

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Organization Studies, History and Bletchley Park

I suppose that if you were to put forward a scheme of organization for any service which laid down as its basis that it would take a lot of men and women from civil life and dress some of them in one kind of clothes and some of them in another, and told all those dressed in black that they came under one set of rules and all those dressed in white under another and so on, and then told them that they had a double allegiance, firstly to the ruler of their black or white or motley party and secondly to another man who would partly rule over all of them, but only partly, any ordinary tribunal would order you to take a rest cure in an asylum. But suppose that the tribunal were somehow foolish enough to adopt your idea and in order that you might begin your work said 'We will now lend you some tools – they may not be quite what you want but you must make do with them, and tell us when they get blunt and we'll see if we can sharpen them for you', some higher power would presumably lock up the tribunal as a public menace – or, if it were in Russia or Germany, shoot them out of hand. Yet that is in fact the precise organization of Bletchley Park. Now it happens that Bletchley Park has been successful – so successful that it has supplied information on every conceivable subject from the movement of a single mine sweeper to the strategy of a campaign and the Christian name of a wireless operator to the introduction of a secret weapon.

Nigel de Grey, Deputy Head of Bletchley Park, Memorandum of 28 March 1943¹

As its title implies, this book has two purposes. One is to explicate the 'decoding organization' at Bletchley Park, the place most famous for the breaking of Enigma ciphers in conditions of complete secrecy during the Second World War. The other is, in the process, to develop a certain approach to the analysis of organizations; a way of making sense of, or 'decoding', organization which points to a way of reviving organization studies as currently commonly conducted. In this sense it is a contribution to the social science of organizations and will primarily be of interest to academics working in that field. However, it should also have a value to those working in the area of intelligence studies

2 INTRODUCTION

and history, and an appeal to general readers with an interest in Bletchley Park².

The overall intention is to provide an interpretative analysis which draws on a broad range of concepts in organization studies whilst engaging in considerable historical detail in order to illuminate how 'organization' is achieved or accomplished over time. This is a 'decoding' of organization in that, like the codebreakers of Bletchley Park, an interpretive analysis seeks an answer to the question 'what does this mean?'. It entails considerable complexity; a complexity which is analytical, methodological and empirical. This lengthy opening chapter introduces this complexity by first introducing Bletchley Park, then indicating the problems and possibilities of organization studies. This is followed by a discussion of organization studies and history, and what the linkage of the two has to offer. This serves as a prelude to indicating the approach to historical analysis which I will adopt and the methods and sources of that analysis. There follows a brief overview of the organization of Bletchley Park and, finally, an outline of the contents of the rest of the book.

BLETCHLEY PARK AS A RESEARCH SITE

One reason for choosing Bletchley Park (BP³) as the focus for this analysis is the widespread public interest its activities command. This is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that the BP story is, in a dramatic sense, an extremely exciting one, filled with human interest and historical significance. George Steiner may have been hyperbolic in claiming that 'it looks as if Bletchley Park is the single greatest achievement of Britain during 1939–45, perhaps during [the twentieth] century as a whole' (Steiner, 1983: 42), but that such a claim could even be made is telling. The official historian of British intelligence in World War Two (WW2), Professor Sir Harry Hinsley, himself an important figure at BP, suggested that its work may have shortened the course of the war by two to four years (Hinsley, 1993a, 1993b), whilst noting the difficult and dubious nature of such counterfactual claims (Hinsley, 1993a: 2).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and
Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The dramatic qualities of BP have provided the inspiration for a successful novel, *Enigma* (Harris, 1995), which became in turn a major film of the same title in 2001, whilst another film, *U-571* (2000), fictionalized the capture at sea of an Enigma machine. Bletchley Park was satirized in the BBC radio comedy show *Hut 33*, first broadcast in 2007, and was the subject of a 1999 Channel Four TV documentary, *Station X*. The BP site is now a major museum attracting many thousands of visitors each year and is regularly in the news because of the enduring interest in its codebreaking achievements and contribution to the conduct of WW2, its role in the development of computing and not least because of public interest in its best known luminary, Alan Turing (Hodges, 1982). There is a stream of popular literature explaining what happened at BP (e.g. Smith, 1998; McKay, 2010) and a growing number of reminiscences of those who worked there (e.g. Welchman, 1982; Hinsley and Stripp, 1993; Calvocoressi, 2001; Page, 2002, 2003; Hill, 2004; Luke, 2005; Watkins, 2006; Paterson, 2007; Hogarth, 2008; Thirsk, 2008; Briggs, 2011; Pearson, 2011)⁴.

