

## BOOK REVIEW

of

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### *Organization Studies*

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How long can one resist *not* reviewing a book on the politics of book reviewing itself when one always had an affinity for books and book reviews? Answer: In my case, not very long. Such was the appeal, the irresistible temptation, of Phillipa Chong's recent book *Inside the Critics' Circle – Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* that I simply had to read the book from front to back cover. I did not plan to write this review book review at all for *Organization Studies*. After all, Chong's book focuses on literary criticisms in uncertain times, so my interest was that of a general reader simply attracted by the topic. What changed my mind, however, is that, as my reading progressed, I found myself increasingly reflecting on my own experience as Co-Book Review Editor (with my wonderful colleagues Lynne Anderson and Mar Perezts) at *Organization Studies*. While some readers might question the review of a book on literary criticisms in the pages of this journal, it is worth remembering that sociological studies of evaluation, which “interrogate how people determine the value . . . of social entities (i.e., evaluative practices), and the process by which entities acquire . . . value” (p. 7), feature regularly in this journal (e.g., Demers and Gond, 2019). By the same token, book reviews are political because reviewers mediate as ‘third party’ between producers (authors and publishers) and an audience. Mediation here is tantamount to ‘orienting readers’

knowledge' about the book under review toward some characteristics of a book *rather than others*. Finally, while we have outlined criteria for assessing the quality or 'value' of books before (Lindebaum et al., 2018), broadening our repertoire of evaluative criteria in relation to how we assess the value of books can make it less likely that book reviews themselves acquire the kind of formulaic flavor that journal articles have sometimes been criticized for.

I admit that my task in reviewing Chong's book is probably less anxiety-stricken compared to the journalistic book reviewers (i.e., 'critics') that Chong interviewed; in fiction, one typically does not find a statement of purpose along the lines of "the aim of this study is....." that we find, by necessity, in scholarly articles and books. For reviewers, the presence of such statement can facilitate the review process, because it serves as a starting point for a series of (three) steps that my colleagues and I have discussed before: Does the book review offer "an indication of (i) the reviewer's understanding of the book's purpose, (ii) how well the reviewer believes the book's purpose has been accomplished and (iii) the support to underpin the reviewer's verdict of the book's achievement" (Lindebaum et al., 2018: 138).

In terms of substantive contents, Chong is generous in detailing what the aims of her empirical book are. There are several occasions in this book where this happens (see pp. 2, 7 and 8 e.g.), but the clearest articulation is that "the goal of the book is to understand how book reviewers undertake the task of reviewing and valuing fiction, and to understand the social factors that influence how reviewers do this work, including the epistemic, social and institutional uncertainty they face" (p. 12). To investigate this aim, she conducted in-depth interviews "with forty fiction reviewers who had published a review in at least one of the three influential American newspapers" (pp. 12-13), such as *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*. In light of the 'elite sample' (her term) at hand, the sample is impressive. As to why there has not been more scholarly attention to the very process of

valuing books of fiction, Chong suggests that this is because aesthetic judgments are (i) subjective (i.e., chaotic and random rather than reasoned and therefore empirically not demonstrable) and (ii) strategic (i.e., when reviewers use aesthetic valuations as a tool to reproduce their own status, and by advancing standards of ‘good literature’).

