

the second part of the book is problematic. He does not consider cases where countries have successfully *resisted* the debtor role, and therefore the category itself needs an urgent revision. Nor does he acknowledge the different trajectories that the IMF or the World Bank have followed in the past 30 years – his critical period of analysis – and therefore uniformity when engaging with debtors cannot be suggested to be the rule. At the micro-level, his creditor–debtor analysis imposes a homogeneous taste and therefore elements such as race, gender, age and immigration, or even time, are simply overlooked. Granted, his effort aims at recapturing debt as a decisive category of analysis. Nonetheless, debt is not evenly distributed within any population, and it is there that a more precise theoretical effort is needed if criticizing neoliberalism is at the core of any research agenda. In the latter case, two examples merit consideration: in the United States, the fixing of interest loan rates regardless of economic class or educational level of the individuals is more *abusive* the darker the skin is. In Canada, recent immigrants, unlike what Lazzarato ultimately suggests, face countless problems trying to be integrated into what he calls the financing market. In both examples, the creditor–debtor relationship seems to paradoxically have a stronger effect once notions of privileges temper the analysis, or rather when more ‘nuances’ have been added to understand ‘neoliberalism’.

Unfortunately, in what is actually a very important sociological effort to revive debt as a core analytical device to carry out sociological theoretical and empirical research, Lazzarato’s argument fades and hides the uneven market practices whereby both unintended and intended privileges have coexisted beyond the recent emergence of ‘neoliberalism’.

## Reference

Weber M and Runciman WG (1978) *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Author biography

José Ignacio Nazif is a PhD candidate in sociology at McGill University. He has published in peer-reviewed journals on social stratification, focusing on cultural consumption, as well as on road risky behaviours. He is now studying how the influence of globalization forces, such as international organizations, forms of expertise and automobile markets are shaping different road safety policies in both developed and developing countries. *Address*: McGill University, Department of Sociology, Room 712, Leacock Building, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T7, Canada. Email: jose.nazifmunoz@mail.mcgill.ca

Howard Lune,

*Understanding Organizations*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010; 216 pp.: ISBN 9780745644271, £55.00 (hbk), 9780745644288, £18.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by** Wade P Smith, *University of Colorado, USA*

## Keywords

Institutions, social change, sociological theory, sociology of organizations

When writing an introductory text on the sociology of organizations, where does one begin? In *Understanding Organizations*, Howard Lune strategically begins by presenting organizational sociology not as simply one among many subdisciplines within a broader field, but rather as a necessary area of emphasis for all sociological analysis, '[w]hatever our specific areas of interest or concern' (p. 8). Stated explicitly, '[i]n an organizational society, there is little that we can learn about ourselves without a reasonable understanding of organizations' (p. 187). Reviewing the theoretical foundation from which a sociological understanding of organizations is made possible, Lune succeeds in providing the reader with a necessary foundation from which contemporary social life can be explored and understood. Along the way, Lune provides students with an ever-increasing set of tools that make sociological analysis and interpretation possible. In the final chapters, these tools are brought together in a novel way that indicates their importance not as a set of unrelated theoretical and empirical observations, but as a collection of tools that, when applied, enables a more thorough analysis of social life.

In the words of the author, *Understanding Organizations* is an 'introductory text' in which he reviews 'many of the major ideas and discoveries that give shape to the field of organizational sociology' (p. 173). Beginning with an overview of the ways Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, as influential founders of the field of sociology, 'all looked to organizations and other associations to help them figure out how people acted collectively' (p. 19), Lune firmly roots the sociology of organizations as an area of necessary interest within the field. Within this section of the book, he also introduces the reader to central concepts introduced by these influential theorists, such as Weber's conceptualizations of forms of authority, the ideal typical bureaucracy, and disenchantment of the world; Durkheim's ideas of social solidarity, conceptualization of anomie, and seminal work on an evolving division of labor; and Marx's conceptualization of capitalism and the economic system's relationship to exploitation and alienation. Most important, however, is not Lune's introduction and description of these sociologically important concepts early in the text, but his reliance on them throughout the remaining chapters to situate and understand more recent contributions. For example, he does not lose sight of these early theoretical contributions (as other texts might), but explicitly relies on them to situate, explore, and understand early 20th-century administrative theories in the chapter that follows (e.g. Fordism and Taylorism). In a similar manner, he moves the reader forward in time to empirical and theoretical attention afforded culture in organizations (Chapter 4) and organizational dysfunctions (Chapter 5) by underscoring the relationship between earlier theories and their influence on the formative works of more recent key contributors such as Erving Goffman, Gideon Kunda, Charles Perrow, Philip Selznick, Ann Swidler, and Diane Vaughan.

