modernity are being eroded and writing as a social process and technique becomes increasingly detached from its referential anchoring. In the late modern world there is no individual or collective subject that is held accountable for her/his constructed versions of the future. Planning under these circumstances — i.e. no accountable subject, no referential
reality — becomes a merely technical activity, almost devoid of meaning, as the rationality of the written form imposes its own procedural and cognitive requirements, producing as it were a semblance or parody of what the official rhetoric of planning demands. Since no one can really be held accountable the system endlessly reproduces itself and the planning activities essential to its functioning.

Luchien Karsten’s contribution, *Writing and the Advent of Scientific Management: The Case of Time and Motion Studies*, is also a reinterpretation of certain historical origins of modern organizations and the emergence of large-scale, standardized systems of work. In Karsten’s view, writing and the recording and spatialization of the event-like character of human action constituted a reliable instrument and strategy for decomposing and analysing the motions of the human body, the “human motor”, during the period marking the emergence of the twentieth century. Such a decomposition and analysis was essential for turning the modern factory into an object made transparent and controllable through various methods of measurement and documentation. *Graphein* became, as Karsten says, a basic method for controlling *tuche*, i.e. the unpredictable and unexpected. All the techniques employed by Marey, Gilbreth, Taylor and others in order to record and analyse human and animal locomotion were basically graphic techniques, i.e. verbal-graphic, chronophoto-graphic and cinemato-graphic systems of recording. An interesting contrast emerges here, however, between the discrete or “digital” character of letter-alphabetic writing and other analogic or pictorial systems for recapturing and controlling human motion. Karsten finishes his article by reflecting on the relationship between power and knowledge in the sense first introduced by Foucault (1977). Though the registering and recording of the motion patterns of the human body seem basically to have served the purpose of control and subjugation of the workers, they could have equally well contributed to the latters’ liberation. The time for this is now ripe, Karsten concludes.

Richard Sotto’s article, *Organizing in Cyberspace: The Virtual Link*, traces the significance of writing in the context of the expanding applications of information technology. He begins by questioning both the instrumental understanding of information technology as simply a tool that serves human purposes and the scope of changes usually associated with it. Rather than being simply a tool, information technology importantly influences our modes of perceiving and acting on the world but does so in an incremental fashion that needs to be distinguished from the revolutionary rhetoric of many of its proponents. The understanding of the effects of information technology is ultimately bound up with the organizational processes or characteristics which it is supposed to impinge on and alter. In this regard, Sotto contrasts oral and written worlds on the one hand and electronic, virtual worlds on the other. Organizational performances formerly directly located in and between the actual bodies of actors are replaced by the formal and decontextualized representations of electronic writing which occur nowhere and everywhere, i.e. in what is now popularly referred to as cyberspace. Social links based on sympathy are increasingly replaced by the *virtual* links of electronic communication where the disembodied reality of limitless combinatorial possibilities takes over.

In *Writing About AIDS: Framing Policy*, David Goss uses Goffman’s frame analysis in order to approach and deconstruct the layers of hidden meanings entailed in written AIDS policies of organizations. Goss begins by recognizing the strong logocentric assumptions underlying written policy documents which are conventionally assumed to identify and define infallibly the significant problems that organizations have to solve. Echoing the analyses of the other contributors, Goss notes that the written character of policy does more than simply reflect an independent organizational reality. The temporal consistency and authority of the written text combines with its “portability” and “reliability” to produce a functional matrix that in essential
respects actually constructs the organizational reality which it claims to address. In this regard, written AIDS policies, while addressing the problem and the dangers associated with the virus in organizations, produce, at the same time, new forms of social control that impinge upon the very life spaces of people with HIV/AIDS. Drawing on a substantial sample of policy documents Goss identifies two fundamental responses to the threat posed by the AIDS virus, which he names defensive and constructive policies. Defensive policies comprise the initial response to HIV/AIDS formed and written down during the “panic” period. While on the surface defensive policies seem to offer protection to employees affected by the disease, additional frames of meaning reveal the primary purpose of the written policy to be the “protection of the organization from such persons.” In contrast, constructive policies frame the discussion in terms of health and construe the situation as a medical “problem”. While constructive policies introduce at one level a framework of equal opportunities, they help also to “control the person with HIV/AIDS, constructing for him/her an identity defined in terms of those principles of substantive rationality that constitute the operating logic of the organization concerned.”

Finally, Stephen Fox’s contribution, Viral Writing: Deconstruction, Disorganization and Ethnomethodology, represents a shift of emphasis. Instead of focusing on the role that writing plays in organizations, Fox analyses the writing of organization theory and attempts to bring to light its hidden assumptions and biases. He uses the analytic resources of deconstruction and ethnomethodology which, he argues, share certain important similarities. Despite their terminological differences both deconstruction and ethnomethodology are essentially concerned with depicting the complementarity, mutual implication and symmetrical character of the binary oppositions that characterize the logocentric (for deconstruction) and reifying (for ethnomethodology) traditions which are construed in an asymmetrical and hierarchical fashion where one pole is privileged over the other, i.e. centre-periphery, inside-outside, speech-writing, surface-depth, etc. The purposes of ethnomethodological and perhaps more especially of deconstructive critique are not, however, to repair the revealed faults but rather to disclose the covert operations by means of which the inherent undecidability of life and work is repressed and through which certainty is constructed. With these analytical resources at his disposal, Fox rereads organization theory and shows how the venerable distinctions of organization-environment, inside-outside, subjective-objective, strategy-contingency exemplify the asymmetrical tricks that deconstruction reveals. Even the enactment approach is found to preserve “a reified notion of the human agent as a voluntaristic, decision-making and enacting centre and to this extent it too fails to stand up to the deconstructive critique.”

REFERENCES