The 'curse' is that out of all of this has grown a degree of mythologization and perhaps even sentimentalization of BP. One reason for the mythologization is the very peculiar circumstances of the secrecy that surrounded it. The work of BP was not publicly known until the mid 1970s (Winterbotham, 1974), with fuller details only emerging slowly over the following decades. Indeed, although most of the papers relating to BP are now declassified, some of what happened there remains secret and much which lies in the declassified papers remains unexamined. One consequence of this is that there are many contradictory accounts of particular details, not least because no reminiscences were published for so long after the event. Moreover, the complexity of its operations and the way that these operations were very rigorously compartmentalized for security reasons make grasping the totality of the BP story difficult and perhaps impossible: 'there is probably no one alive today who could do that, given the organizational structure of the Park at the time' (Enever, 1999: 2) The sentimentalization of BP is a more complex matter, and relates, I will

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 INTRODUCTION

suggest, to the dominant narrative of WW2 in British – in particular – society and its place in contemporary cultural apprehensions of British nationhood. At all events, there is a kind of fuzzy, generalized popular knowledge of BP, one aspect of which is captured by this humorous description in a spoof history book:

At Bitchily and Tetchily Park, highly strung men and women in thick spectacles sat stooped over crossword puzzles and chessboards in chilly, poorly lit rooms throughout the night attempting to catch the famous Enigma cold (Brown, 2005: 46).

So this background presents both opportunities and problems for a book of this sort which seeks to approach BP from a very particular angle. Given that so much has been written about it, one might wonder whether anything new remains to be said. For, apart from the more popular accounts I have alluded to, there has also been a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to BP. These include studies of its significance for intelligence and military history (e.g. Hinsley, 1993c; Bennett, 1994; Budiansky, 2000; Freedman, 2000; Lewin, 2008), for diplomatic and strategic history more widely (e.g. Ferris, 2005) and for the development of cryptographic and cryptanalytic techniques (e.g. Kahn, 1996; Smith and Erskine, 2001) and of computing (e.g. Goldstine, 1993; Copeland, 2001; 2004; 2006). These and a host of other historical studies of BP have some relevance to this book, but none is a social-scientific account of BP. Moreover, none has my focus here, which is specifically concerned with BP's *organization*, which has had very little academic attention. Apart from my own work with Andrew Sturdy (Grey and Sturdy, 2008, 2009, 2010), from which this book has grown, the main exceptions are some brief but important remarks by Herman (1996), some passages in Andrew (1985a, 2001), a book chapter by Davies (2001) and, most significantly, several parts of Ratcliff's (2006) book. The latter compares British and German signals intelligence

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and
Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

organization and also analyses why Germany did not realize that Enigma ciphers had been broken by the British.

However, as I have already indicated, the provision of an account of BP's organization is only one of my aims. My other is to use this as a kind of 'experiment' to develop a way of conducting organization studies. For, whilst this book deals with historical material, I am not an historian but an organizational theorist, and it is to those working in this field that this study is primarily addressed. Of course, this distinction between history and organizational theory is itself an issue which needs to be considered, and one of my arguments in this book is that there is much value in, and much more that can be done by, studying organization historically. I will turn to this shortly, but for now I want to elaborate upon what I mean by developing a way of conducting organization studies. It makes sense for me to do this before, later in this chapter, giving an introductory presentation of the organization of BP because, of course, to give any such presentation entails a set of assumptions about, or at least predispositions towards, what 'organization' means and how one might give a 'presentation' of organization.