Chong’s interest in the epistemic, social and institutional uncertainty reviewers face translates into a corresponding three-part structure of the book. In Part One, which comprises two chapters, the author focuses on what she terms ‘epistemic uncertainty’, in the sense that epistemic is of, or relating to, knowledge about what are appropriate indicators for evaluating works of fiction. These indicators can be notoriously intangible since aesthetic judgment is often considered idiosyncratic rather than an objective fact. When epistemic uncertainty is low, Chong suggests, one deals with entities whose quality is uncertain, but ultimately ‘knowable’. By contrast, when entities are radically uncertain, their value may be unknowable. Following the introduction in Chapter 1, Chong elaborates upon how “how reviewing works” (p. 19) in Chapter 2; that is, she attends to the selection process and practices that influence which books are being reviewed. Because 13 participants had direct experience as review editors, Chong distilled four key themes that influence review editors as to whether they have a book reviewed or not, these being (i) newsworthiness (in the case of ‘big books’), (ii) interesting content, (iii) variety of coverage and (iv) practical constraints (reviewer availability). A figure is provided to show the distribution of scores provided by participants. What struck me as informative is the account of one editor who felt that high status authors and publishing houses do not serve as proxies for quality, but, because these are often described as ‘big books’, the need to have them reviewed is rooted in their newsworthiness. This underlines a general shift in book reviewing from the question ‘is it worth being reviewed’ to ‘does it merit coverage’? In the case of *Organization Studies*, we have always considered it imperative to bring ‘interesting’ ideas and debates into the journal,

no matter where they hailed from in terms of geography, ethnicity, gender, or academic rank. We paid particular attention to those ideas currently underrepresented in the journal, like books on artificial intelligence (Moore, 2018), sleep (Valtonen, 2019), and factfulness (Lefsrud, 2019), or when we felt that current socio-economic conditions justify a reminder of classical works, such as Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Fernandez, 2019) and Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (Deslandes, 2018).

Reverting back to Chong, once reviewers have accepted to review a book, their next task is to generate an evaluation of the book under review. How they do that is the focus of Chapter 3, in which Chong grapples with the adage that there is “no accounting for taste” (p. 36). Many participants admitted that reading is a subjective experience, but that is not necessarily how critics saw their own work. Instead, they seek to produce a highly contextualized evaluation, which is limited in itself, but renders a crucial contribution to the emergence of a “critical consensus” (p. 37). What I found useful in this chapter is that reviewers approach the task of reviewing through two successive strategies Chong refers to as the ‘civilian’ and ‘critical’ mode of reviewing. In the former, reviewers are concerned with assessing the quality of a book based on instinctual responses. She quotes a critic in his response to the question when he likes a book or not. It is worth citing it here in full as it will resonate with many general readers and editors.

“Write me a good first sentence . . . . Okay, I’m teasing a little bit, but you better write me a good first paragraph, and sure as hell better write me a good first chapter, because if you don’t, I’m gone” (p. 36).

In the end, what matters to reviewers is if they can “go along for a ride” (p. 36) as an indication that the book is ‘working’. In other words, some critics acknowledge the technical accomplishment of good writing through affective experiences, of “feeling engaged and absorbed in a story” (p. 40). This observation applies to academic books as well from my experience. I finished this book in three days simply because it told a good story and related

to my keen an unrelenting interest in books. The ‘critical mode’ of reading, however, follows a different purpose, namely, to assess if these first general impressions can be anchored in specific observations and details in the text. That links back with the view, articulated earlier, that support must be provided to underpin the reviewer’s verdict of a book’s achievement. The process of anchoring specific observations in the text also imposes upon reviewers the need for reflexivity, when they ask themselves, for instance, if it is their “personal idiosyncrasy or is it that this book is not very good . . . [that is, that there are] failures intrinsic to the book” (pp. 40-41). In this chapter, Chong also reports on a set of evaluative criteria in terms of participants’ perceptions is of what constitutes ‘good fiction’. These are – together what their equivalent labels for academic reviewers – (i) Characterization (i.e., are constructs or concepts intelligibly defined?), (ii) language or prose (i.e., writing that is accessible but not simplistic versus pompous and naval gazing academic writing), (iii) plot and structure (i.e., does the story/study unfold logically), (iv) themes and ideas (i.e., is the idea vividly presented, and/or does it relate to topical developments?) and finally (v) genre expectations (i.e., expect a rejection letter when you write a critical essay with a positivist hat on). Similar to the figure of distributed scores before, this chapter contains tables that features percentages of responses along the lines of the aforementioned criteria (see p. 43).

