

Power and Contextual Issues in Networks

Alex Faria

Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná

Address: Rua Padre Agostinho, 1905-1001
Curitiba-PR; 80710-000; Brazil
Tel. +55-41-3393742;
Fax +55-41-3323323
E-mail: afaria_aguedes@uol.com.br

Abstract

Networks were taken as a new paradigm for development in the late 1980s and early 1990s by business organizations, academics and governments in several parts of the world. Despite the substantial transfer of corresponding knowledge and frameworks produced mainly in the US and in Europe, supply networks in particular became a potential new fad as problems were observed in different countries and industrial sectors. These suggested that one thing was to theorise or design the other was to manage this type of network.

Drawing upon critical realism, it is argued that the most known schools on networks produced in US and Europe, namely supply chain management and industrial networks, are misleading because they oversimplify power and contextual structures and mechanisms. The author builds research guidelines adequate to the investigation of power and contextual issues in networks from a critical realist standpoint. Based on an extensive empirical research fulfilled from 1995 to 1997 in Brazil and UK and on the revealing accounts of informants, the author shows that those theories are misleading because they do not recognise the political power of the supra-network, led mainly by transnational corporations, in diverse parts of the world. The author then argues that the power of proper research methods grounded on critical realism is limited because the supra-network has become increasingly influential within the academic setting and on the commodification and diffusion of certain types of management knowledge. The author concludes that critical realists should problematize power and contextual issues within and outside the academy and that academics and governments in general should play a more active role to deal with the increasing commodification, diffusion and internationalisation of apolitical types of management knowledge.