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES

My starting point is that something has gone badly wrong with the field of organization studies⁵ (see also Mone and McKinlay, 1993; Weick, 1996; Greenwood and Hinings, 2002; Starbuck, 2003; Czarniawska, 2008; Gabriel, 2010; Grey, 2010; Suddaby, Hardy and Huy, 2011). What I mean by this is that it has in recent years moved further and further from providing incisive, plausible and readable accounts of organizational life which disclose more of, and explain more of, the nature of that life than would be possible without academic inquiry; but which do so in ways which are recognizably connected to the practice of organizational life. Let me unpack that rather convoluted sentence. As is basic to all social science, organization studies is concerned with human beings who themselves already have all kinds of explanations, understandings and theories of the

6 INTRODUCTION

lives they live. These may be under-examined or unexplored altogether, or they may be highly sophisticated. Yet, as Bauman (1990: 9–16), amongst many others, points out, these essentially commonsensical understandings of human life differ from those offered by social scientists in several key respects, including attempts to marshal evidence and provide reflective interpretations which in some way serve to ‘de-familiarize’ lived experience and commonsense. This is clearly not the same as saying that social science provides an objective or disinterested account of the social world; but it does need to provide one which goes beyond the self-accounts and self-understandings of individuals and collectivities, albeit perhaps (and probably) being concerned to give an account of those very self-accounts and self-understandings. This is what I mean by disclosing and explaining more of organizational life than would be possible without academic inquiry. So far, so basic, since some version of what I have said here would feature in any opening undergraduate lecture on a social science course.

What is problematic, at least in organization studies, is that this process of de-familiarizing lived experience has gone to extreme lengths. I have discussed this elsewhere (e.g. Grey, 2009) but, in brief, on the one hand, much academic work in the field has become highly quantified and abstracted, seeking to identify statistical relationships between different, artificially isolated, variables. Certainly, qualitative research in organizations studies has become much more common in recent years and this potentially speaks more directly of and to experience. But whilst the best of it does just that, qualitative research has gained acceptability in large part by adopting technicist norms derived from positivism, being pre-occupied with methodological ‘rigour’ rather than narrative richness. On the other hand, some parts of the field, especially the more ‘critically’ orientated, are concerned with extremely arcane debates in social theory and scarcely refer to concrete human experiences at all. The consequence of this is that much of organization studies does not de-familiarize commonsense understandings of experience but is almost entirely detached from them.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Thus, their immediate colleagues aside, hardly anyone is in a position to understand or to gain from most of what academics who study organizations write. One consequence of this is to create a vacuum which has been filled by the proliferation of 'airport lounge' business books providing, certainly, understandable accounts of organizational life but not ones which have the qualities of evidential and interpretative fidelity or of de-familiarization of commonsense that social science can and should provide.

It does not have to be like this, and indeed it is not uniformly like this. Greenwood and Hinings (2002) point to a kind of 'golden age' in organization studies in the 1950s when scholars such as Blau, Etzioni, Gouldner and Selznick wrote theoretically informed (mainly neo-Weberian) and empirically grounded studies of organization, written on a broad canvas, addressing 'big questions' and intelligible beyond the discipline itself. Whilst there are many reasons why such writing flourished in the 1950s and has rather withered now⁶, it should not be thought that it has since died. On the contrary, from, for example, Kanter's (1977) neo-Weberian study of corporate life and gender at 'Indsco', through Pettigrew's (1985) contextualist analysis of strategy at ICI and Jackall's (1988) constructivist account of the moral entanglements of managers in various unnamed organizations to Kunda's (1992) ethnographic study of organizational culture at 'Tech' and beyond there have been many books written from numerous perspectives which share the basic quality of what I am claiming to be needed for organization studies.

Part of the issue here is stylistic. As one later exemplar of such work, Tony Watson's study of 'ZTC Ryland', expresses it:

I hope to appeal at the same time to a managerial and an academic readership, as well as to the general reader interested in a social science analysis of an important modern activity. I have therefore carefully crafted this book to avoid what Charles Wright Mills in his discussion of intellectual craft work, criticised as the 'dense and turgid' style of much academic writing. This does not mean I have

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 INTRODUCTION

suspended normal standards of academic rigour. It seems to me that good sociology which is meaningful and enlightening to the non-academic reader is a realistic possibility. *(Watson, 1994: 2)*

There is more at stake here than writing style, of course, important though that is (Grey and Sinclair, 2006). One of the many things which has changed in organization studies since the 1950s, say, is the remarkable proliferation of different approaches, both theoretical and methodological, within the field. This fragmentation mirrors that which has occurred in the social sciences more generally and reflects a changing intellectual landscape but also, perhaps, the changing conditions of academic life which tend to encourage ever narrower specialization. In a detailed overview of the organization studies field, Reed (1992) identifies the manifold schisms which characterize it – and which have certainly not decreased, and have probably increased, since then – and makes an important proposal for regeneration. This consists of ‘the construction of, and dialogue between, intellectual narratives and constituting *the* vital intellectual process sustaining the collective search for a better understanding of modern organizations’ (Reed, 1992: 280, emphasis in original). At least one aspect of the kind of dialogue Reed envisages involves engaging

with older narratives, which are in need of substantial overhaul but continue to relate to present problems and projected futures [if] retrieved from the collective amnesia or forgetfulness which is encouraged by recently fashionable modes of discourse and analysis.