Part Two of the book moves into the territory of social uncertainty, a territory rife with pitfalls and proverbial minefields. This is because social uncertainty implies “critics’ inability to predict how relevant others [e.g., authors and other reviewers] will respond or react to their evaluations” (p. 57). But not only that; ultimately, responses may emanate from any part of the wider literary community. What complicates matters further is what Chong refers to as the switch-role reward structure of reviewing, which captures the circumstance that “reviewers are often themselves authors invited by the editors of book review pages to temporarily switch from their roles as producers of books to perform the role of reviewer of

books and back gain” (p. 57). What is crucial here are the ‘anticipated’ reactions of reviewers to future situations when their own work is put to scrutiny, possibly by those whose work they have been reviewed previously. That act of anticipation is thus closely concerned with possible consequences of their reviews. It too has crucial bearing on what eventually goes into the review, and what does not. In Chapter 4, Chong illustrates ways that critics make sense of navigating the social uncertainty enveloping their reviews, especially in cases when reviewers are inclined to offer a negative book review. Chong usefully outlines what she calls ‘benevolent justifications’ that aim to reduce harm for the author, such as sympathy for, and recognition of hard work, by the author. Or those based on previous painful experiences by the reviewer of being at the receiving end of negative reviews. Defensive justifications, by contrast, concern the management of risk for the reviewer. Specifically, it deals with the (i) mitigation of damage that can stem from alienating peers and editors (I can sure as hell recall asking authors to moderate their language because of that) or risk of personal confrontation with the authors (I am reminded here of Geert Hofstede’s unique skill of vitriolically responding to his critics). Further, it has to do with fears of retribution, like receiving negative reviews oneself in future, or being disadvantaged in future forums, like prize juries. The consequence is, therefore, that one should review “as you would want to be reviewed” (p. 72). Chapter 5 features a rather succinct message: “aim for the stars: punching up, never down” (p. 83). It reflects the unwritten rule that one should direct ‘punches’ (i.e., negative reviews) toward authors with status and visibility, while cutting some slack in relation to novices who have published their first novel, for instance. In fact, Chong states that critics were most comfortable being critical about their dislikes of books composed by famous writers.

Part Three, the final part of the book, centers on what is described as institutional uncertainty, or “the relative lack of taken-for-granted procedures, routines, and structures that

organize critics' experiences and activities as reviewers" (p. 98). In chapter 6, this is unpacked in relation to how said lack impinges on how critics' self-perceptions as to whether they qualify as a critic or not. This is grounded in the absence of defined benchmarks or processes for delineating who is qualified to do the work of book reviewing. There are no formal mechanisms through which individuals can be restricted from engaging in book reviewing. Given the powerful role of critics as both 'tastemakers' and 'cultural consecrators' (p. 4) – a circumstance that has more crucial bearing for journalistic rather than academic book reviews – it appears plausible that Chong highlights the anxiety and vulnerability of critics in cases they get it wrong. Another salient point in the chapter, although this placement seems obscure judging by the chapter's title "I am not a critic", is that of book reviewing as a path to self-cultivation. A love of reading runs through the accounts shared here, as expressed in statements like "I like reading books" or "I like thinking about books" (p. 109), and that provides a qualitative difference in how critics engage with books, because "I [i.e., the critic] really do find myself much more involved in a book when I write about it (p. 109). That point is worth dwelling on for a moment. I heard on more than one occasion colleagues asking me what is the use of book reviews per se given that they do not count as 'proper publications' in performance evaluations. These concerns are understandable, if myopic however, because having really immersed oneself in a book, and having gone to the lengths of writing a review about it, one will experience said closer involvement with it. This, in turn, can be pay real and often unexpected dividends in writing scholarly articles simply because one has acquired the necessary theoretical depth and breadth to succeed in this effort. The last chapter before the conclusion, Chapter 7, is devoted to the question if "we need book reviews?" (p. 118). Much of the contents of this chapter consider the question through the lens of journalistic book reviews. Here, we find several rather apocalyptic newspaper headlines (like "the Death of the Critic", p. 118), but Chong goes on to suggest that even more academic-oriented works are

