



FOURTH EDITION



A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT

**STUDYING  
ORGANIZATIONS**



CHRIS GREY



'INDISPENSIBLE AND SUBVERSIVE' SIMON CAULKIN, THE OBSERVER

'I WANTED TO WRITE TO YOU TO TELL YOU HOW MUCH I APPRECIATE YOUR BOOK - AS EVIDENCED BY THE COFFEE STAINS AND FRAVED EDGES, IT IS A BOOK I CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT AND I WILL USE IT AS I CONTINUE MY EDUCATION AND INTO MY CAREER.'

WANDA V. MITCHELL, MASTERS STUDENT IN HEALTHCARE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT, MILANO, THE NEW SCHOOL FOR MANAGEMENT AND URBAN POLICY, NEW YORK

CONCEIVED BY CHRIS GREY AND WRITTEN TO GET YOU THINKING, THE 'VERY SHORT, FAIRLY INTERESTING AND REASONABLY (HEAP' SERIES OFFERS AN INFORMAL, CONVERSATIONAL, ACCESSIBLE YET SOPHISTICATED AND CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF WHAT YOU FIND IN CONVENTIONAL TEXTBOOKS.

THE NEW FOURTH EDITION OF THIS BOOK EXPLAINS THE UNFOLDING CONSEQUENCES FOR ORGANIZATIONS OF THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS, HAS BEEN UPDATED WITH EXAMPLES FROM THE BIGGEST RECENT NEWS EVENTS, AND INCORPORATES THE LATEST RESEARCH STUDIES AND UP-TO-DATE STATISTICS.

THIS BOOK IS IDEAL FOR STUDENTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES, MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS AND ANYONE CURIOUS ABOUT THE WORKINGS OF ORGANIZATIONS.

CHRIS GREY IS PROFESSOR OF ORGANIZATION STUDIES, SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UK.

★ VISIT CHRIS GREY'S REGULARLY UPDATED BLOG WHICH KEEPS THE BOOK BANG UP TO DATE AND IS READ BY THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WORLDWIDE:  
[HTTP://AUTHOR-CHRISGREY.BLOGSPOT.CO.UK](http://author-chrisgrey.blogspot.co.uk)

 **SAGE** [www.sagepublishing.com](http://www.sagepublishing.com)  
Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

ISBN: 978-1-4739-5345-1



9 781473 953451



A VERY SHORT, FAIRLY INTERESTING AND REASONABLY CHEAP  
BOOK ABOUT STUDYING ORGANISATIONS → CHRIS BREY

SAGE



**FOURTH EDITION**



**A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT**

# **STUDYING ORGANIZATIONS**



**CHRIS GREY**



 **SAGE**

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

---

Editor: Delia Martinez-Alfonso  
Editorial assistant: Lyndsay Aitken  
Production editor: Sarah Cooke  
Marketing manager: Alison Borg  
Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow

© Chris Grey 2017

First edition published 2005.  
Reprinted 2006 (twice), 2007, 2008.  
Second edition published 2008.  
Reprinted 2010, 2011 (twice), 2012.  
Third edition published 2013.  
Reprinted 2013, 2014.  
This fourth edition published 2017.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

The title for the 'Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about...Series' was devised by Chris Grey. His book, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Studying Organizations*, was the founding title of this series. Chris Grey asserts his right to be recognized as founding editor of the Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about...Series.

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2016935435**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47395-345-1

ISBN 978-1-47395-346-8 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using FSC papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT

STUDYING  
ORGANIZATIONS

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT

## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

IRENA GELBOLTS

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

JOANNE EGGERTS

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

SECOND EDITION

DAVID SILVERMAN

SECOND EDITION

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT



ANN L. CHLIFPE

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

EMMA DELL AND RICHARD THORPE

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT

LOWRNE LIPPEN

SECOND EDITION

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**COACHING AND MENTORING**

BOB GARDY

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**STUDYING LEADERSHIP**

DEAN JACKSON AND KEN PARRY

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**STUDYING MARKETING**

JIM BLYTHE

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS**

DEBBIE CARRON AND MARTYNA LIMA

A VERY SHORT,  
FAIRLY INTERESTING AND  
REASONABLY CHEAP BOOK ABOUT  
**STUDYING STRATEGY**

CHRIS CARTER, STEWART A. CLEGG  
AND MARTIN KORNSTUBER

Dedicated to Alan Grey (1926–2005)