(Reed, 1992: 281)

To put this last point into sharper focus and indicate what it means in terms of the analysis contained in this book, one of the organizational developments at BP which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2 was a series of transitions which occurred in the period 1940–42, during which a far more factory-like form of organization emerged. When I became aware of this, I realized immediately (for reasons which will be explained at the relevant point) that it conformed in some ways to

some of the classic patterns identified by structural contingency theory (see Donaldson, 2001). Yet for a long time I resisted this realization. Why? Because, to an organizational theorist brought up, as I was, in a largely post-structuralist tradition, approaches such as structural contingency theory are regarded as, at best, outdated and, at worst, wrongheaded. I gradually came to the view that there was something peculiar, and perhaps intellectually dishonest, about my reluctance to consider contingency theory, and this realization very much informs the approach I will adopt throughout this book. Namely, I will deploy a range of organizational theories (not contingency theory in particular) regardless of what camp or perspective they come from and regardless of their current fashionability (cf. Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon, 2011). This does not, of course, imply an acceptance of any of them wholesale (contingency theory included), rather it means recognizing that in relation to particular questions or ranges of problem one kind of organizational theory may have purchase, whilst for another it may be quite irrelevant, or simply wrong.

Such an approach is likely to prove offensive to many organizational theorists and there is probably little which can be done to assuage that offence. But it is perhaps worth pointing out that I am not promoting a kind of vapid pluralism in which there is ‘something in’ each and every approach. Nor am I proposing any sort of unified field theory for organization studies, which I would regard as a doomed enterprise: the fragmentation and schism in social sciences has occurred for good reasons, and is not going to be mended. Rather, my concern is a more pragmatic one. As Tsoukas and Knudsen (2003: 5) have argued, ‘paradigmatic’ conflict is not susceptible to resolution in the abstract but may become less formidably ‘incommensurable’ through being reworked in specific sites:

Like any other kind of work, empirical research is not a matter of mere ‘application’ of a given set of paradigmatic assumptions, but of active determination of those assumptions *in practice* . . .

Researchers do not so much ‘apply’ or ‘follow’ paradigms in their

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00545-7 - Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies

Christopher Grey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO INTRODUCTION

work as they explore particular topics, in particular sites and, having to cope coherently with all the puzzles and tensions stemming from the complexity of the phenomena they investigate, they extend, synthesize, and/or invent concepts.

(Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2003: 13, emphasis in original)

This is very much the spirit in which I approach the study of BP in this book. However, this does not mean that the utilization of various theories arises simply or solely from the ‘facts’ of what happened at, in this case, BP: I am not advocating naïve empiricism. Clearly the way in which I select and identify those facts, questions and puzzles which seem interesting or important is itself something arising from the kinds of theories and ideas which I bring to bear in my selection and interpretation of the evidence available to me. There is an iterative process in play between theory and empirics, mediated, of course, by own concerns, pre-occupations and predispositions, which is irreducible. So in saying that my approach is one of ‘pragmatism’ I do not seek to deny the ‘theory-ladenness’ of empirical knowledge, I just endeavour not to become hamstrung by theoretical purism or tribalism. It seems to me that this is the only way in which it is possible, given the evaporation of broad consensus within the organization studies field, to provide the kind of broad, intelligible, engaged study which I have argued has become too rare within that field.

Drawing together what I have said in this section, I am suggesting that part of what this book attempts to achieve is the provision of a form of organizational analysis which offers insights which would not be possible without such an analysis, but to do so in ways which are reasonably readily understandable to a range of readers and which overcome at least some of the fragmentations within organizational theory, and to do so not via an abstract discussion of that theory but through a situated analysis of a particular organizational setting. It is this kind of analysis which I am denoting as a ‘decoding’ of organization. It is important to clarify what I mean by this term. It should not be taken to imply discovering the ‘hidden truth’ but, rather, providing an