Media Review: Organization, Cultural and the Power of Imagination

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Martin Parker
The Organization of things: A cabinet of curiosities
Abingdon: Routledge, 2025, 302 pp.

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The American satirist Peter De Vries once quipped that nostalgia "ain't what it used to be." Yet, amidst Donald Trump's re-election to the US presidency, conflict in the Middle East and Europe, and a climate crisis worsening by the day, Martin Parker's most recent book offers some comfort and, indeed, nostalgia for a time when ideas and imagination still seemed to hold sway, and a sense of radical possibilities existed.

The organization of things: A cabinet of curiosities (2025) is a collection of essays and articles originally published between 2005 and 2022. Like much of Parker's oeuvre, it firmly belongs to a tradition of reimagining what constitutes the object and practice of organization studies, particularly beyond the narrow confines of business school orthodoxy and its presuppositions (see Burrell, 1997; O'Doherty, 2017; Hancock, 2024; Beyes, 2024). Examining cultural processes and artefacts, ranging from art galleries and skyscrapers to shipping containers and circuses, Parker probes and unravels how often taken-for-granted acts of organizing come into being while suggesting how they might help us understand why we know and fashion organizations in the ways that we do. In doing so, Parker reveals how the concept of organization often remains stubbornly non-identical with its various objects, in turn exposing and engaging with the contradictions and critical spaces this entails.

For those familiar with it, this collection can be read as a follow-up to his 2012 book, *Alternative business: Outlaws, crime and culture* in which he sought to destabilize established narratives about what does and does not constitute organization. Drawing on cultural representations of outlaws and anti-heroes from Robin Hood to Tony Soprano, he consistently challenged the often-monochromatic claims to knowledge made by business academics and the institutions they inhabit, offering a more radical alternative to business as usual. In doing so, he concluded with a clarion call to the imagination and its power to revitalize organization studies as a source of 'something new, something that doesn't exist but could' (Parker 2012, 159).

And it is the power of imagination, of thinking about and relating to things beyond their immediacy, that provides the thread running through this particular collection of essays. In each chapter, an object of, at least in Parker's terms, curiosity, is dissected and toyed with, revealing those organizational practices that bring it into being. From the dizzying heights of skyscrapers and tower cranes to the superflat ontology of Japanese art, he imagines the organizational lessons and opportunities present in both the mundane and the extraordinary facets of life. In doing so, he leads the reader from a discussion of the finances and entrepreneurial spirit underpinning the existence of zoos to how cultural beliefs regarding the rebellion of heaven's angels might undermine our subsequent faith in the inevitability of organizational hierarchies. Moreover, Parker's style, refined over the years into a blend of rigorous scholarly exposition and amiable persiflage, captivates the reader, drawing one into even his most esoteric of musings or detailed empirical accounts.

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A standout chapter, for example, and one originally published in 2011, portrays the circus as a distinctive, mobile organizational form that Parker—leaning on Bob Cooper's (1986) work regarding organization and disorganization—frames as a fusion of "business and otherness." In doing so, he illustrates and engages with its dialectic of light and dark, order and mystery, as well as the often only fleeting harmony between the human longing for order and structure and a primal desire to be astonished, if not unsettled. However, in doing so, Parker never loses sight of the materiality of its ontology: the circus, with its egalitarian ethos stemming from mobility, is also a domain of hard work, precarious wages, strict precision, and everyday cruelty. This relationship, in which inspiration coexists with grit and competition, exemplifies Parker's ongoing fascination: the inextricable yet irreducible relationship between order and disorder and those moments of possibility that lie betwixt and between.

A further highlight is the previously mentioned and particularly scholarly chapter on angels and hierarchy. In it, Parker delves into narratives concerning the divine ordering of Christianity's heavenly hosts to once again explore the realm of organizational indeterminacies. Examining how angelic hierarchies simultaneously demand order while harbouring rebellion, through this lens, even divine organization is found to rely on the subservience of both their constituents and those mortals subject to them. Furthermore, angelic hierarchy is shown to be a necessary, albeit pernicious, agent of stagnation, serving as a means of keeping creation in check by naturalizing God's plan and denying the possibility of autonomy and growth. Nevertheless, despite this, as the story of Lucifer demonstrates, even divine hierarchies are not incontestable, and we can always imagine alternatives.

Now, as I say, there is something curiously nostalgic about all of this. It takes the reader back to a period, admittedly not that long ago, when such ideas were at the forefront of a certain approach to organization theory. This sense of time gone by may partly arise from the recycled nature of these essays, but, more profoundly, it reflects a period when such imaginative work seemed to offer a means of pursuing better ways of both living and working together. And, as I say, it is Parker's enduring belief in the power of imagination that permeates the book and brings it to life.