# About the Author

**Chris Grey** is Professor of Organization Studies at the School of Management at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK and Professeur-invité and Chercheur-associé at Université Paris-Dauphine, France. Before that he held Professorships at the Universities of Warwick and Cambridge, where he was also a Fellow of Wolfson College. He has been Visiting Research Fellow at Cambridge, Velux Foundation Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, and a Visiting Fellow at the Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research, Sweden. Between 2010 and 2012 he was a Leverhulme Major Research Fellow. In 2015 he was made a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (FACSS). He has been Editor-in-Chief of *Management Learning*, Associate Editor of *Organization* and is on the Editorial Boards of several journals including *Organization Studies* and the *Academy of Management Education and Learning*. Apart from publishing numerous articles in academic journals, he co-edited *Rethinking Management Education* (Sage, 1996), *Essential Readings in Management Learning* (Sage, 2004), *Critical Management Studies: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2005), *Critical Management Studies: Global Voices, Local Accents* (Routledge, 2016); co-authored *Making Up Accountants* (Gower Ashgate, 1998), *Secrecy at Work: The Hidden Architecture of Organizational Life* (Stanford University Press, 2016) and is the author of *Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

# Acknowledgements to the Fourth Edition

I continue to be grateful to all those acknowledged in the previous three editions, especially Kiren Shoman, now Executive Director (Publishing) at Sage, who was the commissioning editor of the original edition. For this edition I would particularly like to thank Kirsty Smy, my current commissioning editor at Sage, Delia Martinez-Alfonso, Publisher, who stood in for her whilst she was on leave, Lyndsay Aitken, the editorial assistant on this project, and all the rest of the Sage team who have worked on it. I am also grateful to my colleagues and PhD students at Royal Holloway, University of London – especially Ariel Liu, Laura Spence, Gillian Symon and Ziyun Fan – for making it a good place to work.

Chris Grey

# Should You Buy this Book?

This book is mainly designed for university students who are studying organizations, probably as part of a management course, whether undergraduate or postgraduate. It is not a textbook, and assumes some knowledge of the field. It's also for people who aren't on one of these courses but are interested in organizations and management, perhaps because of their experience of these. And it might also be for academics working in the field who would like to read an overview of a less conventional approach.

You should buy this book if:

- you're bored by the obese textbook your lecturer has recommended
- you've got the feeling that the textbook stuff is a bit dubious
- you've found that the recommended 'extra reading' is boring
- you'd like to read something stimulating, but not too turgid and worthy
- you'd like to show your lecturer you've done some extra reading
- you want a different take on organizations and management
- you don't want to spend too much money.

You should not buy this book if:

- you want a textbook
- you want bullet points (these are almost the last ones), boxes of text, further reading, further questions and all the usual patronizing stuff
- you're happy to get a minimal pass out of the textbook
- you don't want to have some of your ideas challenged
- you want heroic stories about great leaders, fantastic companies and how all is right with the world
- you haven't got even the modest price of the book, or have better things to do with it.

If you do buy this book and want to come back on anything in it, you can email me at: [chris.grey@sagepub.co.uk](mailto:chris.grey@sagepub.co.uk). You can also follow my blog relating to this book at <http://author-chrisgrey.blogspot.co.uk>.

# Preface to the Fourth Edition

Whenever people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong.

Oscar Wilde

If you had been at the port of Newhaven, on the south coast of Britain, at about six in the morning one day in October 2003 you would have seen a rather sad sight. Struggling up the ramp to the cross-channel ferry in the dark and the rain was a man with a huge, unwieldy suitcase and an almost equally huge rucksack. That man was me – or at least a younger, thinner version of me – and I was on my way to Dieppe, on the northern coast of France, where I had rented a flat for the next two months.