concerned with the legitimacy crisis of reviewing. That may be so in the domain of her field of study (i.e., sociology), but as far as *Organization Studies* is concerned, the solid increase of download rates<sup>1</sup> of book reviews in recent years speaks a very different language, namely that of appreciation about, interest in, and utility of books as theoretical inspirations for scholars of organizations and beyond. In concluding her book, Chong argues that, in the end, it is how “critics draw on their personal experience as writers [and reviewees], shared stories about the other reviewers’ experiences, reflections on the status hierarchy in publishing, and the particular publication in which the review will appear that informs their individual calculus about how they handle writing negative reviews” (p. 135). It underlines the need for political acumen if one wishes to survive as a critic in the long run, but also in terms of the potentially harmful consequences that one’s review can cause for others – both psychologically and economically.

I made no secret before that I enjoyed reading the book – it uses accessible prose and ‘takes the reader on a ride’ through the world of reviewing books under conditions of uncertainty. Equally, I am impressed that she managed to garner a sample of 40 critics in a ‘elite’ context where probably not many more will be around in the geographical context that she examined. And she deserves credit for eliciting the political implications of reviewers operating under the three types of uncertainty. I believe that authors, reviewers, and editors all can potentially glean useful practical insights from Phillipa Chong’s book. All this makes me lenient in glossing over some of the inaccuracies in the book, such as using ‘epistemology’ and ‘epistemic’ interchangeably, or the ‘bumpy’ built up of Part Three, when she foreshadows a theoretical focus of this section (see bottom paragraph of p. 98), that connects awkwardly with the title of the opening chapter (chapter 6). However, if I am

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<sup>1</sup> To elaborate, there are now book reviews with 4-digit download rates (Moore, 2018), and several with medium 3-digit numbers (Tourish, 2018; Kelemen, 2019; Gabriel, 2018).

pressed to answer how well I believe Chong has satisfied the aim of her study, I struggle to be lenient. There are several reasons why I think this to be the case, and they are anchored in specific observations taken from her book. The book being empirical in nature, it was irksome to search for a methodological and analysis chapter in vain. Books allow much more space for elaborating on these particularly crucial elements compared to academic journals. After all, it has been stated more than once before that trustworthiness of qualitative studies can be enhanced if they follow a 'clear methodological process' (Gephart, 2004: 458). So I am left to wonder where do all the themes come from, and how did they evolve? Where is the analytical procedure that shows how the scope of themes changed iteratively from the initial interview guide to the final template? It is odd - to the say the least - that for an empirical monograph – with the aim to empirically specify types of uncertainty (see p. 8) – that attention to this key stage in the analytical process has been omitted. What impresses itself upon the reader is the question where do the main themes come from? On reading the first few pages, one gets the impression that the themes are the result of simple knowledge abstraction from the existing literature, and that the interview material serves as mere illustration, if not sometimes confirmation, of such abstractions. What this points to is a well-established debate on masquerading qualitative data by way of 'objective percentages' and 'distribution of scores' to instill greater validity of findings, as if natural followers of the qualitative tradition ever needed persuasion by means of positivist standards. That, in light of the project's phenomenological focus, is rather counterproductive and corrodes the quality of the (anecdotal) story as such.

When all is said and done, Phillipa Chong has provided illuminating accounts about the types of uncertainty that reviewers face when they undertake the task of reviewing books. However, the book succeeds at an anecdotal level at best, rather than an empirical monograph, for in the absence of a clear analytical strategy of how the data were analyzed, its

scholarly merit remains suspect. In saying that, on looking for the first time now at the promotion website of the publisher with all the glowing (commercially placed) reviews and endorsements, I suddenly become acutely aware of being at the onset of a full-blown crisis of “professional insecurity”, this “first blush of feeling” of perhaps getting it wrong (p. 52) as one reviewer put it. Well, I guess these are uncertain times for folks like me then....

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