Not that all chapters are equally effective, however. Essays such as the one featuring James Bond, for example, while not uninformative, could benefit from deeper analysis of its subject matter. Moreover, as one would inevitably expect from a work of such scope and ambition, some of what is presented here, idiosyncratic and personal as it is, does not always convincingly align with Parker's professed ambition to extend the field outwards. By his own admission, and despite its capacity to fascinate and even entertain, this remains a somewhat self-indulgent, even ego-centric exercise: a "temple to me," as he self-deprecatingly yet knowingly confesses.

It is also worth noting that this is rather a 'Boys' Own' collection of ideas and fancies. His unabashed fascination with skyscrapers, tower cranes, and rockets reflects a phallocentrism that would not be out of place between the covers of his 007 novels. Plus, there are times when the level of detail he provides in describing some of his beloved cultural artefacts borders on the unhealthy. However, Parker is once again quick to mitigate such charges with a bashful shrug and a mea culpa. Consequently, even in raising these issues, one can somewhat feel cheap or perhaps not 'knowing'

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enough; that one might be falling into a cunningly set trap designed to draw the reader's attention away from more significant flaws. After all, if Parker is the interrogator of illusions, as he states, why shouldn't he also be the master of them?

It is also starkly noticeable that his critique of organization and his fascination with the sublime he finds in disorder, when combined with his yearning for a deeper understanding of such matters, create what one might term a hermeneutic tension. For, akin to the nineteenth-century lepidopterist he occasionally resembles, in seeking to understand what makes this expanded world of organization tick, he still longs to pull the wings from each butterfly he captures, subjecting it to the rigours of his version of the scientific gaze. As the book title suggests, he even possesses a cabinet, complete with shelves and cubbyholes, in which to store his dissected 'curiosities,' displaying them proudly for those who come to visit while leaving in his wake disorder subdued and a reimposed will to form. Thus, he perhaps reminds us that liberation and servitude are often two sides of the same coin, whether political or intellectual.

It can also be said that while his dissection of organizational illusions is incisive, this seldom leads to a wholly convincing reassemblage that I would otherwise suspect he might approve of. Despite his distrust of dualities, culture and organization often remain stubbornly discrete, with no higher reconciliation in the offing. And while I concede that a more dialectical closure, however temporary, might not be Parker's objective, at times, it is a shame. After all, I, too, used to find tower cranes inspiring, if not magical or 'beautiful and strange'. However, as I now force myself to gaze upward at them, all I seem to hear is Parker's voice saying, 'look, see', at what has become a lost totality of individual men urinating in bottles and a disenchanted world of stress calculations leaving me to wonder if the price of this enlightenment is perhaps too high.

Nevertheless, I still find myself, despite or perhaps because of such a misgiving, returning to my opening observation that this still feels like a very nostalgic book: a reminder or remnant. And it is this that brings me back to the question posed by Parker in his concluding chapter, namely, 'who wants to know this stuff?'. For me, at least, it seems that most organizational theorists, particularly those of a critical persuasion who would be drawn to such an analysis, either already know most of this or are increasingly focusing their energies on geo-political issues such as the role that business plays in environmental degradation, the perpetuation of colonial tropes and practices in business, and the need to enact more egalitarian and democratic forms of organizing. As such, while imagination still has its role to play in changing the world, it may no longer be sufficient to want to watch James Bond films or read about space rockets. Not that Parker isn't already aware of this. After all, exploring these very practical matters is not only central to other important facets of his research but also to his academic identity. Nevertheless, the question of who this particular book is for remains to be resolved.

Perhaps, on reflection, invoking nostalgia has led me down the wrong path. For while this collection is nostalgic for me, I belong to a passing generation, as do most of those who have rightfully praised it. And while nostalgia necessitates a readership that is willing to confront, once more, what it already deems true, like any compilation or greatest hits record, such work seldom gains new followers during its immediate lifetime. In a roundabout way, therefore, one possible answer to Parker's question is

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that this is not a book for me, nor perhaps even for the most recent generation of organizational theorists.

Rather, *The organization of things* feels less like a guide for today's scholars and more like a time capsule for future generations, lest they forget these lessons. For when the pendulum of academic trends swings once more—should such a rhythm endure—I hope that a new cohort of organizational thinkers will rediscover Parker's ideas as laid out in this book and be equally enriched by them as I was. They may not draw immediate solutions from them, of course. That is not Parker's ambition. Nonetheless, what they might find is a way of reimagining the possibilities of not only organization but also the importance of disorganization and that which slips between our vision. In this way, this book may be akin to a message in a bottle, perhaps not destined to reshape the present but to inspire those who come after. If that proves to be the case, then it was an exercise that was well worth the effort.

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