The reason for this trip was to write a book. This book, as it turned out, the first edition of which was published in 2005. I was on sabbatical from the University of Cambridge, where I worked at the time, and I wanted to have complete quiet and seclusion to get on with what had become a bit of a nightmare. Because as I explain in the Introduction to this book, it had a long gestation and originally was planned as something very different to what it became. It was in Dieppe that that transition happened, but as I walked on to the ferry I still had the original idea in mind, and was as weighed down by my failure to produce it as I was by my luggage.

Dieppe – where Oscar Wilde lived after his release from prison, although I did not know that at the time – proved surprisingly inspiring, even in a dismal autumn. Between long walks by the sea, endless coffees in the Café des Tribuneaux (Wilde's local as well, as it happens) and eating fish bought at the dockside straight off the trawlers, I wrote in huge, intensive bursts the bulk of the first edition of this book. With the exception of a single evening, with my sister-in-law in Paris, I did not have any face-to-face conversations with anyone during the whole time I was there. An advert perhaps for the merits of seclusion, although I must admit that by the end I had probably become slightly strange and certainly heartily sick of my own company.

That seems very remote now, some twelve years later, as I sit down to prepare what will be the fourth edition. The book that I didn't originally know I was going to write has, by the standards of most academic books, been quite successful in terms of sales and, for the

most part, has been fairly well-received. And the title has been taken up and used to develop a whole series of books on different topics. George Melly (1970) coined the phrase ‘revolt into style’, in his book of that title, to refer to the way that what may start out as counter-cultural in art and music becomes incorporated into mainstream popular culture. It’s certainly too grandiose a notion for this book but there is a kind of a parallel. What started out as a would-be iconoclastic take on organization studies has become, through sales, new editions and the series, in some way institutionalized, perhaps even branded.

That certainly isn’t a complaint, but it does make the process of trying to update it for a new edition quite different to the process of writing the original book. The biggest challenge with the new editions has been that the first edition had a very particular tone and style which is impossible to recapture. Some readers have said that reading the book feels like a conversation but it is inevitable that, over the course of the years since I wrote the original version, the way I ‘talk’ has changed. I haven’t attempted to unify the style except in the sense that it remains fairly conversational, and I am sure that the joins show in places as a result. Actually, for me the real problem has not been trying to write now as I wrote before, but the fact that parts of what I wrote before now make me cringe, rather in the way that seeing an old photograph of yourself in what now seem embarrassing clothes and with an embarrassing haircut makes you cringe. But since many readers have been kind enough to say that they liked that style, it would seem perverse to expunge it, though I have tweaked it.

Let me now talk about reactions to the book, and as a prelude I would like to say something about what I originally hoped to achieve with it. I felt that there was a space for something which was neither textbook nor research monograph, and which communicated, to students in particular, something about the gap between what is presented as established knowledge in the former and the way that that knowledge is very often problematized in the latter. I actually had some wider aspirations, too, which the book only partially realized. I hoped that it might be possible to reach an audience beyond students and academics; to appeal to that most elusive of creatures, the ‘general reader’.

Perhaps because the book contained an email address and an invitation to make comments, I have had a great deal of feedback from readers – far more than I’ve received about anything else I’ve written. Some of this reaction is reproduced on the cover, and it is not just the usual marketing blurb in that probably 99 per cent of the correspondents were positive. By and large the same goes for online reviews, like this one from ‘Eryc Eyl’ on the Goodreads site:



This book blew my little mind. In the way that going to grad school for education caused me to see the deep and complex inadequacies of the public school system, this book has caused me to question much of my received knowledge and beliefs about organizations and, more to the point, corporations. Chris Grey's insightful analysis has unmoored me a bit and made me deeply worried about things that previously 'seemed to me to be true.'<sup>2</sup>

Others, like Amazon reviewer 'Ronald G. Young', are even more extravagant (whilst also making some acute criticisms):

[T]his is a book about power which, for me, contains more incendiary material than Marx, Lenin, Che Guevara and Al-Qaeda rolled together. It is written by an academic who can actually write clearly – and who sees it as his job to interpret for us the significant parts of academic work.<sup>3</sup>