Continuing in this manner, with each later section being necessarily related to earlier paradigms, Lune devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 6) to relatively recent conceptualizations focused on how organizations are embedded within wider social environments. What is important is that this chapter maintains continuity with the introduction chapter in which institutional forces are of primary interest. In Chapter 1, for example, Lune does not take the contemporary organizational form and structure (or even the state, bureaucracy, and 'the organizational society') as given, but rather details the historical and social contingency of such reality. In this later chapter, he revisits these substantial

observations by describing in detail more recent ‘powerful analytic paradigms and numerous methodological breakthroughs’ (p. 111) that have exposed the relationship between an organization and its environment to include network analysis, ecological models, and neoinstitutional theory.

Returning to his initial suggestion that virtually everything we do (such as, to use his examples, selling Girl Scout cookies or participating in sports leagues) occurs in an organized setting, Lune devotes a chapter to the nonprofit sector (Chapter 7). More importantly, he details this sector not simply as an arena of social life only understandable on its own terms, but rather one that can be interpreted through the organization-focused theoretical lens he has developed throughout the text. Throughout the chapter, he relies on key contributions to detail the contingent relationships between sectors (to include for-profit, nonprofit, and government sectors), as well as the similarities and differences among them. Of note is his reliance not on an altogether new language, but his incorporation of concepts detailed throughout the book—such as alienation, organizational culture, and network analysis—to provide the reader with a more thorough sociological understanding of the nonprofit sector.

With the weaving together of a history of ideas being a strong point of Lune’s text, Chapter 8, ‘Organizing for social change,’ demonstrates the practical worth of understanding the sociology of organizations ‘whatever our specific areas of interest or concern.’ In this chapter, the author leverages a unique approach to ‘demonstrate the interactions among many of the major findings that we have looked at in the [previous] chapters’ (p. 167). Relying on concepts described throughout the text in his discussion of social-change organizations, Lune reinvigorates the attention of the reader away from a persistent focus on for-profit organizations, re-emphasizing and supporting his initial suggestions that the sociology of organizations is not a distinct area of sociological interest, but a necessary area of emphasis within all sociological analysis.

In conclusion, Lune provides the reader with thoughts on ‘new directions for the field.’ First, this section begins with a discussion of some areas of inquiry that are of significant interest in contemporary society. It should be noted, however, that Lune does not provide a definitive answer to the questions he poses, but lets the student consider how the material covered in the text may be applied in useful ways to understand social life today and the directions in which it seems to be headed. He reminds the reader of the importance of a sociology of organizations, briefly describing how an understanding of the key contributions detailed throughout the book enable more nuanced understandings of sociological concerns including culture, politics, economics, and stratification, encouraging students to apply the ideas to both sociological analysis and in their daily lives.

Of significant importance for any introductory text geared toward students relatively unfamiliar with the topic, beyond reviewing ‘many of the major ideas and discoveries that have shaped the field,’ is the author’s ability to make relevant the topic of interest. As a matter of significance, therefore, I comment here on one strategy that I feel makes the author’s attempts successful. Throughout the text, Lune does not simply rely on empirical research to contextualize the discussions, but also incorporates current and relevant examples. Whether relying on Starbucks as an example of ‘McDonaldization,’ discussing the film *Apollo 13* to demonstrate concepts of organizational culture, or

providing personal examples from his own work experiences, the reader is invited to envision the theoretical constructs in real-life situations. Furthermore, the reader is often encouraged to 'imagine,' 'consider,' or 'suppose' a common or likely scenario that demonstrates the concepts being discussed. In a theory-focused text like *Understanding Organizations*, such examples and hypothetical scenarios provide the reader with the essential connection between theoretical construct and empirical observation.

Though this introductory text is successful at providing a necessary overview, one criticism, however minor, is warranted here. Throughout the text, Lune stays true to his focus on discussing the sociology of organizations. Readers will find familiar names and figures, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, C Wright Mills, and Erving Goffman, who are mentioned in nearly every introductory sociology text. Although this serves as a strength in Lune's attempt to make a sociology of organizations relevant in all sociological analysis, I believe the text would benefit from a comparison, if only brief, to other approaches to organization studies. Organizational sociology is well represented in the text, yet the reader is left to wonder how this approach is unique. In a text dedicated to the sociological approach, the reader would benefit from exploring, for example, how organizational sociology is similar to yet different from the study of organizational communication. That being said, no one text can adequately capture the entire field of organization studies, and Lune does provide the reader with a solid and useful review of the major ideas that have shaped organizational sociology, the task he sets out to accomplish, and as I suggest above, successfully does. As a theoretically driven introductory text, therefore, *Understanding Organizations* is a very useful resource, and one that could find its place on any young sociologist's bookshelf.

### Author biography

Wade P Smith is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado. His research interests include organizational sociology and neo-institutional theory, with a focus on military and sport organizations. *Address:* University of Colorado, Department of Sociology, 327 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309, USA. Email: [wade.p.smith@colorado.edu](mailto:wade.p.smith@colorado.edu)