Of course there has been some negative comment, too. The most dismissive of the online reviewers has, alas, not given me permission to quote her words, but I am sure that anyone interested can find the review I mean. And amongst the emails I've received one – from a student in New Zealand who I will not name, but who may well speak for many who did not choose to write to me – told me that the book was irredeemably dull and worthless and invited me never to write a word again. Charming as her email was, it will be obvious that I have declined her invitation. By contrast, I was particularly pleased to receive several complimentary emails from people who were indeed general readers and for whom the main attraction was that the book provided an antidote to the otherwise ubiquitous managerialism to which they were exposed in their working lives.

Others who have responded positively include Martin Vogel of consultancy firm Vogel Wakefield who saw the book as 'challenging fashionable nonsense of both managerialist and oppositional varieties'<sup>4</sup>. A 2013 Anglo-Irish-Swedish inter-governmental report on public sector governance reforms quotes the book (see p. 47 of report) to argue for the problematic nature of change management<sup>5</sup>. And journalists Simon Caulkin in the *Observer* and Stefan Stern in the *Financial Times* both wrote appreciative articles around the book, which are quoted in the cover blurb.

In the academic literature, there have been reviews in many scholarly journals treating the book not simply as a primer for students, but also as containing a serious argument about the nature of the organization studies. Those reviews have also been broadly positive – though, as is

inevitable with a book of this sort, some have profoundly disagreed with my fundamental position, a view I can respect whilst of course not sharing. There have also been predictably – and, in fact, predicted in the book – waspish attacks on my attempt at accessibility (for some, perversely one might have thought, the ultimate accolade for a writer is to be both unreadable and unread). It is a very considerable temptation to reply to such reviews here, but perhaps it would be ‘unreasonably cheap’ to do so. All that I would say on this point is that the most negative reactions seem to have come from those within the ‘critical management studies’ (CMS) community, rather than from what one might call the mainstream. That is perhaps curious since what is contained in this book is some version of CMS.

The scale of the reactions, and the diversity of audiences from which they have come, and the strong sales it has enjoyed, suggest to me that, despite the flaws and shortcomings the book most certainly has, it has been successful in being seen as ‘a different kind of book’. It is difficult to think of many books about organizations which have garnered reaction – still less largely positive reaction – from students, academics, consultants, journalists and general readers alike.

The reasons for this are depressing, though. The world of organizations and the way we make sense of them is immensely important because it is central to many, perhaps most, people’s lives. But it has been almost entirely evacuated by academics and intellectuals who have any apparent desire to communicate. There are certainly exceptions to this<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Parker, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2006; Sennett, 2006; Aubenas, 2011; Standing, 2011), but from most of us whose job it is to explore organizational life there is little to be heard outside of the stunted and stultifying world of academic journals. This is as true for ‘mainstream’ organization studies as it is for avowedly ‘critical’ work, for reasons I have written about elsewhere (Grey, 2010). This is neither to criticize ‘theoretical’ writing per se nor to deny the very substantial value of the introduction of a broad swathe of thinkers from other social sciences or philosophy by many pioneers in organization studies, to whom this book is substantially indebted. Rather it is to deplore the recent tendency to do so in ways which obscure rather than illuminate.

So it is within this rather unsatisfactory context that I understand the reactions to the previous editions of this book. Let me be absolutely clear that it is not my intention to encourage anti-intellectualism. In the book I make much use of the notion of unintended consequences, and one of the unintended consequences of its reception has been that a few have seen it – usually as misplaced criticism, occasionally as misplaced praise – as giving license to people to avoid difficult or complex ideas (apparently not recognizing that the book itself would have been

impossible without the prior existence of a difficult and complex literature). In a sense the book is an attempt to translate that literature into a more comprehensible form. So to clarify: I certainly don't think that students need do no more than read this little book to have an adequate grasp of the field; I certainly don't think that the way that I have written it is the only worthwhile way to write; and I certainly don't intend my criticism of critical writing in the field to validate bluff, common-sense empiricism or dismissive small-mindedness.

Nor has this been the only unintended consequence. As indicated earlier, I originally intended this book to be in some way an alternative – to the academic literature and to the textbooks – which might, I hoped, appeal to students precisely because it tried to connect to and to articulate what might be their own reservations about existing writings. But, as it has turned out, it has been used in many places as the 'official text'. Indeed in some places students are assessed on its contents as if it were some kind of repository of authorized knowledge. So occasionally I receive emails from such students asking me, in effect, to answer the questions they have been set (for the record, this is not a service I provide). For these students, the book can hardly be seen as 'alternative'. I'm obviously not complaining about this – I'm actually rather flattered, I suppose – and anyway it would make no difference even if I was. But it is an irony of which I am all too well aware.

A different kind of irony lies in the development of the blog that, since the publication of the third edition, accompanies this book [<http://author-chrisgrey.blogspot.co.uk/>]. This was an idea of the publisher's, and I was initially not very enthusiastic. It seemed unlikely that I would be able to think of many interesting things to post or, knowing how many millions of blogs languish unread, that anyone would be interested in it. In fact, it has attracted a lot of visits (22,000 as at February 2016) from a very wide range of countries, and has been fun to write. I like the discipline of writing short, hopefully punchy, pieces. And by linking some of the themes in the book to current events and news stories I've been able to identify new examples and illustrations of these themes, some of which have found their way into this new edition. For me, now, book and blog have become interrelated.

In terms of what is new in this edition (apart from most of this Preface), this follows a similar pattern to how things have changed across the previous editions. Chapters 1 to 4 are broadly the same as before because they mainly set out a set of arguments, often related to basic concepts within organization studies, and therefore they do not really date. Thus in these chapters the new material takes the form of an updating of examples and of references to reflect developments in the three or four years since the last edition and changes in the way

I think about them. Chapter 5 has changed rather more. In this chapter I link organization studies and management to broad contours of contemporary economics and politics and necessarily this means that the previous versions got dated. Thus in the 2008 second edition (which was the first time there had been a chapter of this sort) this chapter focused on things such as affluence and consumerism as well as the by then looming financial crisis. By the time of the 2012 third edition, the attention to affluence and consumerism seemed quite *passé* and the chapter became much more concerned with the emergent landscape in the aftermath of the financial crisis. This remains the landscape for the chapter, but with considerable updating both of statistics quoted and the way that the intervening period has seen an intensification of economic and employment insecurity.

It is worth saying something about dates here because the lead times on book publication are quite long, so that when I say that the 2008 edition referred to the then looming financial crisis, what I really mean is that it was looming when I was drafting the text back in 2007. Similarly, the 2012 edition was already dated because it had been written very early that year whereas the book was published in December. The same time lag will apply to this edition, updated in the winter of 2015–16. This in fact is one of the reasons why I see the blog as so intrinsic to the book, as it does allow developments between editions to be addressed.

Despite all the changes to this and previous editions the guiding spirit remains what it became in Dieppe in October 2003, once I'd unloaded my luggage and discarded my worries: to contribute to the project of critique, at the heart of which is a politics of transformation and emancipation. And to convey my sense, angry but still optimistic, that such a politics is possible. This politics ultimately calls for a re-evaluation of dominant ideologies associated with unrestrained neo-liberal capitalism, instrumental rationality and managerialism. We are living through some dramatic events, but to say so does not imply the detached voice of an observer because it is a time of much suffering. And within that suffering there is much which relates to the study of organizations: unemployment, under-employment, the erosion of welfare, the ever-more intrusive and stringent demands made of those who are in work, the growing insecurity of the old and the destruction of hope amongst the young, and the increasing sense of interlinked crises in global finance, economics and politics. But what does mainstream organization studies have to say about these things? Virtually nothing. It is depressing that the previous few sentences remain unchanged from the preface to the last edition. Yet that this is so leads me to hope that this book still has a role and that, despite its having been in some ways institutionalized, it still has for some readers the capacity to offer a different kind of way of studying organizations.